

**Textuality, Kinship, and the Amazonian Theories of
Being in the World: An Analysis of Motherhood and
Yachay in Two Napo Runa Songs**

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This essay explores Amazonian storytelling and music as practices that connect people to each other, the past, the landscape, and cosmology in complex experiential and social ways. While many people consider Native Amazonian storytelling to be “oral literature” or “oral poetry,” there is much more to Amazonian storytelling than Western understandings of orality. As I will show, Amazonian storytelling and musical practices are defined by alternative forms and practices of textuality and creative expression.

Specifically, this essay will focus on two Napo Runa (Amazonian Kichwa speakers of Ecuador) songs—“Mama Munditi” and “Pano Warmi”—part of the repertoire of Camilo Tapuy, a three-string violin player with whom I have been apprenticing since 2009.¹ These two songs are embedded within a larger Amazonian Kichwa mythological tradition that weaves human and nonhuman relations involving birds, plants, and insects into a shared ontological frame. In this lived reality, plants, animals, the landscape, spirits, and people all are thought to share a common “humanity” defined by the circulation of energy, souls, and identities among different subjectivities and embodied forms of life.²

My argument is the following: Here we have two songs about motherhood, one that features a woman’s body being made up of the reconstituted parts of other species and features of the landscape, and another about birds engaging in adoption and co-mothering of each other’s children. The careful study and analysis of these songs shows that they are configured according to fractal principles that posit the body as the reconstituted “parts” of other bodies, and analogies that correlate bird and

human sociality (Uzendoski, “Fractal Subjectivities”). Motherhood, however, is but one “line” of relation in a more complex whole, as motherhood’s association with the creation of new life involves the implicit corollary that mothers not only feed their young but also become food for others. Becoming food for others is a central message of the second song, where a “hunted” and dying mother gives her children away for another mother bird to raise.

However, in Amazonian realities, how do we define the “text”? The text here is not limited to inscriptions of material surfaces or any other material object. It moves through all aspects of the landscape and can be “read” by people who know how to perceive the meanings and relations of the storytelling tradition. But it would be a mistake to think that this textual system is just about memory; it also involves the continued creation and experience of the underlying truths of stories. In other words, the text here is a lived practice of analogical flow (Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*; Uzendoski, “Beyond Orality”), of creating “lines” of mutual relation that define a shared interspecies world (Ingold, *Lines and Being Alive*; Mentore; Schuler Zea; Colloredo-Mansfeld). In this reality, where the text is dynamic and constantly changing, humans, plants, and animals coexist, feeding off and feeding each other (Uzendoski, “Beyond Orality”). The text, in other words, features co-authoring and line-making by other species, and the text corresponds to the actual practices of life itself (Uzendoski, “Somatic Poetry”).

These songs under consideration also speak to other deep truths, which display the subtlety with which Amazonians understand life and human destiny in the world. Unlike in Western thought, the reality of becoming food for others is not something ugly or to be feared but rather a social and spiritual principle that is both beautiful and accepted: by singing about death and its reconstitution into life, transformation—not death—is affirmed as the sacred principle of the cosmos. And the body is not singular and sedentary but multiple and embedded in a rich interspecies social world—always changing, moving, and adapting to surrounding physical and social processes.³ These movements of somatic and species transformation, as I will show, are not just limited to these songs but pervade the underlying textual aesthetic of Amazonian storytelling and music in general.

Being “Family” with the Landscape: Sacha, Yaku, Chagra, Wasi, Ayllu

Before I move on to analyze the details of the songs, it is necessary to set out some Amazonian social theory, for artistic expressions in the Amazonian world cannot be understood without the context of their social meanings and

place in what is a holistic philosophy of life. I will refer here to specific Amazonian Kichwa practices since these are the most familiar to me, but Amazonian Kichwa ideas and practices are similar to those found among other Amazonian groups (Clastres, *Society Against the State*; Uzendoski, *The Napo Runa*). The main idea I will discuss is how Amazonian peoples use kinship as a means of conceptualizing relationships not only among people but also among people and the spirits, plants, animals, and features of landscape.⁴

When Kichwa speakers talk about the natural world, they usually refer to specific species, features, or named things. They don't say "nature" or think of "nature" as a category opposed to "culture." The most maximally encompassing spatial domains that they identify are "sacha" (forest), "yaku" (river), and "chagra" (gardens), the three areas where food is produced through hunting, gathering, fishing, and agriculture. These domains are social and have gender associations. The forest is mainly "masculine," while the gardens are "feminine" and the river both masculine and feminine (Whitten, *Sacha Runa* and *Sicuanga Runa*). These spaces also contrast with the "wasi" (house), which also includes the feminine space of the "yanuna wasi" (kitchen).

It might, at first glance, seem that the forests, rivers, and gardens contrast with the house as nature to culture. But this dichotomy is not at all how Kichwa speakers conceptualize the relationships, at least not when they are thinking and talking in Kichwa. They say things like the gardens are a "forest house" and that all of the forest is "our house." They also say that the *wasi* must be "in the forest" and "by a river" for it to be viable. The body is also conceptualized as having the "ushay" (power) or "samay" (breath/soul substance) of the rivers, forests, and gardens, and while the body sleeps in the house, its inner spirit travels during the night. The sociality of these spaces of life is often expressed through metaphors of somatic analogy and shared spiritual essence. In other words, for Kichwa speakers, the relationship between different categories of ecological space is an underlying shared sociality and spirituality, but one in which difference is organized through complementary otherness of which masculine-feminine is the most basic form.

Kichwa speakers also talk about their lived spaces by reference to the "ayllu," or kinship forms, that are rooted in them. *Ayllu* means simultaneously family, extended family, and community of relationships. Rooted in the "allpa" (land), the *ayllu* grows outward from the house into the forest, rivers, and gardens. The house is where our *ayllu* lives, but we are related, or potentially related, to all other *ayllus* and houses via potential affinity and/or consanguinity. Marriage is the main institution and focus of the kinship system. Through marriage other *ayllus* are brought into one's own and one's own *ayllu* becomes enmeshed with the *ayllus* and ecological spaces of other families (Uzendoski, *The Napo Runa*).

These *ayllu* relations, in Amazonian cosmology, extend to the forests, rivers, and gardens. Ecological space is defined by the forms of kinship and mutuality of being with all living things that inhabit the landscape. Hunters and shamans often speak of interspecies family relations defined by marriage and alliance, but also through predation and killing. For example, the masters of the animals are thought both to try and “take” hunters as husbands for their daughters but also send their animal “children” to hunters as gifts to feed their human families. Kinship and predation are conceptually linked, as being a good hunter implies a relationship with a “sacha warmi” (forest woman) or “yaku warmi” (water woman), Kichwa names for these spirit women who are dangerous predators and/or potential affines. In this world whereby sexuality and predation are linked, hunters are defined by their powers to attract spirits and women, as well as prey (Brown).

The *ayllu* is always changing as new life comes into the family and sons and daughters wed. As people die they become *ayllu* with the spirits and members of the animal domain, who in their world are fully human and live in large cities. The sharing and giving of food, living together, and marriage (affinity) and consanguinity are the core principles behind being *ayllu*. *Ayllu* members are defined by a shared, common flow of *samay*, or soul-substance, that emanates from the landscape, rivers, and ancestors and circulates among the group. In death, one becomes “consanguineous” with the landscape by becoming food for others. In the lived realities of Runa kinship and daily life, bodies are in constant physical, social, and spiritual motion in relation to *ayllu* configurations.

I have outlined a very basic model of how Napo Runa and other Amazonian peoples relate to their landscape via kinship, focusing on the terms and social categories by which ecology is conceptualized and described. That kinship is a lived-out textuality also implies that the body is the site of constant transformation and narrative creation: the Amazonian body as a text, an assemblage of powers and relational flows that are the source of community narrative life. As one body is connected to the bodies of multitudes of others, all of whom share existence within a landscape, the narrative of one life becomes enmeshed in the larger narrative of all lives.

At the macro level, we have myth. At the local level, we have other forms and genres of narrative life that are local practices but follow the same principles and patterns of mythological thought. In this sense the destiny of any individual—a mother, for instance—is expressed by her own songs and creative expressions. At the same time, these individual expressions always also tell the story of the individual life as one pathway in a larger journey of all mothers that have lived and died.

The major difference between Western narrative life and that of Amazonia is the social purposes and social forms that underlie creative acts and expressions. Amazonians “live” their narratives and locate their texts not in commodities but in the bodies that are both social and organic sites of

constant transformation and movement. It remains to be shown how these principles of textuality, space, and kinship play out in the music of the Napo Runa and other Amazonian peoples.

One consequence of body-textuality is a reorganization of power. Power does not flow from those in control of printing or digital technologies downward through commodity-texts and through society (Ingold, *Lines*). “Power” flows from a cosmic source, up through the body, and circulates among the lived social relations that define a community of others inhabiting a shared landscape. It is for this reason that Amazonian peoples, in their struggles against neoliberalism and extractivism, rely on their symbols of land and ecology that define who they are and how they live. They are a source of knowledge and power, or “yachay” in Kichwa, a point to which I will return after I discuss the songs.

“Pano Warmi,” or the Pano Woman

“Pano Warmi” is composed and performed by the three-string violin player Camilo Tapuy. The song is an elegy for Camilo’s wife, Serafina, but it is also a celebration of all the women of Pano, past and present, as well as of the Napo Runa woman in general. Camilo plays his violin and sings at the same time, but others often join in the singing. Because I am not a musicologist, I will not describe the musical qualities of the song but instead focus on its social and cosmological features. A digital recording of both songs is housed in the Napo Kichwa collection at the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America at the University of Texas-Austin.⁵ Here is the song in the original Kichwa with my translation.

“Pano Warmi” Song by Camilo Tapuy

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| I | |
| Pano warmi shituga | little Pano woman |
| manamari pishiangui | you are not lacking! |
| sumak rikuri warmi | a beautiful-looking woman |
| // sisa kwenta rikurinmi shayangui // | standing, you look like a flower |
| II | |
| kanba akchas pamiwa kwenta (m)angui | your hair is like the pamiwa fiber |
| kanba ñavis kukuyu kwenta sindinmi | your eyes light up like the firefly |
| // kanba shimis mana alilla rimak | your mouth, you are not a timid speaking |
| warmichu angui // | woman |

III

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| uyaywaklla munaywaklla rimangui | you speak beautifully and gracefully |
| sacha mishki kwentaga | just like sweet honey |
| // sumak llakina shimira rimak warmi | you are a little woman who says |
| shituga // | tender, loving words |

IV

| | |
|---|--|
| kanbas chuchus atun urkunakwenta | your breasts are like big mountains |
| kanba rigray tukuy churi samaunchi | all of your children rest on your shoulder |
| kanbak maki chagraunata llukchishka | your hand has made many gardens |
| // tukuy <i>yachay</i> ushushiuna churiunas | you have many wise daughters and sons |
| charingui // | |

V

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Pano warmi shituga | little Pano woman |
| chagraunaras llangangui | you work in your gardens |
| puruturas tarpungui | you plant beans |
| // sumak mikuna samira pallangui // | you harvest all kinds of nice food |

The most notable feature of the song is its fractal patterning, a mode of organization whereby “parts” and “wholes” are self-similar and analogically related.⁶ The song describes the Pano woman as beautiful and then details her qualities by reference to the female body. Camilo describes his wife’s person by detailing her body as constituted of different plants, insects, mountains, honey, gardens, and children—components that flow into and define the inner soul-substance of his wife’s flesh. We move from a body as a flower to composite body parts that are equated as follows: hair = palm fiber, eyes = fireflies, mouth = honey, breasts = mountains, shoulder = children, hands = gardens. The song itself, however, also has a narrative arc in which we move from the body toward production, not of things or commodities but of beautiful and wise children, as well as food. This is the essence of the Pano Warmi: a mother who stands as the source of all life and beauty in the world.

In other publications I have referred to the fractal logic of the body being intermeshed with forest beings and energy flows as the notion of the “cosmic body” (Uzendoski, “Fractal Subjectivities”), and to the narrative forms of expressing the cosmic body as “somatic poetry” (Uzendoski, “Somatic Poetry”; Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy). “Pano Warmi” is a good example of both of these ideas, as the song is poetry of the body’s textuality in the world and in living movement. The song also implies an energetic connectedness of *samay* [breath/soul-substance] with ecological others and the *ayllu*. The “love” of the mother manifests itself as a channel of energy that moves from forests and gardens through the body—especially

the mouth—toward her children and kin. The production of food is also analogous with the notion of birthing and nurturing vegetable children, beings that must be tenderly and lovingly raised to be fed to one's own human children and sustain the *ayllu*.

“Mama Munditi”

“Mama Munditi,” like “Pano Warmi,” is defined by perspective change. The human is perceived from the point of view of ecological others, in this case birds. The song was originally composed by Camilo's grandparents, Vicente Calapucha and Serafina Shiguango, and Camilo learned it from his grandparents when he was very young. It was traditionally performed in a pair: Vicente would play the three-stringed violin while his wife, Serafina, sang. Because Camilo's wife does not sing, however, Camilo performs both roles, as is the case with the recording that I am working from.

The song features the nocturnal curassow bird (*Nothocrax urumutum*) and the *yutu*, the great tinamou (*Tinamus major*). The original song and my translation follow:

“Mama Mundito” by Vicente Calapucha, performed by Camilo Tapuy

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| 1) | | |
| // mama munditi takika // | | the mama munditi bird [nocturnal curassow] sang |
| kinsa wawara | | to her three children |
| kinsa wawara kamachin | | to her three children she warns |
| // mana alira mana alira muskuni // | | not well, not well I dream |
| 2) | | |
| // kinsa wawara charini // | | I have three children |
| kinri sachay | | in the nearby forest |
| kinri sachay apinawn | | in the nearby forest they are caught |
| // tugllaymari, tugllaymari wañuchinawn // | | in a trap, in a trap, they are killed |
| 3) | | |
| // kangunara rimauni // | | I tell you all now |
| anganawa | | with the birds of prey |
| anganawa ama lu-tarin-gui-chu | | the birds of prey, do not get near them |
| // mikushami mikushami ninawnga // | | I will eat you, I will eat you, they will say |
| 4) | | |
| // mansu makimi sakiuni // | | I leave you in the hands of someone nice |

| | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| kanba mamaga | your mother now |
| kanba mamaga yutumi | you mother now is a yutu bird |
| | [great tinamou] |
| // mamachisha, mamachisha tianguichi // | making her your mother, making her |
| | your mother, stay with her |

5)

| | |
|---|---|
| // paywa shimi uyanguichi // | listen to what she says |
| paymi llakisha | she will love you |
| paymi llakisha charinga | she will love you and take care of you |
| // churi shina, churi shina tianguichi // | like her own, like her own, stay with her |

The song is masterfully constructed in both its poetics and movement of relations. In terms of form, the song is defined by ethnopoetic features of parallelism, repetition, pause, and dynamic relations of couplets (Hymes). Also, the semantic density of the song is high, as the song combines themes of motherhood, dreams, death, and adoption into a single narrative with very few words. The song is about life and death, and the adoption of children in the unfortunate circumstance of a mother's death—a feature of the Napo Runa *ayllu* system. At its core, the song is perspectival, in that the human condition is expressed through the world of birds and bird relations.

In the first stanza, we have a third-person reference to the Mama Munditi bird, which then “speaks” within the song and establishes the first-person narrative voice. She states that she has three children and has had a bad dream, a prophetic, foreboding vision. Mama Munditi continues to speak in the second stanza, where she relates that her dream involves her children's being caught in a hunter's trap in the forest and dying. In the next verse she gives her “last words” to her children, and it is at this point that one realizes something serious is amiss, for it is common practice for elders to “lecture” (*kamachina*) their children when they are dying. Mama Munditi tells her children not to get close to hawks, which will try to eat them. In stanza four we know for certain that Mama Munditi is dead or dying. She tells her children that their new mother is the yutu bird, and that they need to love her and stay with her. In stanza five Mama Munditi provides her final instructions. She tells her children to listen to the yutu mother's words and assures them that she will love them. Her last words are “like her own [children], like her own, stay with her.”

The “Mama Munditi” song is an expression of motherhood from the perspective of death and predation, and in this sense it contrasts with “Pano Warmi,” a song about motherhood from the point of view of life and food production. But the two songs are intertextually enmeshed as different views of a shared reality in which mothers both produce food for their children and become food for other people's children. The “Mama Munditi” song conveys sadness but also acceptance of death, and is comforting in its

account of how other *ayllu* members can love and take care of one's children as their own.

The adoption of other people's children if the parents die is and always has been a feature of the *ayllu* system of the Napo Runa. In fact, godparents are picked out when a child is young, and the ritual whereby the child is "baptized" also features rhetorical phrases about the child's being cared for in the event of a tragedy. Adoption is common among the Napo Runa and is not regarded as inferior to procreation. On the contrary, adopted children become "substance kin" in the symbolic logic of the Napo Runa because they share food, residence, soul-substance, and life experiences. In the Napo Runa theory of the *ayllu*, these are all ways of becoming "consanguineous" to the *ayllu*; kinship is not something that is "given" but a process of becoming.

In the defining myths of the Napo Runa cycle, humans and other species co-adopt and/or raise each other's children, as in the stories of "Twins and Jaguars" and "Origin of the Sun" (Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy). In another article (Uzendoski, "Fractal"), I present a myth about a young boy who was taken to the underworld by his anaconda girlfriend and made an administrator by her father. There are also stories about anaconda parents leaving their children on the banks of rivers for humans to adopt. Adoption, like marriage, is a way of enmeshing kinship relationships and creating a substance link among others not already related but in the process of becoming related.

The "Mama Munditi" song expresses truths that perhaps derive from the native experience of colonialism and the plagues and death brought by Europeans. In the region of Pano, for example, there are fruit trees [*Bactris gasipaes*, or *chonta*, and *Eschweilera longifolia*, or *pasu*] planted in remote zones of the hills where previous generations are remembered to have lived in hiding to avoid diseases spread by the whites. As Lúcia Sá has written eloquently in reference to the lessons of mythology, "if it is true that native peoples share a history of dispossession, abuse, and extermination . . . it is also true that those who survive attest to the great capacity of indigenous cultures to re-create and reinvent themselves amidst the worst adversities" (276). The "Mama Munditi" song is evidence of this re-creation and re-invention of kinship and motherhood in the face of this history of abuse, death, and dispossession. Adoption was one important strategy by which the Napo Runa were able to survive the abuses of colonialism and the patron system. It was a practice of continuing life in the face of death. But there are other structural meanings to the song as well.

The myth of the Iluku bird and the moon man, one of the central myths of Napo Runa culture (see Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy), is also intertextually linked to the meaning of both of these songs. In the myth, Iluku fails to follow her husband, the moon man, up to the sky and is stuck on earth, pregnant with twins. These twins are the cultural heroes who later

perform all the “miracles” for the Napo Runa people so that they can live freely without being eaten by supernatural predators. Iluku thus is the metaphorical mother of all the Napo Runa and the embodiment of life production itself. The life of Iluku, however, is tragic. Not only does she fail to follow her husband to the sky because of a character flaw of being *killla* (lazy, careless), she also transforms into a bird and “cries” at night to her husband when there is a full moon. Scientifically speaking, the Iluku bird is the common potoo (*Nyctibius griseus*), and this species does actually sing to the full moon in a series of descending calls that sound like weeping.⁷ The Napo Runa identify this call as Iluku crying to her lost man. As the myth goes, Iluku, in despair, gets lost in the forest and comes to the house of the man-eating jaguars. The jaguars devour her, but the jaguar grandmother takes the twins out of her belly, keeps them safe, and eventually raises them. It is when the twins grow up that they perform their miracles of transformation that eventually give humans “space” to live well.

In this sense the Pano Warmi, the ideal woman, is the opposite of Iluku. She is a person of impeccable character and strength and a loving mother and wife. Mama Munditi, however, is the mediating relationship between the two. Mama Munditi is not lazy or careless but, to the contrary, is wise and a powerful dreamer. But she, like Iluku, becomes food for predators. And like Iluku, Mama Munditi relies on adoption to keep her children alive. She also embodies the value of *yachay*, which I will discuss below.

So far, this essay has presented two short songs with deep social and mythical meanings. These two texts come out of a much larger intertextual and narrative world in which humans, plants, animals, and the landscape all share in the human condition, a condition defined by kinship, predation, nurturing, and producing and becoming food for others. These songs offer different and changing perspectives on motherhood, whereby mothers both produce food and life but also in death become food and life for others. This is art infused with life and the social principles and forms by which people live and perceive the world. To end this section, I will discuss the Amazonian theory of power in relation to lived textualities and somatic poetics.

There is a large body of scholarship on writing and the Americas, much of which explores the relationship of alphabetic writing, history, and domination (Boone and Mignolo; Mignolo, *The Darker Side*; Mignolo, “Signs and Their Transmission”; Rama; Arnold). Another complementary theoretical push examines how indigenous peoples have appropriated alphabetic writing and used it alongside their own graphic traditions in ways that not just are about state power and state domination but also involve continuity with indigenous forms of sociality and textuality (Salomon and Niño-Murcia; Rappaport and Cummins). Most of this literature derives from the Andes, but there are also important discussions of Amazonian perceptions of writing, most notably the work of Gow. I myself have been

most influenced by the trailblazing works of Denise Y. Arnold and Tim Ingold, “line” theorists who have written books discussing textuality and its relationship to the landscape via the body.

Within this field, I think the most crucial questions about literacy and writing are those that relate to how power is organized and how textual systems fit within the history of indigenous peoples’ struggles for self-determination. In this sense, one cannot ignore the role that alphabetic writing has played in the fight for indigenous rights and a more just world (Adorno). But these practices are also ambiguous, for alphabetic writing itself involves forms and ways of thinking that mesh with the state’s deployment and use of power (Rubenstein). The values that storytelling embodies and creates, however, derive from a different world of power and sociality. It is here, in comparing different and overlapping “regimes of textuality” (Arnold 38), that we require a discussion of the anthropological concept of value, for orality proponents are often accused of having a Rousseau-inspired desire to critique literacy. I am aware that native peoples have always had inscriptive traditions and have historically embraced alphabetic writing for specific social purposes (Salomon and Niño-Murcia 288), but storytelling—in my view—is defined by values that obviate literacy.

When anthropologists debate “value,” following the work of Louis Dumont, Joel Robbins, Karl Marx, and David Graeber, they always emphasize the hierarchical organization of certain values in relation to others. It is here, in a discussion of value and value relationships, that we must distinguish between different kinds of power, social forms, and their sources. When Napo Runa people write alphabetically, they are doing something that involves power relations emanating and circulating from values of the Hispanic world. These practices and ways of thinking are referred to as “mishu iyay” (mestizo thinking), and their sociality derives from the forms of power and relation to the state. Most of these social contexts involve money, business, government, or some other institution. By contrast, when Napo Runa people are gathered together and are telling a story or singing in Kichwa, they are involved in defining who they are in relationship to the ancestors and Napo Runa knowledge or “Runa Yachay,” hereafter referred to simply as *yachay* (knowledge). *Yachay* encompasses *mishu iyay* in Runa thought, just as the *ayllu* is more primary than the state, and local knowledge more valued than expert knowledge.⁸ The fight for indigenous self-determination in the Americas has always been a struggle of values, one in which communities continue to assert their right to exist as sovereign societies defined by alternative values and social philosophies. As the leaders of the indigenous movement in Ecuador stated in a book about their historic movement, the strategy for survival was to achieve “autonomy” and “defense” from the unmediated power of the state (CONAIE).

The associated values of *yachay* are those of living beautifully, speaking well, and being interconnected via kinship and exchange with others inhabiting the landscape. When people experience the joy of collective being—a notion that Edith Turner continues to refine as the notion of “*communitas*”—*yachay* is synonymous with the idea of good living or living properly. Like other root metaphors or focal values, *yachay* is a concept associated with many different concepts and ideas. It also means “power,” specifically the power of the spiritual world that animates all things and can also mean “soul” in certain contexts. As a value, in most Amazonian communities that are socially and politically healthy, *yachay* is superior to and encompasses *mishu iyay* in thought and social practice. *Yachay* also reverberates within the symbols and cultural practices of Napo Kichwa daily life so that almost all activities refer back to it, just as money and market mentality are infinitely present in societies dominated by neoliberal forms. A shaman, for example, is a “*yachak*” (one who has *yachay*), just as a millionaire is one who has lots of accumulated money and the status and power that it brings.

Furthermore, *yachay* is explicitly associated with historical struggle against domination. The decade-long fight against petroleum extraction backed by Ecuadorian governments and private companies by the community of Sarayaku—Amazonian Kichwa speakers from the Pastaza River region—for example, has involved the assertion and reclamation of *yachay* as the key value in the indigenous way of life. As part of their struggle, the people of Sarayaku recently produced and disseminated a documentary video titled *Sacha Runa Yachay* (2006). The documentary, as it was introduced by José Gualinga in Quito in 2012, translated and discussed *yachay* as the “science and technology” by which “*runa*” (people) mediate their relationships with the “*sumak allpa*” (land without contamination/beautiful land). Coincidentally, in July 2012 the people of Sarayaku won an historic victory at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in their struggles for self-determination and control of their land. The notion of *yachay* was, and continues to be, the internal value of cultural action and expression. It refers to the human and ecological textuality of living in relationship to the land.

In this sense, *yachay* is the most important value in indigenous self-determination because it is not only conceptualized as power but also the source of all beauty and life itself, a kind of “ancestral knowledge” that is not understood by outsiders but internally defining. To live well, Kichwa speakers say, one must develop and cultivate one’s *yachay*, a theme that runs throughout the research of the Whittens (*Puyo Runa* and “Clashing Concepts”) and in my own fieldwork experiences. In the “Pano Warmi” song, for example, Camilo refers to his wife as having produced sons and daughters of *yachay*, which I translated inadequately as “wise.” Elders constantly emphasize to the young the need to develop and cultivate one’s

own *yachay*, one of the defining characteristics of dreaming, drinking *wayusa* tea and/or other sacred plants, and bathing in the cold, early-morning rivers—among other myriad practices and habits.

In this world of *yachay* movement and transformation, people do not define themselves culturally and socially through alphabetic writing or books. They talk to each other, they follow paths in the forest, they hunt, they fish, and they farm. They feel the wind and listen to the sounds of the rivers. They use their bodies and feelings to create and express stories, songs, and music that are poetic renditions of the beauty experienced in everyday life. The documentary made by the Sarayaku community opens with the statement, “[T]he person does not live on the land but is the land, the person is not the owner but is the land itself” (*Sacha Runa Yachay*). The text is out there in the world, and it is created and co-created by people, plants, animals, the spirits, and features of the landscape. It is an organic world of lived textuality defined by *yachay*, the value embodied by Mama Munditi and Camilo’s wife.

Conclusion: The Social Philosophy of Amazonian Textuality

The two songs I have presented and analyzed in this essay show that different visions of the human condition do exist and that alternative textualities are quite real and beautiful. The songs show how Amazonian themes of motherhood and love are tied to the reality of death and predation but mediated by kinship: feeding children and becoming food for others are associated as different moments of a larger narrative about the circulation of souls, energy, and identities and the creation and dissolution of families. The songs also feature configurations of fractality and analogic perspective change: the “Mama Munditi” song elicits a human reality of *ayllu* and adoption expressed by reference to birds, and the “Pano Warmi” song “constructs” the feminine body by analogical flow of plants, animals, landscape features, insects, and cosmological energy. Both songs refer to love, kinship, feeding, and the interconnectedness of the human text with the textuality of the surrounding environment.

The beauty of the song texts is defined by the details and movements of ecology, which are internal rather than external to kinship⁹—and, as I have shown, constitute how people conceptualize their bodies as being fractally defined by others and other species. A person is, in this philosophy of life, a living being that is part of a larger movement and transformation of social and ecological others. These songs show that Amazonian world(s) are intertextual realities in which stories and music define and pervade consciousness of the immediately sensory world and the social forms by which people live.

These texts, I have argued, are also conceptualized socially as expressions of *yachay*, a focal value of Napo Runa sociality and historical understandings of self-determination (Whitten and Whitten, *Puyo Runa*; Whitten and Whitten, “Clashing Concepts”). While alphabetic writing is present and useful to the Napo Runa for certain social tasks, it is not dominant, and in indigenous consciousness subordinate to the practices associated with *yachay*—the lived textuality of a community of people who share and experience narratives via the expressive power of the whole body and all of its senses within a shared landscape.

The implications of the communicative world I have just described—which is as much defined by images and experiences as by words—are many, but my main point has been that there is nothing universal nor inherently superior in alphabetic writing, just as there is nothing natural about the state. Just as looking at social theory from an “anarchist” perspective has allowed us to demystify the state and its power to shape perception (Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*; Clastres, *Society Against the State*; Graeber; Rubenstein), so too do we need more histories and studies of how the state is produced and consumed via alphabetic regimes and, more importantly, that show and explore alternative communicative possibilities that obviate the system. In this project of liberating the world from the hegemony of Western modes of thought and material life, indigenous peoples offer us the greatest hope of finding a way to reconsider the human beyond just letters and commodities—as part of a communicative world whereby the earth, landscapes, and other species are part of how we think about and relate to others and ourselves.

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Notes

1. My apprenticeship should be contextualized by over five years of fieldwork working and living in Napo Runa communities and nineteen years of study of the Kichwa language and culture. Most of the research involved in this essay was conducted in the Kichwa language, and many of the insights derive from actual experiences and apprenticeship in various domains (skill sets and knowledge) rather than “research methods.” Over the past nineteen years, I have had thousands

of conversations with Napo Runa peoples and participated in countless learning experiences involving many different aspects of life, ranging from hunting to washing dishes.

2. See the work of Descola; Castro, “Cosmological Deixis” and “Cosmological Perspectivism”; Costa and Fausto; Vilaça; Santos-Granero. Anthropologists have theorized these Amazonian modes of thought and relation as “animism” (Descola) and “perspectivism” (Castro “Cosmological Deixis”), elegant theories for which there also exist significant critiques (Bird-David; Terry S. Turner; Ramos). I do not have time to review all of these arguments here. My main point is that while the above theories can help translate Amazonian ways of thinking about “nature,” the texts of the Amazonian world are organized according to complex symbolic and social forms that are theoretical in their own right (Wagner, *Symbols That Stand for Themselves; The Invention of Culture*; “The Fractal Person”).
3. On this point I follow Ingold (*Being Alive* 145), who contends that modern Western civilization no longer allows people to “inhabit” the world but rather “occupy” it—our bodies and minds have become so sedentary that we have become a civilization of people going against the grain of humanity and the designs of our bodies.
4. I follow Sahlins (“What Kinship Is,” parts one and two) in defining kinship as the “mutuality of being” and not as necessarily rooted in Western notions of biology and genetic relatedness.
5. “Pano Warmi” Song, Napo Kichwa Collection, Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America, University of Texas-Austin. Web. 28 February 2013. <www.ailla.utexas.org/site/welcome.html>.
6. See Jackson 11; Mosko and Damon; Uzendoski, “Fractal Subjectivities”; Wagner, “The Fractal Person.”
7. Readers who wish to listen to an audio recording of the song of the common potoo (Iluku bird) can do so on the companion website to *The Ecology of the Spoken Word: Amazonian Storytelling and Shamanism*: <http://spokenworddecology.com/> (see chapter 3 of the website). This website also contains videos of storytellers recounting the core myths of the Napo Runa, including the Iluku myth and the Twins stories. Chapter 2 of the website also features a video of Camilo playing his violin and singing the song of the great flood.
8. See Scott for an insightful discussion on the general conflict between local and state knowledge.
9. While Western philosophy long ago “broke” with the possibility of kinship as a defining feature of human social organization and good living, Native Amazonians did not. Kinship is a highly developed and complex intellectual as well as social problem in Amazonian thought and practice; it is in this sense that Lévi-Strauss was asking the right question in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*: whether kinship was valid as a social theory in its own right. The anthro-anarchist and student of Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Clastres, was more direct in insisting that kinship is not lacking as a theory of society. He wrote, many years ago, that “Primitive society [sic], less than any other, cannot be thought of without kinship relations” (Clastres, “French Marxists” 1). The argument he develops in his major work is that societies based on kinship are not only ignored, but they are also denied the right to exist and to be heard as a theory of being (Clastres, *Society Against the State*).

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