



Beyond orality

Textuality, territory, and ontology among Amazonian peoples

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Drawing on narratives and images related to mythology, I explore the relationships between textuality, territory, and ontology among Amazonian cultures, and specifically the Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador. My argument is that the Napo Runa, as well as other indigenous peoples in the Americas, have developed their own complex theories of textuality in which cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social, and the surrounding territorial world. Drawing on the theory of Amazonian perspectivism, I analyze the *Aycha Yura* or “Tree of Flesh” myth and its underlying aesthetic, geographic, and ontological qualities. This macro-myth intersects with local mythologies of particular trees, species, and spirits, forming a complex shared narrative world of local differentiation, self and other transformations, and experiences of territoriality. An engagement with the ethnographic realities of so-called oral cultures shows the untranslatable ontological contours of their textual worlds, worlds that are distorted and reified by Western notions of orality and literacy.

Keywords: Kichwa, Quichua, Napo Runa, Ecuador, myth, orality, textuality, perspectivism

In contrast to the Western emphasis on alphabetic writing, indigenous peoples have developed diverse, complex theories of textuality in which cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social, and the surrounding ecological world (Arnold and Yapita 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004b). Indigenous philosophies of communication do not oppose the oral and the textual, and are distorted by Western discourses on orality, most of which assume that orality is a survival from humanity’s primitive stages (Ong 1967, 1982). Assuming that literacy has evolved from orality, or the notion that indigenous peoples are defined only by orality, contradicts the rich and complex forms of textuality practiced by many non-alphabetic cultures in the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere (Arnold and Yapita 2006; Finnegan 2007; Hill and Mignolo 1994; Uzendoski 2009).

It may seem counterintuitive, to some readers at least, to argue that worlds of textuality exist that have nothing to do with conventional understandings of writing

or alphabetic literacy.¹ Peter Gow (1990) provides a good example of the inseparability of ontology and textuality/writing in his description of a shaman named Sangama from the Piro of Peru. Sangama, who was illiterate by Western standards, claimed he could read newspapers like the whites. While Sangama could not read the actual words on the pages, he drew on Piro norms of perception, specifically their own traditions of shamanism and graphic design. Within the newspaper, Sangama was able to perceive an image of a woman with red lips, what he claims was the hidden ‘body’ of the paper, its spirit within (Gow 1990: 98). When he was ‘reading,’ the woman spoke to Sangama and gave him prophetic knowledge. This alien, ethnographic example shows how communication can be organized in complex ways not structured by Western habits of knowing and perceiving the world.

In Ecuador, correspondingly, Amazonian Kichwa speaking people view life in ways not reducible to Western modes of perception. For example, Kichwa speakers see life (and death) as a continual process of communication, interaction, and regeneration within surrounding territorial presences. This communicative world implies a social and symbolic “mutuality of being”² among plants, animals, people, and other living and nonliving entities, as well as a shared relatedness among all the subjectivities present within a territory. But how can these specificities of a territory be viewed as a *text*, and how can a textual approach³ shed light on the mutuality of being among all the subjectivities within a territorial lifeworld?

My argument is the following. Within the space of land/territory or *allpa* in Kichwa, the social world is not limited to the human but also includes various nonhuman beings like plants, animals, rivers, trees, and other features of the landscape. In these lifeworlds, textuality is a lived practice of analogical flow (Wagner 1977), of creating and experiencing “lines” (Ingold 2007; Mentore 2005; Schuler Zea 2010; Colloredo-Mansfeld 2011) that move through the body, plants, animals, and the landscape. These lines are not just metaphors but relations of interaction and communication, and the forms that such lines take are curving, looping, and circular. New lines are often reconstituted from old ones, so the

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- 1 The contrast between the oral and the written is the very material by which Westerners conceptualize communication, language, history, and culture itself; orality versus literacy is a difficult binary to supersede in relation to the communicative philosophies of other cultures, especially those who historically did not develop alphabetic writing.
 - 2 I borrow this phrase from Marshall Sahlins (2011a, 2011b), who has recently defined kinship as the “mutuality of being,” a notion influenced by perspectivist theory and Amazonian ethnography. He writes, “The same mutuality of existence [kinship among people] is involved in trans-specific relations of kinship, such as the plants who are children of the Amazonian or New Caledonian women who cultivate them, or the animals of Siberia and Amazonia who are affines of the men who hunt them. This is no metaphor, but a sociology of moral, ritual, and practical conduct” (Sahlins 2010a: 15).
 - 3 I define “text” following Walter Mignolo (1994) and Arnold and Yapita (2006: 6) in the sense of “making” a narrative that involves images/designs or more specifically “weaving” a narrative that is inscribed and patterned. Textuality involves various and multimodal practices that leave traces: storytelling, dance, song/music, ritual, production, and a host of other human activities that are recursive of inscribed truths and which involve experience. This is not a literary but rather a phenomenological approach, and I subscribe to the counterintuitive notion that writing/textuality is synonymous with language and symbolization itself. See also Finnegan (2007).

relations are dynamic, moving spirals, inversions, and figure-ground reversals. Such textual lines are not always visible; sometimes they come into view only to disappear again, as when a storyteller tells a myth or in dreaming. Having aesthetic as well as social qualities, the lines of such worlds imply a shared kinship and cosmological destiny among all animate subjects, which in Amazonian cosmologies can also include features of the landscape like rivers, mountains, rocks, celestial bodies, wind, and other forces such as heat and lightning. The lines flow through and define the body, the bodies of others, the cosmos, and the land, but all textual lines and pathways eventually flow into *wĩñay*, the world of primordial space-time, the beginning and end of all life.

First, by examining anthropological work on the philosophy of perspectivism (Århem 1981; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Vilaça 2005, 2007, 2009; Fausto 2000, 2007; Uzendoski et al. 2005), I will theorize indigenous ontology as the body's relational and transformational capacity in a social world of social others, others that include kin, affines, nonhuman 'natural' beings, and spirits. Next, using the Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador as a case study, I will provide ethnographic examples of textual practices that create connections among people, via the body, to *allpa* or "territory," as well as to the world of spirits and cosmological others. For reasons of space, I will focus on one myth, the "Tree of Flesh" story (*Aycha Yura*) to explore lines of communication, sociality, and transformation among bodies, plants, animals, and regional geography. Using this myth, I will demonstrate the regenerative quality of the textual lines that define communities within regional and local territories.

The arguments about Napo Runa theories of textuality will be enhanced by the use of several images that depict mythological scenes, including a map of the geography of the *Aycha Yura* story, a copy of the original recording of the narrative in mp3 format, as well as a song. The song, "Aycha Yura," is a contemporary musical rendition of the "Tree of Flesh" myth by Carlos Alvarado, one of the founders of modern Amazonian Kichwa music (Uzendoski and Calapucha 2012). This multimodal strategy helps to show that the textual complexities of sounds, imagery, geography, and language are all interwoven aspects of the mythological lifeworld.⁴

The wider implications of a multimodal view of Amazonian textuality provide a critical perspective to consider the distortions of indigenous storytelling practices by Western literature and in the Western imagination. Although historically

4 Two images are from Kichwa elementary children who were my students during the 2009–2010 school year at the "Escuela Intercultural Bilingüe Venancio Calapucha de Pano." One image is my own sketch of the vulture-man, and a map I made depicting the geographical relations of the *Aycha Yura* myth. The last image, a drawing of the *Aycha Yura*, was created by Carlos Alvarado, who is a renowned musician, poet, author, artist, and elder of the Napo Runa community. A song about the *Aycha Yura* myth, composed and performed by Mr. Alvarado's music group, Los Yumbos Chawamangos, will also be available. These multimodal materials derive from a lengthy sabbatical (2009–2010), where I worked as a volunteer Kichwa language and culture teacher/researcher at the bilingual school in Pano, Upper Napo. Over the course of the year, the students and I co-produced hundreds of images related to Napo Kichwa stories. Also, during this time, I was able to work closely with Mr. Alvarado and learned much about the relationship of myth to performance, as well as the perceptual contours of the Napo Runa lifeworld in music.

Amazonian storytelling has been co-opted and used for inspiration in many Latin American literary works (Sá 2004), native notions of textuality are neither recognized as such nor appreciated in their own right. Translators, authors, and literary critics continue to produce the illusion of orality and the superiority of Western literary knowledge. Rather than cut and paste Amazonian storytelling into Western narratives, perspectivist translation requires recognizing the incommensurability of ontologies and differing communicative worlds (Viveiros de Castro 2004b). It is time to rewrite the history of writing, language, textuality, and literature from a multispecies, multinatural perspective—one that obviates the orality-literacy distinction.

Perspectivism and the textuality of the body

There is a rich debate among anthropologists about Native Amazonian notions of the body, and the way the Amazonian body problematizes Western philosophical views on nature and materiality in general (Seeger et al. 1979; Turner 1995; Vilaça 2005, 2009; Rival 2005; Santos Granero 2009; Oakdale 2008; Uzendoski 2008, 2010a). Rather than survey all of this literature, I will instead focus on the theory of perspectivism⁵ and its implications for understanding textuality in relation to the body.

Perspectivism is a theory that attempts to explain the social philosophy and mode of perceiving the world that defines Native Amazonian cultures, and, perhaps also the cultures of the Andes, the Americas, and Asian groups (Fausto 2007; Course 2010; Arnold and Yapita 2006). Perspectivism hypothesizes that indigenous people view animals and plants as internal rather than external to the human condition. The differences among humans, and among humans and animals and plants, are expressed as perspective changes of bodily form and subjectivity. At the same time, all bodily forms possess intelligence, communicative competencies, and an animating soul. While a shared notion of soul, soul(s), or soul-substance unites and defines all living things, the body is the key differentiator, the external *form* that imbues beings with subjectivity, a point of view, and particular qualities for action. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998: 2) explains:

animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a “clothing”) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the “soul” or “spirit” of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask.

As Viveiros de Castro points out, in such systems, animals not only possess human-like subjectivity, they also consider themselves to be fully human, possessors of culture, language, dress, societies, cities, and other defining

5 Perspectivism can be traced to Århem (1981) and Viveiros de Castro (1998). It is also related to, and overlaps with the rehabilitated concept of “animism” (Descola 1996). Bruno Latour (2009: 2) considers that perspectivism could be considered a “bomb with the potential to explode the whole implicit philosophy so dominant in most ethnographers’ interpretations of their material.”

characteristic of the human condition. Humans, however, do not—under normal circumstances—see animals as humans because animal bodies have undergone some form of transformation that masks their underlying essence. The animals likewise see themselves as people when they are in their territories, but see the humans as animals.

Carlos Fausto (2007) provides a more complex view of the idea that Amazonian peoples define animals as having souls but different bodies. He argues that the body often possesses multiple souls and some animals are more or less human than others; indeed there are differences in how Amazonian cultures view the soul and its relationship to the body. Fausto (2007) hypothesizes that the qualities and actions of predation are conceptually paramount in perspectivist realities. This emphasis on predation causes a further complexity because, as animals are considered people, eating takes on a potential relation with cannibalism. The conceptual problem of cannibalism, however, is mediated by ritual and other means of creating alterity, so that the consumption of ‘human’ flesh is transformed into the consumption of otherness. Hunting is not cannibalism, and if it is, it is a safe kind whereby socially dangerous flesh has been transformed into flesh that is safe for consumption.

Otherness in Amazonia, however, often implies the notion of a relation—a potential or future mutuality of being—but there are differing degrees of difference and these relations are constantly changing. The process of predation upon the other is linked to related notions of reproduction (rather than direct extermination) of kinship groups, as enemies or different species in competition provide life, not just death, for each other. Similarly, it is not just food that is being circulated but also life-force, energy, and souls, and there are salient differences on the particularities of these ideas among specific groups. As Fausto (2007: 513) argues, following the work of Marilyn Strathern (1988), the person is not just a differentiated body with a soul but rather:

an amalgamation of activity and passivity, as someone who contains two possible perspectives in a relation of predation. The move from potency to act, from predatory tension to predatory act, is what produces the disjunction of these perspectives into detachable parts, parts which can then be transacted.

In other words, for Fausto, humanity is defined by the ability of people to engage in predatory actions to produce food/life-energy but also by the notion of becoming food/life-energy for others. Those that participate in this world of relations, of creating and modifying bodies but also killing and taking them apart, constitute a shared social reality of human and nonhuman actors.

While predatory themes are salient within Amazonian socio-textual constructions, there are other emphases as well. For example, the Brazilian anthropologist Aparecida Vilaça has argued that the instability and constant transformation of the body are perhaps themes that supersede predation. The Amazonian body, she argues, is never “totalized” or made whole (Vilaça 2007: 459), and the emphasis is not on *making* the body as much as it is on its constant transformation. The body is not just adorned, painted, and fabricated in relation to ritual practices. It is also vulnerable and an agent of attraction, both of bad and good energies, qualities, and powers that reveal the cosmic embeddedness of the body within a predatory world. Ritual behaviors like *couvade* underlie the way that the body is vulnerable to the

energies of the animal and plant worlds (Rival 1998), and shamanism cannot be separated from predatory body-sorcery (Fausto 2000; Whitehead 2002) or healing practices that require somatic energy regeneration and cleansing techniques (Whitten and Whitten 2008; Uzendoski 2008).

The soul, as Vilaça (2007) argues, can actualize the body in another perspective or as another form, a notion that includes transformation into an animal. Unlike the Western notion, Amazonian souls are neither individual nor totalized entities; the soul does not oppose the body in the sense of the spirit-material distinction but rather the soul is more like a “dividual” (Strathern 1988), another body that inhabits the this-worldly one (Vilaça 2007: 453). So in a dream, one’s soul is also a body whose subjectivity takes over during subconscious or dream states, and the soul-body allows one to become an animal. But the soul-body is not the same body that one has in waking reality, although it lives inside of it and animates it. The soul, thus, is not just a spirit. It is a physical manifestation, an energy form of bodies existing within bodies.

The body, in other words, is constantly being divided and reconnected as people experience different forms of consciousness and imagine various perspectives. It also changes, as people move through the life cycle and experience the severing and reconnecting of kinship relations.⁶ Vilaça cites Viveiros de Castro’s emphasis that “metamorphosis is something that haunts the native imagination” (Vilaça 2007: 458), and *alterity* (not identity) is the “default state” in Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 2001). So it is not so much the individual making of the body as it is the body’s being made, unmade, and transformed in relation to the lines of kinship, social action, and predation that are defining principles of Native cosmologies. These cosmologies, in practice, are rich life-worlds where narratives, songs, and everyday conversations—which often invoke myth or mythological truths—are built up from experience.

For example, mythology is focused upon the encounters among the bodies and soul-bodies of humans and plant, animal, and spirit bodies. Myth brings to light the resultant dangers and transformations, including the aesthetic qualities, of such encounters. Implicit in storytelling, which is inscribed in the landscape and cultural practices, is that all soul-bodies begin and end in the continuum of primordial space-time (Sullivan 1988). The co-reproduction of life, the circularity between predator and prey, thus, are interconnected themes that manifest in myth as well as everyday ways of speaking and cultural practices. This territorialized storytelling world allows people to create textual relations in which the narrative of one-life, that of a finite being, becomes linked to the narratives of all other living or animate things, a human condition where people are rooted in specific places and in relation to specific communities of plants, animals, and trees. In such a world, the details and interactions of life itself are the stuff of textual creation,⁷ and notions of

6 Amazonian Kichwa speakers, for example, describe the life-cycle through metaphors of the “hardening” and “straightening” of *samay*, or “soul-substance,” the invisible internal energy of the body (Uzendoski 2005).

7 The Amazonian notion of the body differs significantly from Western intellectual approaches that romanticize the body or celebrate a perspective of “embodiment” (Csordas 1990, 1994; Lock 1993). As Vilaça’s (2007, 2009) critique points out, these approaches seek to reconfigure Western thought in ways that transcend the Cartesian

ecology or nature are not abstract categories cut off from experience. Human lives are tied together with specific species who define the local territory, a world of sociality and co-reproduction that spans many generations. In such worlds, people eventually become the landscape, and human death is conceptualized to be regenerative, although souls and bodies must be made dissolute before they can be reconstituted.

Just as indigenous cultures have their own life-worlds and forms of textuality, so too does the West. Alphabetic literacy was born out of, and elevated to the pinnacle of human achievement by Western narratives that, along with the social forms of technologized industrial capitalism, divorced the body from textual-creation (Ingold 2007; Abrams 1997; Hornborg 2001). Aspects of Amazonian communicative worlds can be simulated using alphabetic writing, but alphabetic writing accelerates the debilitation of Amazonian textuality because it places too much emphasis on words at the expense of experience. This rootedness in experience is why most Native Amazonian peoples experience the alphabetization of their languages as culture change, and why perhaps bilingual education programs have not resulted in the actual revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures (Martínez 2009; Arnold and Yapita 2006; Haboud 2004: 77). Rubenstein (2012: 68–69), for example, has recently argued that the Shuar view the power of literacy as co-opting and competing with their own emphasis on “visions,” and the recent dominance of literacy in many Shuar communities reflects subordination to the state.

Indeed, the imposition of Western notions of textuality create new ways of looking at and experiencing territoriality (Escobar 2008). Once a culture has become alphabetized, and traditional notions of textuality debilitated, the conduit is opened for power to flow from the state into the capillary nodes of schools, development agencies, and microgovernments (Uzendoski 2009). Land, once an extension of the human experience of perspectivist textuality, becomes controlled and dominated by agents of Western naturalism, who assume that society and nature are separated by an ontological barrier in which the human is destined to exploit (Descola 1996; Arnold and Yapita 2006; Latour 1993, 2005, 2007). Capital not only becomes possible, it can now become dominant and recreate territory in its own image (Marx 1977 [1887]; Escobar 2008; Arnold and Yapita 2006).

Somatic territorial mythological textualities

I am now going to discuss Amazonian textuality by diving headfirst into the communicative reality of the Napo Ruma, an Amazonian Kichwa speaking group with whom I have worked for over 15 years. The textual “lines” of this Amazonian world, as I am arguing, move through and define the whole body; they emphasize the somatic truth that all things are in a constant state of transformation and re-circulation, notions that can be ‘read’ in the landscape via experience. Words and images, as well as feelings, tastes and touch, all work together in creating these intertextual, dialogical, multimodal realities.

In the Kichwa language the word for “orality” is *rimana*, which also means “to speak,” “to tell,” or “to have a conversation.” The notion of *rimana* is the primary

body-mind duality in which the body is taken as the “locus of authentic experience” (Vilaça 2007: 447 citing Pollock 1996: 320).

or dominant mode of communication in Kichwa, mainly because *rimana* derives from social practices. In the ebb and flow of daily life, Kichwa speakers spend a lot of time telling stories—and they tell them well. Speaking well requires competency in parallelism, plot, pause, prosody, imagery, gestures, and ideophones—features of poetry that Kichwa speakers use to take on different subjectivities and perspective changes (see Nuckolls 1996, 2000, 2004, 2010; Uzendoski and Calapucha 2012). Because of the salience and complexity of these features in storytelling, many anthropological linguists and other scholars find indigenous storytelling to be more like “oral poetry” than prose or plain discourse (Hymes 2003; Tedlock 2011).

“Orality,” however, distorts the communicative philosophy behind *rimana*, as *rimana* does not actually mean “orality in contrast to literacy,” as it does in the West, but rather oral communicative action also defined by an underlying and dynamic textuality, a textuality defined by animal and ecological subjectivities as well as human inscriptions. Furthermore, *rimana* is more than just words because it encompasses all forms of communication. Kichwa speakers assume that all speaking subjects are rooted in, and defined by organic processes, processes that are inscribed and perceived by people in the landscape. Any sentient being that sends a message can be said to be “speaking,” as in the imagery that one receives in a dream or curing session involving hallucinogenic plants. Rivers, mountains, and other soul-possessing beings, even plants, can and do speak in this way, and sometimes spirits send messages through feelings, dreams, and images that are then converted into discourse when people recount their experiences to others. Images, feelings, and experiences are converted into words, but people also use words, gestures, and sounds to recreate the images and experiences for others.

In Napo Runa mythological thought, communication is a defining characteristic of all sentient beings, beings defined by *samay* or “soul-substance.” In myth plants, animals, and even mountains speak. In the myth of the primordial flood, for example, the three major mountain beings (Chiuta, Sumaco, and Cula) call out to each other as they combat the rising floodwaters (Uzendoski and Calapucha 2012). They call out to each other, very loudly, *kari!* (“masculinity!”), a sound-pattern that reverberates throughout the earth and which conveys the awesomeness of what the mountains have accomplished. As the waters rise higher and higher, the mountains grow taller and taller, thus saving humanity from extinction. After the flood, when the waters recede, the mountains shrink back down to original size. There are traces, however, of these transformations. The ancestors planted a *cocoa blanco* tree on top of one of the mountains (Chiuta), and shamans know that there are cities of spirits that exist within the interiors of all three mountains. Implicit in the story is that the *cuchamama*, or “mother anaconda,” caused the great flood; it is said that one day she will send another one (see Figure 1).

The myth of Iluku, who is the mother of the Twins, is about the origins of the nocturnal common potoo bird and the lines of association among women, birds, and the song of the potoo. Iluku was sleeping with her brother, the moon, but when they were discovered the moon left the earth to escape punishment. Iluku tried to follow her lover, but her flaw of being careless caused her to fall behind. The ladder that the moon-man had constructed fell apart and so Iluku became trapped here on earth.

Separated from her husband, during nights of a full moon, Iluku cries out to her husband because she can “see his face.” She cries “*nuka kusalla*” or “my beloved husband” (see Figure 2). The aesthetic contour of this phrase is shaped by

the actual bird-song of the common potoo bird, which lets out an eerie human-sounding cry, such as “ooooo, oooooo, oooooo, ooooo, ooooo.” As I have discussed elsewhere, feminine ritual wailing is aesthetically and conceptually patterned upon the Iluku-potoo complex, a multispecies social and aesthetic reality (see Uzendoski et al. 2005; Uzendoski and Calapucha 2012)

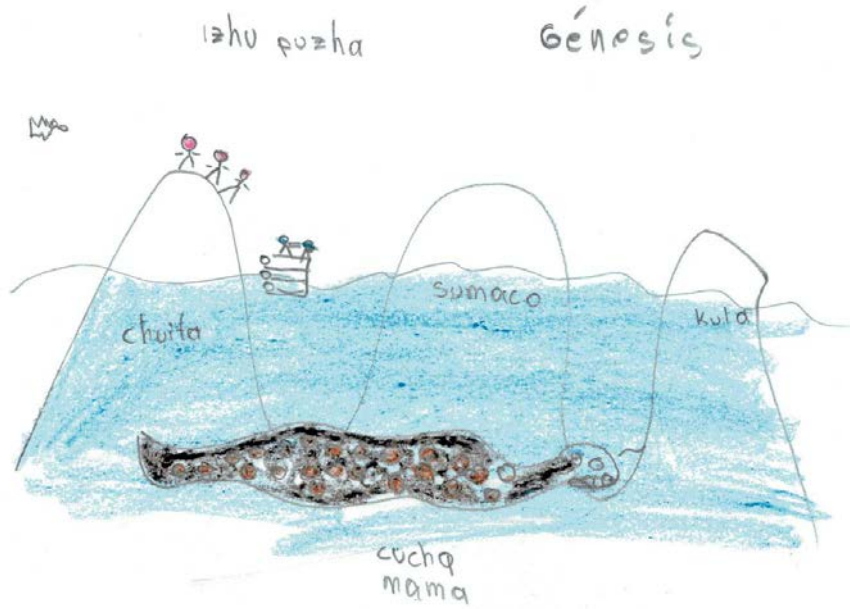


Figure 1. Fifth grader Génesis Grefa's illustration of the great flood myth. Note the *cuchamama* or anaconda, “the mother of the deep.”



Figure 2. Kichwa student illustration of Iluku crying “My Beloved Husband” to Moon-Man.

In later mythological episodes, when the Twins grow up, we find that jaguars speak among themselves and to humans, and the same is true for the other animals featured in Twins stories—the anacondas, birds-of-prey, caiman, and even buzzard-man, who gives the Twins a ride on his back when they got lost after killing the giant hawk people. Unfortunately, the buzzard-man's taste for meat is the moral flaw that causes him to transform into a carrion-eating bird (see Figure 3). The vulture man loses his outer human form and the ability to speak words in the everyday human domain. But in his own reality, where his 'inner body' is manifest, the buzzard-man speaks, and he can speak quite elegantly. And so it goes for many other animal and plant species.



Figure 3. Sketch of the encounter between the Twins and Vulture-Man.

The transformations of myth caused many mythological humans to become something else in external form, but none of these species have lost their internal soul, their latent 'human' body. In their own worlds, these re-naturalized beings are fully human. They live in cities and interact with each other as humans on this earth do. Shamans experience and interact with these people when they journey to these places; oftentimes these visits take on the quality of a diplomatic visit to settle or talk about relations between the two worlds or between animal and human families inhabiting a shared territory.

These transformations of myth create a communicative barrier between humans and other beings, but the transformations leave perceptual clues to past events. For example, each of the mythological transformations has left a trace on the landscape, in ecology, and each locale has its own history of such transformations (Baleé 2006; Whitehead 2003). The link between human communities and the mythological past/future is reproduction and transformation, the recirculation of *samay* through predation, death, and rebirth. Myth is also experienced by crossing interspecies boundaries via dreaming and rituals involving non-ordinary experience. These processes are inscribed upon the landscape and within the predatory and nurturing processes of interspecies communities. All living and animate things have 'bodies' infused with *samay*, the breath of soul-substance, which, in the processes of life and predation, is continually dissolved, reconstituted, and re-circulated among the subjectivities of territory.

Verna's telling of the *Aycha Yura* myth

Let us now move onto the *Aycha Yura* myth, so that these principles of Amazonian textuality can be made more visible and tangible for the reader.

The *Aycha Yura* story was told to me by Verna Grefa in 2010 in his house in Dos Ríos/Ongota, Napo, Ecuador. I have translated the story in poetic form following a hybrid methodology combining Dell Hymes (2003) and Dennis Tedlock (1983). The story is divided into scenes (i, ii, iii, etc.), stanzas (A, B, C, etc.), and lines, with scenes being the largest, most encompassing category of relations. The line, which is defined by pauses and grammatical features, is the basic unit of analysis. Lines, according to Hymes (2003), are grouped into verses but for the sake of simplicity I have chosen not to signal verses (verses are groupings of lines that share poetic relations, as in a couplet or triplet⁸). Ideophones, in which spoken Kichwa is especially rich (Nuckolls 2010), are italicized and will be discussed in more detail after the story. The translation is presented in poetic form (and available as an audio file online) so that the reader can better appreciate the aesthetic features of Kichwa storytelling, such as repetition, parallelism, quotations, and turns of talk; hopefully this translation strategy will better convey the ontological and aesthetic slippage between source and target languages.

The poetics, which are complex and multilayered, are more than just adornment. The storyteller uses sound, pauses, and gestures to bring to life the lines of association and transformations that exist within form. For example, the storyteller does not *say* that the animals used to be human when he tells the story. He *shows* that they are human by quoting their words and bringing to life the dialogues of mythological times (Silverstein 1993; Tedlock 2010; Wagner 2011). This ancient technique is one whereby dualities are created so that they can be obviated by transformations and subsequent dissolutions/reconstitutions (Wagner 1978). For readers who wish to hear these oral dynamics, a media file of the original recording is available in the supplementary materials section (listen to the story). Here is the story in translated form:

i/A	the so named aycha yura was standing they say on the guacamayo mountain up above
B	in that all kinds of game were never lacking they say right at the base of the tree there were many animals
C	and so being “what is this?” saying they looked and above a lot of birds and other animals could be heard they say and inside the branches they saw a huge lake they say because people had houses there and were settled there
ii/A	they asked and wondered how they might cut down that tree they say and so being then the people begged the twins [Cuillur and Duciru] to help them

8 Similarly, Tedlock has argued that Mayan narratives are defined by “parallel verses, in which recurring patterns of sound reflect recurrent patterns of meaning rather than operating at a level below that of meaning as they do in metrical verse” (2010: 2).

- B “we will certainly cut it down” they said [the twins] they spoke say
 and when the twins so spoke
 the people responded, “then do it if you can”
 they begged them
- C they made a high platform
 and began cutting it they say
 they were cutting it down for a long long time
 then from the inside
 they finished cutting they say
 cutting through it
- D and so being now
 a little later now
 they began cutting it from behind they say
- iii/A “this tree which do you want it to fall” saying they [the twins] asked
 “this should not just fall anywhere” [they responded]
 “it should fall downriver” saying they spoke they say
- B and so being
 “lets send it downriver” saying
 so they cut a wide notch in the front they say
 then later
 they made another cut behind they say
- C and now when they had cut all the through
 it began to move
 move
 and swaying they say
- iv/A and so being
 in that
 the twins
 jumped down off the platform
 “it’s going to fall downriver”
 “it’s going to fall downriver” saying
 waving their hands and shouting they stood they say
- B and so while that was going on
 when they looked up
 way up
 it was held fast by a thick vine they say
 a strangler fig vine
 all the way to heaven was supporting it they say
- v/A “who else can cut that vine?” [the twins asked]
 and so being
 “if not the spirit of the lagoon will eat them” saying
 “you can’t send in a person”
- B and so being
 they tried out a monkey
 he couldn’t do the job though they say
- C and so being
 they sent up a squirrel
 because he had sharp teeth
 and there
 he took a long time to cut all around the thick vine
 he cut through
- vi/A after he was done cutting
 [the tree] began to sway

- “it will fall downriver”
 “it will fall downriver” saying
 while they were shouting
- B a bit more [the tree moved]
 it began to sway even more
 it began falling they say
- C a loud sound came from [the tree]
punlla [impact, reverberation]
 the sound traveled all the-way to the edge of the world they say
- D and so doing
 looking at it
 all those creatures inside [the tree]
 all of the game animals
 and different kinds of Pacu fish
 catfish and the bocachico fish
 were all inside of [the tree] they say
- E and so being
 when they [the twins] said “its going to fall down”
 it fell down they say
 it went making lots, lots of noise
sawlla [swooshing]
 it sounded as it fell they say
 down
- vii/A there it went down
 downriver [Lower Napo]
 so there it got known for being a settlement with much game they say
- B over here
 for us the tree of game was standing right here [in Upper Napo]
 and when it went downriver
 only a few animals and fish fell out
- C and so from that
 this became a settlement of hunger they say
 downriver though there are lots of animals and fish
 just grab and eat them
- D and so being
 this is why we suffer a lot
 with hunger
- E that was how the problem began
 yes
- F and so that is the story
 of the Aycha Yura

As Verna’s telling highlights, the *Aycha Yura* story explains the origins of the game animals and fish that are food for humans, and this is why the tree is called the tree of *aycha*. In Kichwa *aycha* is translated as “flesh” or “the body,” and the term applies to plants, animals, and humans. It also gives no sense of the body being a bounded, individual thing. The meaning of the phrase “*Aycha Yura*” is polysemic. It means “the tree with game animals,” but also means “the tree of flesh,” a tree that is made of the substance of bodies, the substance that is food for humans as well as all predators, scavengers, and even insects (see Figure 4).

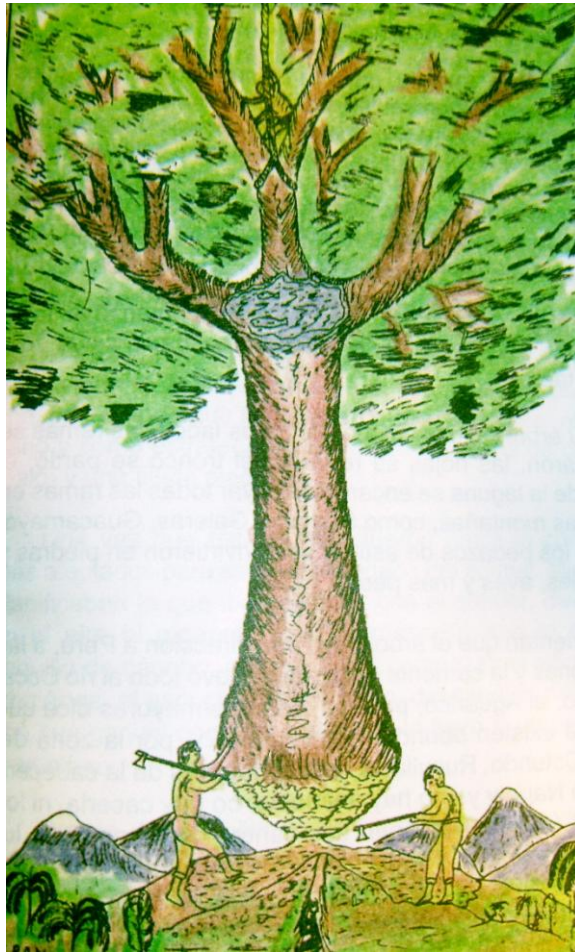


Figure 4. Carlos Alvarado's illustration of the *Aycha Yura*, from his book, *Historia de una cultura la que se quiere matar* (Quito: Imprenta Nuestra Amazonia).

As the story goes, the cutting down the *Aycha Yura* effects a major transformation between the levels of the universe (Wibbelsman 2008; Whitten and Whitten 2008; Sullivan 1988). Because the tree falls east, most of the animals and fish became located in Lower Napo (see Figure 5). This myth explains why the high rainforests and fast-moving waters (rocky bottoms) of the Archidona/Tena region, Upper Napo, contain relatively little game and fish in contrast with the lowland forests and wider, slower-moving rivers (sandy bottoms).

The tree does not fall right away because it is tied to heaven by the strangler fig vine or *ila* in Kichwa. The strangler begins as a vine, but later becomes a gigantic tree as it wraps around its victim and “strangles” the host tree. Strangler trees become gigantic and develop very characteristic buttress roots. They also contain large cavities within their trunks. Because of these characteristics, the Napo Runa consider the strangler tree to be a portal into the spirit world, and a gathering place of spirits and animals.

There are other nuances brought to life by the use of ideophones in describing how trees express themselves when they are cut down. For example,

Janis Nuckoll's Kichwa consultant explained that she used ideophones to express how trees “cry” when they die (Nuckolls 2010: 42). Indeed, when talking about how a tree is or has been cut down, Amazonian Kichwa speakers often use a three-part sequence of ideophones to convey 1) the creaking or popping sounds when a tree just begins to fall, 2) the swooshing and cracking noises as it falls, and 3) finally the sounds of impact as it hits the ground (Nuckolls 2010: 42). These poetic conventions enrich language by conveying the communicative animacy of trees.

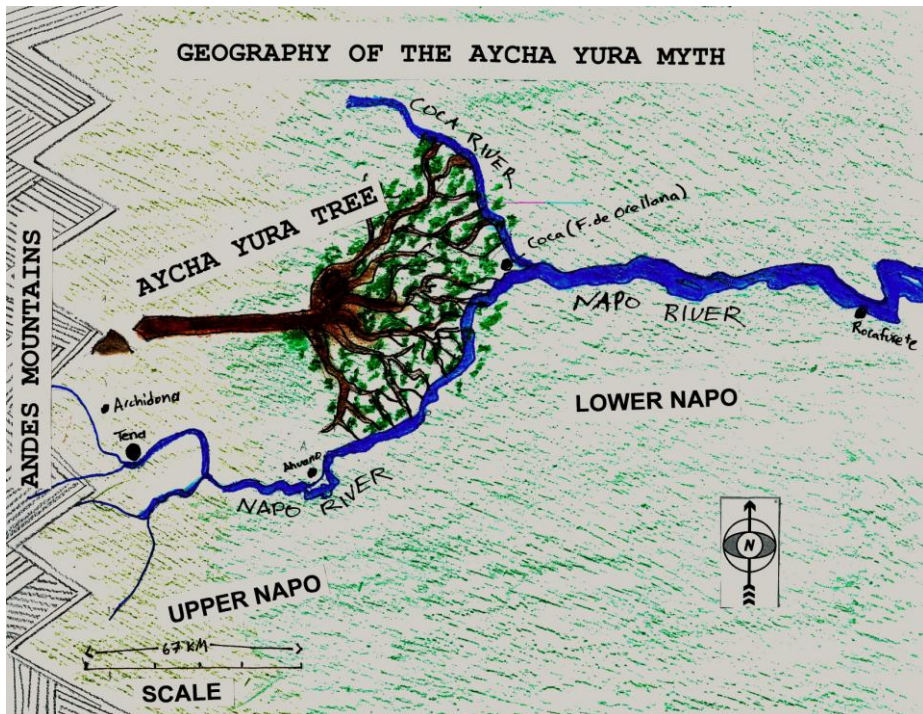


Figure 5: Map of the geography of the *Aycha Yura* story.

Verna uses two ideophones to describe the way that the tree falls in the story above. He first uses the impact ideophone, “*puulla*” to invoke the sound of the tree falling. The first part of the ideophone, “*puu*” is the noise of the tree hitting the ground. The second part, “*lla*” is the reverberation. Later he recounts the swooshing sound as the tree is falling by using the ideophone “*sawlla*” (swooshing). The ending “*lla*,” again, is reverberation. The ideophone brings to life the notion of a primordial sound wave traveling to the ends of the earth.

Coincidentally, Carlos Alvarado and his musical group, Los Yumbos Chawamangos, also sing a beautiful song about the *Aycha Yura* myth. Their song, like Verna's story, emphasizes the vocality of the *Aycha Yura* tree when it is cut down. For example, in the fourth verse, Mr. Alvarado sings:

urayrami uyarisha aychandimi rishka nin
 (“falling down, making sound, with all the flesh, the tree went they say”)
chimandami lastimalla kawsanchi
 (“that is why we live hard lives”)

The term used here, *uyarisha*, means “to make sound,” and the usage is analogic with Verna’s ideophones, which are explicit renditions of *uyarina*. The second part of the song obviates the *Aycha Yura* myth by folding it into the images and sounds of everyday rainforest experience—the poetic movements of ants, manioc beer, monkeys, the “music” of toucans, and “standing on a mountain” are defining of this world (verses 5, 6, 7). The song brings mythological transformation and rainforest intertextuality to life, a pattern analogic within the music itself, which is a complex of repetitive/differentiating relations. While neither Verna nor Carlos refer to tree sounds as “words” or anything approaching a discourse, it is clear that trees, animals, and birds are attributed communicative competency and social interrelatedness (listen to the song).

Nevertheless, in Napo Runa ways of speaking and singing, the subjectivity of plant bodies is not always obvious or explicit, and this ambiguity reveals that the moral qualities of most trees and plants do not always equal the moral qualities of humans (Lodoño Sulkin 2005; Seeger 1975; Swanson 2009; Santos Granero 2009). Some plants, however, such as visionary producing *ayawaska* (and adjuncts used in it), *wanduk*, and other medicinal plants, are considered more animate, more powerful, and more human. These sacred plants are often described as spirits, teachers, or authorities, entities that have the ability to speak directly to people through dreams and visions.

This scaffolding of relations is evidence that all Amazonians do not ascribe equal animacy and status to all things in relation to humans. These are worlds of relations that, to follow Santos Granero (2009: 21), have a strong “constructional” dimension of creating relations and communities out of the composite entities that occupy the conceptual landscape. While it is true that all living things, and many inanimate objects contain the life force, substances, and subjectivities of one shared cosmological universe, this diversity is configured into relationships whereby some are more important than others, what anthropologists refer to as *value* (Dumont 1977, 1980, 1982, 1986; Damon 2002; Graeber 2001; Gregory 1982, 1997; Uzendoski 2005, 2010b). The value forms of any community, however, are not just human. They derive from social relationships and practices linked to the landscape. Agriculture, gathering, hunting, fishing, and many other daily activities are ways of transforming human, plant, and animal communities into reproductive patterns of mutual existence and co-creation. All of these patterns flow through the land, the body, and different layers of human consciousness. In totality, they constitute textuality in the Amazonian way—a textuality of lived experience.

Amazonian textual worlds, as Stolze Lima (1999: 48) points out, are defined by the constant struggle to maintain one’s point of view, to “prevent one’s point of view from becoming tainted with that of others” (Santos Granero 2009: 23). The landscape, myth, and social practices are all part of the complex fabric of Amazonian textuality. How a point of view has emerged, dissipated, or transformed are all part of the larger meaning of mythical texts, as we have just seen with the *Aycha Yura* story; social life is built up upon the textual reality that all living things, at one point, lose their point of view and become dissolved and remade into other composite life forms. Death is conceptualized as a process whereby one loses presence, a metamorphosis into something more ambiguous and diffuse. But beings that cross over to the side of death do not lose all presence. They are still part of the place, of the community, but have had their bodies undone and remade so that they can become something new.

The notion of composite bodies being undone and remade within a territory, as well as the struggle among all living things to maintain their perspective, is a defining quality of myth. The felling of the *Aycha Yura* tree, like death, unleashes a host of transformations as energy is dispersed into new corporeal forms and subjectivities. The tree, in releasing its vitality to the animal and fish world, ceases to exist as a subject position, but becomes diffused into the multiple subject positions of other *aycha* species. These processes are the textual messages present in mythology that, as a whole, explains how human values and Napo Runa people have created a space in the world to maintain a point of view, the Runa way of life. In the beginning, for example, the Twins saved the Runa people from losing out to supernatural jaguars, anacondas, and other predators. The totality of all of these stories reveals how the Runa people, with help from the Twins, were successful (for now at least) in the struggle of perspectives against their ‘enemies.’ These struggles are marked clearly within the landscape and its relations, but are not thought to be permanent. Kichwa storytellers, as well as musicians, for example, always make references to a future world where the relations of myth will again be reversed. This future world, often referred to as *izhu punzha* or “judgment day,” will be one where the humans lose their perspective, usually by fire or water, but also because the supernatural predators will again rise up.

Geographies of perspectivism: macro- and micro-myth

The *Aycha Yura* story is a good example of how myths convey the textuality of geographical relations, a defining feature of how Amazonian people ‘read,’ understand, and experience their cosmologies. For example, Villavicencio (1858: 350), writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, states that Upper Napo has much less hunting compared to Lower Napo, defined by the slower moving rivers located “thirty five leagues from the [Andean] mountain ranges.” While the Western explanation of this difference in hunting would be overpopulation, overhunting, or animal behavior, the mythological explanation is the *Aycha Yura* story. The myth shows that storytellers are sensitive to territories beyond their own when they create myths. The Amazonian Kichwa speaking communities of Upper Napo have had to create their point of view, their pattern of life, in a different way than those of Lower Napo. The Lower Napo communities rely more upon hunting large animals and catching bigger, more plentiful fish, while people of Upper Napo rely on diverse sources of protein, usually smaller animals, little fish, grubs, plant proteins (*aycha shina* or “like meat”), and more exchange with the Andes. The textuality of myth can be read within social habitus, history, as well as regional ecology of different territories.

Other myths about trees reference trees that are tied in with family histories and local differences, rather than regional relations. In this sense, there is a difference of scale between macro-myths and micro-myths, but all relations flow into the macro-myths, which refer to the pan-regional transformations of primordial space-time. Micro-myths, by contrast, detail the interrelations of specific families and communities to the territories that they inhabit. While macro-myth is often a favorite source of material for analysis by ethnographers and folklorists, micro-myth plays a crucial but understudied role in the textuality of perspectivism; individuals and families create micro-myths to connect the narrative threads of individual lives and communities to the threads of the mythology as a whole.

For example, surrounded by his extended family, Alberto Grefa once told a story about the *wayusa* (*Ilex guayusa*) tree. The story he told was about a particular tree, one that is still located on his family's land in Puma Yacu. *Wayusa* is a sacred plant within Napo Runa medicinal culture, and the plant is thought to be medicinal, cleansing, and gives vital energy. It is also a plant teacher that has a guardian (*supay*). Although it does not give visions, it is considered to be part of the class of plants used by shamans, and one can become a shaman by entering into a relationship with the *wayusa* spirit (Shiguango 2006). A close relative of yerba mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*), *wayusa* contains a considerable amount of caffeine, but its power is ascribed to its supernatural rather than biochemical qualities.

Alberto told the story of how his father used to visit the *wayusa* tree to gather leaves to make his morning tea. But one day he found an abandoned blowgun left leaning against the trunk. Because his father knew that this blowgun belonged to the spirit of the *wayusa* tree, he did not touch it. Some time later, however, other passersby were not as respectful and touched the blowgun. The spirit then entered into the dreams of Alberto's father and told him not to let people touch his blowgun.

"That makes me upset," commented the spirit, "because you people, especially those that do not cleanse themselves by drinking my tea, leave stinky mucous all over my blowgun."

The spirit continued, "I have to clean off my blowgun every time people touch it. Please tell them not to touch my blowgun. They can gather my leaves and drink my tea, but they should not touch my blowgun. As I said, this angers me."

Alberto finished his story by reaffirming the benefits of drinking *wayusa* and of the importance of maintaining a clean spirit, both of which he told us were key principles and practices that defined his father's and his own long lives. Then he smiled and let out a hearty laugh, the kind of laugh that one lets out when something meaningful has been conveyed.

I have recounted Alberto's story to highlight how territories are defined through family histories, all interconnected with the activities, both conscious and subconscious, of ancestors who lived there. For example, many of the stories that I have heard are linked to individuals who planted or had encounters with the spirits of highly animate trees. The stories are usually told when we come across such a tree in the forest, for many of the older trees evoke memories of ancestors. Tree myths often reference *Ila* trees (strangler figs), *chonta* trees or clusters of them, bamboo forests, *ayawaska*, *wayusa*, *pitón* trees, or other large, enduring species. In Agua Pungu, for example, there is a family that links their history to a story about the *tanya yura* or "rain tree." This tree is now the symbol of a current ecological reforestation project, but the tree is a trace of the textuality of ancestor *samay* and the spirit world. It is not an invented tradition, but rather a reinvented one.

Such tree history reveals that each territory, every landscape, has its own mythology of *samay* recirculation. Outside of the arboreal realm, there are many stories that refer to other animated things, such as rivers, swamps, rocks, petroglyphs, mountains, birds, animals, and insects. Micro-myths are also present in musical traditions, especially in women's and shamanic songs, which employ the principles of perspectivism and dialogue as an aesthetic of power. The shaman, for example, when singing, shifts from a human to that of an animal or spirit perspective, sometimes referring to him or herself in the third-person. Women, when singing, often take on the subjectivity of birds, giving voice to bird-expressiveness,

and look back upon themselves and their families from the sky. These Other-subjectivities are not abstractions as much as they are considered to be real places and presences within the landscape; they are elicitation that are thought to make forests, rivers, and animals ‘internal’ to the body. To take on the subjectivity of a bird or a spirit in a magical song requires *samay* relations—a soul body link—with these beings within the local or regional landscape. This Amazonian lifeworld is a shared community whereby the social is reinforced by subconscious imaginations and somatic energy flows.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that indigenous peoples in the Amazonian world have developed diverse, complex theories of textuality in which cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social, and the surrounding territorial world. This indigenous theory of textuality is not previous to nor inferior to the Western regime of textuality *qua* alphabetic literacy, which carries great weight in the ideology of development and the politics of so-called third world countries. The illusion of orality, I have argued, not only distorts Amazonian communication realities, it also paves the way for the entrance of alphabetic literacy. Ideologies of alphabetic superiority are the communicative expression of capitalistic deterritorialization and the ensuing alienation of people from local ecology and their surrounding environment. Western notions of literacy are commensurate with predatory naturalism, a way of objectifying and exploiting plants, animals, and ‘natural resources’ for the commercial ends of states and corporations.⁹

Amazonian textuality, by contrast, is built up upon a mode of relating to the world anthropologists have termed perspectivism, the notion of an animated world whereby the human is just one of many possible perspectives of subjectivity, and whereby all living things metamorphose into different perspectives via the body and its transformative powers. This philosophy of life emphasizes certain themes: 1) predation, communication, and dialogue with plants, animals, and spirits, 2) the power of the subconscious in eliciting social relations with other subjectivities, and 3) the intimacy of life with death. It is a real experiential world where myths are lived realities, trees communicate, and spirits participate in human affairs.

In order to bring into focus these relations, I analyzed the Napo Runa *Aycha Yura* story, a Napo Runa myth about the primordial origins of game meat and fish. I showed how the poetics of this story elicit perspectivist truths, such as the communicative capacity of trees, the metamorphosis of the bodies into other kinds of bodies, the life-giving qualities of predation, and the real life ecological conditions of geography. Because it is a creation story common among all Napo Runa people, one that explains the whole geography of the Upper and Lower Napo

9 All people, all cultures, find ways to live outside of themselves, to feel the magical and animate qualities of the world around them. Alphabetic literacy and new communicative technologies seek to suppress the unity of mythological consciousness, to drive conceptual wedges between nature, culture, and place, giving shape and feel to the social processes and alienating forms of modernity. The subconscious of the modern technologized world suffers constant invasions by hordes of commercial subjectivities and commodities that are cleverly woven into communicative media. In this sense one must question whether alphabetic and computer/digital literacy are really improving the world, or just the last instance of machine culture colonizing the already disembodied mind.

world, the *Aycha Yura* account is a macro-myth, one that can be expressed through various genres, including music and graphic arts.

Micro-myths are experiential and textual realities, realities whereby the story—indeed, the act of telling—is but one manifestation of a much larger textual network of circular, spiraling, and transforming relations. These relations span the generations and go back to the beginning and end of space-time, what Kichwa speakers refer to as *wiñay*. In the Amazonian world, the text is the dialogical and intersubjective presence of the landscape that is recreated by storytellers when they tell myths, recount experiences, describe paths, and explain the actions of people. The text is not mediated by a machine, an alphabet, or any other Western technology, nor does it have a single author. The text is written through human, plant, and animal co-interactions and dialogues that span several generations within a shared territorial place. Without the agency of diverse territorial subjectivities and their influence upon the human subconscious, Amazonian texts would not cohere as meaningful works of art and experience. The power of dreams, visions, and experiences—like seeing or feeling a spirit—are normal within this animate world of creative human imagination. The imagination allows Amazonian textuality to take off, to feel spiritually and cosmologically real, and to have emotional and experiential force. In this sense, their theory of textuality is enriching and humanly necessary, even if it is difficult or practically impossible for Westerners or literate people to comprehend.

In this perspectivist reality, communication is a social action that invokes a cosmological flow where all things possess *samay* or bodily “soul-substance,” the energy that animates all things, including humans, animals, plants, rocks/stone, and spirits. Myth, as I have tried to show, is not only present in the imagination. It is rooted in the sociality of the landscape, and performing myths allows the textual lines of the Amazonian world to move through and define the body, thus emphasizing dynamic bodily transformations of life, death, and metamorphosis into different forms, all of which have become the history and deep memory of the community.

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Au-delà de l'oralité. Textualité, territoire, et ontologie parmi les peuples amazoniens

Résumé : S'appuyant sur des récits et des images liées à la mythologie, j'explore les relations entre la textualité, le territoire, et l'ontologie parmi les cultures amazoniennes, et en particulier chez les Napo Runa de l'Amazonie équatorienne. Mon argument est que les Napo Runa, ainsi que d'autres peuples autochtones des Amériques, ont développé leurs propres théories complexes de la textualité dans

lesquelles la cosmologie est inscrite dans le corps, la vie sociale, et le territoire environnant. À l'aide de la théorie du perspectivisme amazonien, j'analyse le mythe de *Yura Aycha* ou "Arbre de la chair" ainsi que son esthétique, sa géographie, et ses qualités ontologiques sous-jacentes. Ce macro-mythe mêle les mythologies locales d'arbres particuliers, d'espèces et d'esprits, formant un univers narratif complexe et partagé de la différenciation locale, des transformations de soi et de l'autre, et des expériences de la territorialité. Cet engagement avec les réalités ethnographiques de cultures dites orales montre les contours ontologiques intraduisibles de leurs mondes textuels : des mondes qui sont déformées et réifiées par les notions occidentales de l'oralité et de l'alphabétisation.

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