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Nomadic ecologies: Plants, embodied knowledge, and temporality in the Colombian Amazon¹

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Abstract. A non-anthropocentric approach to human and other-than-human relations in the Colombian Amazon, this paper follows plant-human encounters in the context of the ritual use of coca

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- 1 I would like to thank the Murui community of Puerto Leguizamo-Putumayo for a weeklong stay with them in their territory, and for many insightful conversations on plant life. Thanks to Professor Catherine Walsh, Director of the Cultural Studies Graduate Program at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar-Quito, for dialogues on decoloniality and decolonial research, as well as for taking the time to comment on previous drafts of this paper. Thanks to Professor Kristina Lyons at UC Santa Cruz for sharing her ethnographic research in Putumayo with me, and for her comments on the final draft of this article. Also to Professor Arturo Escobar at UNC-Chapel Hill. Many of the theoretical insights on embodiment and relationality here take inspiration from readings and conversations in his graduate seminars on critical political ecology and the anthropology of ontological design at UNC-Chapel Hill. Last but not least, special thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this article. Their suggestions far improved it in many ways. Note: The following text does not encompass an ethnographic account of Murui knowledge about plants in the Amazon. I am sharing instances of some of the conversations I had with Don Antonio during a weeklong stay in his home, as well as my own theoretical elaborations. The ideas presented here are my entire responsibility. In order to protect the identity of the people I dialogued with, I will use different names.

(Quech. *kuka*; Lat. *Erythroxylon coca*) with a Murui indigenous elder. It describes how plants and humans co-create place-based knowledge, ecologies, and territories. The article also tackles some aspects of Amazonian socio-ecological life beyond teleological notions of time, change, and history. A conversation on plant-human relations, it suggests that questions of corporality, ingestion, and tactility, among others, might be of interest to decolonial theory.

Keywords: *Mambia*, agency of plants, other-than-human temporalities, decoloniality, Colombian Amazon.

Ecologías nómadas: las plantas, conocimiento incorporado y temporalidad en la Amazonia colombiana

Resumen. Una aproximación no antropocéntrica a las relaciones humanas y otras no humanas en la Amazonia colombiana, este artículo hace seguimiento a los encuentros planta- humano en el contexto del uso ritual de la coca (Quech *kuka*; Lat. *Erythroxylon coca*) con un anciano Murui. En él se describe cómo las plantas y los seres humanos co-crean conocimiento basado en el lugar, ecologías, y territorios. El artículo también aborda algunos aspectos de la vida socio-ecológica amazónica más allá de las nociones teleológicas de tiempo, cambio e historia. Una conversación sobre las relaciones planta-humano, sugiere que las cuestiones de la corporalidad, ingestión y tacto, entre otras, podrían ser de interés para la teoría decolonial.

Palabras clave: *mambia*, agencia de las plantas, temporalidades no humanas, decolonialidad, Amazonia colombiana.

Ecologias nômaes: as plantas, o conhecimento incorporado e a temporalidade na Amazônia Colombiana

Resumo. Uma aproximação não antropocêntrica às relações humanas e outras não humanas na Amazônia colombiana, este artigo faz um seguimento aso encontros planta-humano no contexto do uso ritual da coca (Quech *kuka*; Lat. *Erythroxylon coca*) com um idoso Murui. Nele descreve-se como as plantas e os seres humanos criam em conjunto conhecimento baseado no lugar, ecologias e territórios. O artigo também se aproxima a assuntos da vida sócio ecológica amazônica além das noções teleológicas de tempo, mudança e história. Uma conversa sobre as relações planta-humano sugere que as questões da corporeidade, ingestão e tato, entre outras, poderiam ser de interesses para a teoria não colonial.

Palavras-chave: *mambia*, agência das plantas, temporalidades não humanas, decolonialidade, Amazônia colombiana.

Écologies nomades : plantes, connaissance intégrée et temporalité dans l'Amazonie colombienne

Résumé. Un approche non anthropocentrique aux relations humaines et autres relations non humaines dans l'Amazonie colombienne, cet article fait suite à des rencontres entre plantes et humaines dans le contexte de l'usage rituel de la coca (Quech. *kuka*; Lat. *Erythroxylon coca*) par un homme âgé Murui. Dans cet article on décrit comment les plantes et les humains co-crée des connaissances fondées sur le lieu, l'écologie, et les territoires. L'article aborde également certains aspects de la vie socio-écologique de l'Amazonie au-delà des notions téléologiques du temps, du changement et de l'histoire. Une conversation sur les relations entre plantes et humaines, suggère que les questions de la corporéité, l'ingestion et du tact, entre autres, pourraient être d'intérêt pour la théorie décoloniale.

Mots-clés : *mambia*, agence des plantes, temporalités non humaines, perspective décoloniale, Amazonie colombienne.

Introduction

A well-known image of the Amazon might convey it as a green vastness. A radically diverse, barely explored, and certainly untamable and complex ecology, this region depends upon manifold life forms and relations that copiously proliferate and change (Slater, 2002). Moreover, it might be viewed as a huge recycling machine where everything loops back into the land, air, and water, among other images; in other words, a place predominantly populated by the nonhuman. Following a similar principle of organic ex-change, the *chagra* could be imagined as a small place of no more than two hectares where humans cultivate plants for their feeding and medicinal purposes. Then, it might also be viewed as the site of the tamable, measurable, and human-like, among other features (Kawa, 2016).²

Far from clear edged pieces of a huge vegetal puzzle, yet, *selva* and *chagra* remain in continuity while co-forming each other. To be sure, they interact and overlap relentlessly, while composing and decomposing the material and spiritual bodies of each other (see Lyons, 2016). Participants of such an organic process of mutual shaping, Don Antonio, a local *sabedor* from a Murui community in the Colombian Amazon, as well as the plants he works with (particularly, *coca* and *tobacco*), are intrinsic to the continuum of life forces and agencies morphing into socio-ecological kinships in this region. While telling the origin of the first *chagra* during a nightlong *mambia* session,³ Don Antonio is keen to suggest the primordial vegetal ontology of the world he has helped to co-create travelling and working in the *selva*, as well as chewing his coca mix with the community men:

Muinajeba luego fue enviado con la espiritualidad. Guamo se enfrentó a Muinajeba y luego empezaron a competir. Muinajeba encontró la coca de monte (esa es la coca de los animales) y luego la coca humana. Encontró el tabaco y luego el árbol donde nació la comida. En ese árbol había de todo y todo el mundo comía. Creció muy alto y ya nadie podía subirse. Muinajeba comenzó a hablar con algunos animales y le dijo al sapo que subiera al árbol, pero él solo podía llegar hasta cierta parte. Luego le dijo al zorro pero ese bajaba comida para él solo. Muinajeba le habló a uno de los jefes que primero creó Dios y mandó llamar al picaflor que trajo la candela. Luego mandó a una persona con un hacha y con ella tumbó el árbol. Cuando cayó el palo, de las astillas se formaron los peces. El tronco formó el río Putumayo y las ramas sus vertientes; las hojas, los lagos. Ahora tocaba sembrar las semillas y con ellas se hace la primera chagra. Muinajeba entonces formó la primera chagra. (Personal interview, August 27th 2010, Putumayo)

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- 2 The *chagra* is a space of small agriculture based on land rotation, but also a space of socio-ecological relations of nourishment, spirituality, and political life among many traditional communities in South America.
 - 3 It refers to the act of ingesting coca-based preparation (*mambe*) in a ritual context. It also refers to the act of discussing community matters with male members of the community under the effect of the *mambe* and into the *mambeadero* or *maloka*.

Affirming a non-anthropocentric approach to human-nonhuman interactions in the Amazon, I start by describing plant-human relations in the context of the ritual use of coca (Quech. *kuka*; Lat. *Erythroxylon coca*). Combined with *yarumo* ashes (Amaz.: *yarumo*, *yagrumo* or *grayumbo*; Lat. *Cecropia peltata*), coca leaves are thinly macerated to obtain the *mambia*, an Amazonian-specific preparation.

In fact, encounters between plants and humans are quite central to local modes of knowing, living, and shaping territories in this region (Echeverry and Kine-rai, 1993). In the second portion of the article I describe how plant-human relations—through the ritual use of *mambia*—perform a nomadic ecology. I use this notion in two ways; first, to refer to the act of traveling-together with human and other-than-human beings, for example, when Don Antonio roams through the jungle and collects wild seeds to sow in his *chagra*. But also when the *chagra* co-shapes the canopy as it *moves* into another plot in order to allow the previous one to rest and regenerate. Second, the act of planning community labor in the *chagra*, but also the act of going spiritually to distant places with the aid of sacred plants without moving from the *maloca* (a representation of the cosmos). Don Antonio uses coca to “*ordenar el mundo*” [order the world], as he says. This twofold agency between humans and plants simultaneously co-creates place-based knowledge, as well as local ecologies and territories.

The “ordering of the world” may take place in a non-linear fashion. In the third section, and taking inspiration from Mexican decolonial scholar Rolando Vasquez, I propose the notion of other-than-human temporalities as a way to reflect upon Amazonian socio-ecological life cycles beyond teleological notions of time, change, and history (Vasquez, 2012), a conversation on plant-human relations. This paper also suggests that questions of corporality, ingestion, and tactility, among others, might be of interest to decolonial theory.

***Mambia*: Plant-human encounters**

There is a great deal of literature on the Andean use of coca (see Allen, 2002). Comparatively, however, there is little on the ritual and political meanings of its Amazonian counterpart (Urbina, 1992, 2010). Although relatively recent in the Amazon, the *mambe* is a historical institution that “has been incorporated into myths, everyday life, the ceremonial, and symbolic universe of many Amazonian groups” (Echeverry and Pereira, 2010: 590). Yet, the ritual use of powdered coca in the Amazon seems to be limited to the regions of the Great Vaupés (basins of the Vaupés, Apoporis and Mirití rivers, and towards the Caquetá river), and the Caquetá-Putumayo interfluvium, “with some extensions to the South and East resulting from migrations of these groups” (Echeverry and Pereira, 2010: 590) as well as certain urban regions of Colombia like the city of Bogotá where many indigenous peoples from the Amazon live today.

Mambear coca is, first of all, a male knowledge practice associated with the education of the body and the spirit. Moreover, it is a vehicle of social and political life that is best crystalized in the institution of the *mambeadero*—"a place for the preparation and consumption of the coca dust, as well as a site of dialogue" (Echeverry and Pereira, 2010: 566). According to the anthropologists Juan Álvaro Echeverry and Edmundo Pereira, the corporeal and social discipline embedded in the institution of *mambe* has fundamentally a religious and spiritual meaning. Indigenous people, for instance, assert this dimension when they say that coca 'has a spirit'. In fact, *mambear* coca "is not merely to paint your mouth with green": the slightly stimulating effects of *mambe* do matter, these scholars argue, but so the social and corporal disciplines associated with the ways coca plant is understood and managed in each community (2010: 566).

On the religious character of the *mambe*, for example, Don Antonio, from a Murui community near Puerto Leguizamo (Colombian Amazon), says that "oramos en la noche y trabajamos al día siguiente. Queremos que esta coca sea dulce, que sea al servicio de mi Dios, porque si no, lo bueno se puede ir yendo y lo malo se puede ir acumulando. Nosotros nos relacionamos con Dios a través del mambeo". Nonetheless, this 'spirit of the coca' does not refer to an abstract entity, since it is fully embedded in labor, practices of care, the education of children, inter-tribal relations, among other aspects of community life. Moreover, it expresses itself materially in the body of the *mambeador* in different ways as we could see during a nightlong *mambe* session with Don Antonio and other men.

Pedro, the nephew of Don Antonio, prepared the *mambia* by gently moving a bunch of coca leaves with his bare hands in a simmering copper pan, while a sheen of sweat bubbles sprouted on his forehead. Once toasted, the coca was poured into a wooden container, tenderized, and then mixed with *yarumo* ashes. Seated next to him, Don Antonio, the storyteller, went on to explain the details of his roaming through the jungle a couple of months ago. As he poured a large spoon of the mix in his mouth, he told us how the jungle wanted him to survive: "Me dio comida, me dio abrigo, pero también me dio susto".

That night the most experienced *mambeadores* poured two to three full spoons with *mambia* into their mouths while beginners like me unsuccessfully tried to avoid the momentary lack of breathe provoked by a teaspoon of *mambia* mix. Quite an entertainment to the community men. Yet, everybody was willing to be guided by the plant: "Vamos a ver cómo nos va con la palabra que da la mambia", said Don Antonio.

The material-spirituality of the *mambia*, as it were, can be described as a vibration or resonance that is enabled by the sensorial acuity obtained with the ingestion and gradual absorption of the plant in the blood stream. The stimulation was mild, and it offered the capacity to enhance concentration, facilitate communication with other people, and recall stories. To be sure, the senses were opened

to the lure of full alertness, as well as the perception of sounds, colors, smells, and shapes. Such a resonance comes and goes making the skin quiver in slow motion each time, almost like the wind shaking the top branches of a tall tree. These vibrations or *señales*, as Don Antonio would describe them, took place in the skin. The skin, as it was, emerged not as the limit of bodies separating humans from the rest of the world, but as an interface where the speech of coca (embodied vibrations) and human perception met one another. Borrowing from the work of Lyons on *selva* relationality in the Colombian Amazon, such encounter between the *mambia* and the human skin established a relation of material continuity, or ‘shared body’ (Lyons, 2016). The most experienced *mambeadores* could read these vibrations like an open book in order to diagnose illnesses, or as signposts to mark different moments in the story that is being told. Vibrations, I shall venture to say, might be a mode of plant communication while its ensuing stories, like the roaming of Don Antonio through the *selva* —which I will recall in the next section— may well be a matter of collaboration between human and nonhuman bodies, and modes of intentionality. What came out of such an encounter between *mambia* and humans was created, nourished, transmitted, and sustained as a story. This one was a fleshy story (Haraway, 2008).

The plant, however, wanted to *see* us first that very night while also keeping us alert and open to the encounter. A natural-like host curious to learn about our intentions, stories, and desires, the plant offered the possibility of a new mode of inquiry. Yet, in what sense was the plant curious? Curiosity and other human-like features may be expressed materially. In the case of *mambia* such attribute suggested that the plant held a form of interiority or agent-like capacity within her body (Descola, 2013), which concealed intentionality like a piece of clothing or mask. This agential capacity, however, emerged from the relationship with the human by means of the ingestion of the plant. Yet, how can we know if the plant has capacities of intentionality? I suspect that vegetal intentionality revealed itself in the context of the bodily encounter between the human and the plant, as we all experienced it during the *mambia* session. In fact, what resulted from such encounter with the coca opened up the issue of who (what) counts as a subject of knowledge? In other words, was the plant divesting the human from the epistemological command? Was the plant producing knowledge at all? and if so, what kind of knowledge?

Rendering a colonial subject after centuries-long negation, criminalization, and elimination, the coca plant was communicating with the human by means of its own speech. On this point, Don Antonio would agree with scholar Michael Marder: Vegetal beings express themselves otherwise “without resorting to vocalization” (2013: 74). For him, “aside from communicating their distress when predators are detected in the vicinity by fingering airborne (or in some cases belowground) chemicals, plants, like all living beings, articulate themselves spatially. In a body language free from gestures, they can express themselves [...] in their postures”

(Marder 2013: 75).⁴ In fact, the word language here describes plant modes of communication as a form of “spatialized materiality”, which Don Antonio would also agree, expresses an independent will from human intentions, desires, and agencies:

Las plantas se quieren unas a otras pero hay plantas más cariñosas. Por eso hacemos cultivos diversificados para que se apoyen entre ellas. También hay plantas más poderosas que otras, más celosas que otras y más mágicas que otras. (Personal interview, August 23th 2010, Putumayo)

In fact, this type of communication between the human and the plant is made possible through a series of material transformations whereby coca becomes *mambia* through human labor. Simultaneously, the human becomes a *mambeador* through the agency of the plant.⁵ Colombian scholar Fernando Urbina, well known for his work on the symbolism of coca use among Murui-Muinane communities in the Amazon, affirms that the coca leaf —itself a symbol of both tongue and speech— helps humans to remember what was told in the *mambeadero*. There, the *hombre sentado*, the wise-person seated on the ritual stool “vertebrates reality with words” (Urbina, 2010: 142), he argues. When the *mambeador* is just a boy, he listens to the words of power in the “germinal shadow of the place of his mother” (Urbina, 2010: 142). When he grows up, like a plant, he is inserted in the illuminated space of the *coqueadero* or *mambeadero* in the company of other men. These words will later become meaningful and real as they unfold rituals and daily life in community. In this way, when a guiding word is needed, the coca, which is the tongue, will provide the right one. That is, the one that was heard next to the elder, Urbina argues (2010).

Indeed, the human learns the word of the coca [*la palabra de la coca*] by incorporating it as *mambe*. In other words, knowledge becomes a matter of eating. ‘Eating the tongue’, as it was, grant humans the access to knowledge on community rituals and also prepares them to plan and undertake the necessary labor to cultivate the *chagra*—where the coca grows. In other words, powdered coca embodies humanity through labor while the human *mambeador* embodies plant-hood through the ingestion of *mambe*. A material feedback-loop between living beings, this tis-

4 Without referring explicitly to plants, the work of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn with Runa people of the Ecuadorian Amazon is an example of this shifting focus towards nonhuman modes of meaning. He argues that both humans and nonhumans use signs that are not necessarily symbolic. Kohn insists that ‘life-forms represent the world in some way or another, and these representations are intrinsic to their beings.’ In fact, what we, humans, share with nonhuman species is not only our embodiment “[...] as certain strains of phenomenological approaches would hold, but the fact that we all live with and through signs [...] signs make what we are” (2013: 9).

5 The way the body of the coca plant is transformed by means of human, and nonhuman agencies. For a poetic and photographic description of the *mambia* process (see Urbina, 1992).

sue of human and nonhuman agencies is itself a conversation on and about mutual nurturance.

As Andean intellectual, Eduardo Grillo brilliantly explains:

[...] here [in the Andean world], conversations cannot be reduced to dialogue, to the word, as in the modern Western world but rather conversation engages us vitally: one converses with the whole body. To converse is to show oneself reciprocally, it is to commune, it is to dance to the rhythm which at every moment corresponds to the annual cycle of life. Conversation assumes all the complications characteristic of the living world. Nothing escapes conversation. There is no privacy here. Conversation is inseparable from nurturance. For humans, to make *chakra*, that is, to grow plants, animals, soils, waters, climates, is to converse with nature. But in the Andean-Amazonian world, all, not only humans, make and nurture the *chakra* (the *chagra* is the Amazonian counterpart). The human *chakra* is not only made (nurture) by humans; all, in one way or another, participate in the creation/nurturance of the human *chakra*: the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountain, the birds, the rain, the wind...even the frost and the hail.' (Grillo 1998: 34, 55).

Anthropologist and feminist science studies scholar, Kristina Lyons goes a step further. Indeed, this conversation implies bodily contact between life entities, but also an emergent “shared body” (Lyons, 2016) which connecting tissue is what I will call *skin*—so, both tact and ingestion are mutually implicated in Andean-Amazonian conversations with plants. A bundle of beings emerging as a single body, plant-human encounters — from sowing the land to the transformation of coca leaves into *mambia*; from ingesting the *mambia* to the planning of labor in the *chagra*— may well expand the scope of this agency. When these entities emerge as a shared body, the word *agency* becomes a matter of bodily convergence (ingestion) and material distribution of action between different life forms (vegetal or not). In other words eating the plant, that is, eating the bundle of relations that make the plant emerge as such, is the condition of possibility of any collective knowledge and action. On this issue, Don Antonio will insist about the idea of fostering a ‘cyclic chain’ between human, animal, and vegetal beings: “[...] con las plantas dueñas [coca y tabaco] se alimenta el espíritu y se encuentra la fuerza para el trabajo, de esa forma mantenemos una cadena cíclica entre lo animal, lo vegetal y lo humano”.

Yet, how is the relational body of plants-humans like? How would this relation appear to the plant as *something* with a perspective? The *chagra* where the coca grows offers a unique image of this relational body, or material continuum between life-entities. Pedro says that “para dimensionar la chagra hay que tomar en cuenta el aspecto físico, el aspecto de salud, el territorio, el aspecto de la educación, lo cosmogónico. La chagra es una herencia y se transmite de dos maneras: oral y espiritual”. To be sure, the *chagra* is the “shared body” of human and other-than-human entities, where the cyclical chain between the animal, the vegetal, and the

human is nourished and maintained. Yet, such statement may well apply to any living entity.

Moreover, the *chagra* is not a stable being whatsoever. Much like Lyons describes in her work with *campesinos* in the department of Putumayo, Colombia: “When farmers refer to what technicians call “soil”, they are never referring to a stable object that can be managed by humans, but rather an entanglement of life-propagating relations that include microbes, insects, sunlight, *selva*, decaying leaves, animal feces and urine, human labor, and *mística*” (Lyons, 2014: 1). In fact, *chagra* also becomes jungle when the community (of human and other-than human) prepares another small area to cultivate, while the previous one is left to rest gradually growing into a *berbecho* and then a secondary forest.⁶ *Chagra* is forest, but forest is also *chagra*. Relations emerge from relations.

As an expression of such embodied spirituality, material practices in the *chagra* are planned during the night in the *mambeadero* where *la palabra* (the word) is co-produced along with the human. As Don Antonio poetically expressed it: “la coca es como un lago grande que da palabra en abundancia. El ambil es como un chorro que cae del cielo y orienta esa palabra y le da dirección (ordenando el mundo)”. In a similar vein, Murui elder Don José García beautifully addresses this conversation of and on mutual nurturance between plants and humans as follows:

Al sembrar se canta, se silba para que la coca se ponga contenta. Al cantar se pone feliz porque presiente que se va a hacer baile. Y así crece rápido. Esos cantos son las oraciones. ¡Como antiguamente todo se hacía coqueando. Cuando el cultivo está pequeñito y apenas hermoheando, se sacan tres o cuatro hojitas de cada matica. Hay algo que se hace cuando se da el primer repunte, se saca una ramita y se pone encima de un tronco en medio del cocal. Esa ramita llama a las de abajo diciéndoles: —¡Vengan, vengan! ¡Vengan a mi casa! ¡no se queden! Y así las hace crecer. Y las de abajo responden: —¡No, no nos dejen! ¡Espérennos! Pues de la misma manera nosotras nacimos. ¡Espérennos! Y así intentan subir. Unas matas hacen caso y otras no. Por eso hay unas que crecen rápido y otras no. (Abuelo José García. See Urbina, 2011: 201)

A counterpoint to the teachings of Don Antonio, Doña Cecilia, his wife, says that for plants to grow pretty it is necessary to converse with them —again the notion of conversation in its material sense comes to the fore—:

Primero uno siembra la yuca y el plátano. Después el ñame, el daleale (se muerde la hoja para avisarle a uno que la fruta está lista), el chontaduro, umarí, uva caimarona, caña, copoazú, piña, borojó, caimo. Hay que estar limpiando para que se levante la fruta si no se la come el monte. Hay que conversar con las plantas que para crezcan: ‘yo la siembro

6 For a description of phases of the *chagra*, see Andrade 1992, 1990; Correa, 1990 and Rodríguez, 2010.

aquí para mantenerme de usted, para que dé buen fruto, un buen árbol', y ellas escuchan.
(Personal interview, August 27th 2010, Putumayo)

Tropes of conversation and shared-body are useful tools to engage with the ontology of the *mambia* in the Colombian Amazon. That night, for instance, *mam-bear* evoked, as Don Antonio suggested, a woven object; almost like a soft piece of clothing gently pressing against the skin.⁷ In fact, the speech of coca became the material language of vibrations with the capacity to anticipate a flesh-like consistency. Moreover, the fabric of words and images woven by the stories of Don Antonio also opened up a window to the past of his jungle roaming, a past made present and material through the *mambe*: “Como si la historia estuviera viva”, I thought. “La mambia llama el pasado y es como si una ventana se hubiera abierto”.

A matter of sudden emergence, the *mambia* taught us how the skin—rather than the brain—might become a site of knowledge in its own right. In the relationship between the language of vibration of coca and the skin, the latter was neither the surface for the workings of perception, nor the exposed surface for the contingencies of sunrays, cold winds, scratches, and the passing of time, among other images. That night it became a site of active knowledge as well as embodied memory. When compared to the lettered archive, can vibrations and plants be considered sources of knowledge in their own right? During the *mambia* session, the skin became the canvas of a collective geometry of sensations and memories. The *mambia* held a language on its own whose grammar was akin to a bundle of vibrations rendered possible through the ingestion of the plant. Thus, vibrations became a sort of testimony without words about the itinerant and life-producing character of the socio-ecological partnerships that I call a nomadic ecology: Life partnerships that have moved, walked, and shaped living beings, ecologies, territories, and knowledge practices for centuries in the Amazon.⁸

7 See Echeverry and Kinerai, 1993. This text reminds us of the potentiality of vibrations as epistemic devices.

8 The term ‘socioecological’ has been discussed in a number of recent works in the fields of geography and anthropology. For a detailed review on this term see Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Vol. 105, Number 2, March 2015. *Special Issue: Futures: Imagining socioecological transformation*.

Other scholars prefer the use of ‘cosmologies’ or even ‘natures’ (where the human is already implicated in the concept) to refer to these arrangements between social relations and natural relations, while avoiding the western heritage of the scholarly field of ‘political ecology’ (Conversation with Catherine Walsh).

A nomadic ecology: The roaming of Don Antonio co-shaping life in the Amazon

More than 20 years ago, Don Antonio wandered alone across the Amazon for several weeks. Eventually he was able to find the trail back home to tell the story of his roaming. He encountered vines, *ceiba* trees (Taíno: *ceiba*. Amaz. deno.: *Ceiba*; Lat. *Caiba pentadra*), *moriche* palms (Amaz. deno.: *Moriche*; Lat. *Mauritia flexuosa*), and hundreds of other members of a vegetal world in constant transformation. Such plants, Don Antonio said, led him back to his family and *chagra*. Negotiating his subsistence with whomever being was willing to cooperate, Don Antonio lived off fruits, plants, and small animals. The Amazon fed him, shared its hints, and finally proposed a route for him to follow. It would be possible to say that the canopy *walked* with Don Antonio, thus showing a form of natural empathy whereby home and other-than-home; food and enemy; human and nonhuman beings, among other dualisms, were no longer tenable distinctions. The jungle partnered with the human by procuring his survival while the human enhanced the boundaries of his family members. Moreover, the distinction between dwelling in a single territory and the weave of life beyond the human settlement became quite blurry for him. To be sure, a new form of collaboration emerged in a place deemed as the other—the *selva*; a place turning into a nomadic ecology, that is, a place in continuous motion and transformation; a place becoming-home as it moved with Don Antonio as long as he moved with *it*.

Don Antonio risked his life for several weeks while becoming an integral part of a continuum of life forces morphing into a *natural* kin. In order to reach his destination (the *chagra*), Don Antonio established intimate relations of survival and collaboration with the nonhuman others that he met along the way. “In the *chagra*”, he said, “plants are together and closer to the house, but in the jungle you are alone and it is not always easy to find the plant you need”. A family of life forms was in the making as Don Antonio wandered alone through the jungle. Yet, this vital relationality or the lively materials involved in his survival —plants and small animals, water and soil, among others—*wandered* through him as well. This was an inner ecology on the move. Where can we locate, then, the precise limits of beings, family, and place? The jungle, also a product of human action certainly had something entirely *chagra*-like.⁹ In fact, the intimate knowledge of jungle ecology Don Antonio has, would later become his *chagra*. In other words, a space made off *stuff* from a different place.

It is always surprising to encounter other beings. However, such encounters do not entice the universal moral choice of a community of settlers commanding

9 See Kawa on *terras pretas* or dark soils of anthropogenic origin (2016).

action over their surroundings, but the embodied mode of skill, co-emergence, and eventuality of the disperse community of foragers that make both place and people emerge from relations.¹⁰ On the one hand, such interactions with this “not-so-unfamiliar” jungle forced Don Antonio to part-take in sequences of collaboration, predation, and survival with an emerging family of nonhuman relatives.¹¹ On the other hand, such a dense yet ephemeral relationality made it difficult to dwell long in one single place. Thus, human and nonhuman mobility became a condition of survival possibility, while *place*—also on the move—far from the backdrop of human action became the resulting effect of human/non-human encounters. This is what Don Antonio taught us. His return to the *chagra* was indeed preceded by the formation of a nomadic community of life forms (plants and animals) that also inhabited him. In other words, *chagra* and *jungle* constituted a single continuum of Amazonian life. “*Selva* is home,” Don Antonio insisted, and *chagra* may be *selva* for nonhuman beings as well—plants included.

I heard this story in the *mambeadero* that night, and it occurred to me that the act of roaming through the jungle was neither a single activity nor a human only prerogative. In fact, Don Antonio was not alone as he moved. He was traveling with the *mambia*, while the *mambia* travelled with him (and within him). Moreover, what made him move also moved with him, for example, the small animals and plants that procured his survival. Hence, *what* travels? Or better yet, *who* travels? There is not a simple answer to this question. It suffices to say, however, that the community of nonhuman and human peoples formed, in the story of Don Antonio, a nomadic ecology in its own right. As stated, humans and nonhumans became a bundle of relations, or better yet, a shared-body: life-forms depending upon relations with other beings. Thus, Don Antonio needed to connect with other entities by means of ingestion, tact, or even refusal of different entities—for his own sake. And for that to happen, those entities moved underneath, like plant roots, or above ground, like leaves trying to catch sunlight. An emerging bundle of life relations on the move—of which Don Antonio was already a part—as it was, this nomadic ecology transformed the place (and itself) with each new step. “*Mambia*-human”, a “partially connected” entity (Strathern, 2004) created its own dwelling as it moved.

Furthermore, “*mambia*-human” changed the surface of the Amazonian soil by leaving a material trace (like a scratch). Surely, this material imprint was made possible thanks to the *mambia* that inhabited the body of Don Antonio (i.e. ingesting the plant; ‘eating the tongue’ to produce knowledge), which allowed him the necessary bodily capacities to orient himself through the *selva*. Similarly, the *chagra*, another nomadic ecology depending upon the *mambia* gathering, where

10 On embodiment (see Varela, 1999).

11 On this point see the insightful text by Carlos Fausto, 2007.

the work is planned and organized, leaves a material trace when it rotates through the *selva*. In fact, since many Amazonian soils are very acidic and have only a thin layer of organic matter (Lyons, 2016), traditional agricultural systems of slash and burn (*chagra*) requires the rotation of the cultivation area from one place to the next. To be sure, this *chagra* itinerancy through the jungle is an instrument to the formation of a secondary forest: “[...] cuando quemamos los palos la ceniza se vuelve la comida del suelo”, Don Antonio said. Thus, the human moves to produce place and, in return, the place, thus created, moves to co-shape other places, other humans, and other non-human beings. To put it bluntly, a nomadic ecology is another name for life relations.¹²

I imagine the encounter between the human and the *mambia* as a learning moment about/with life in the midst of a dense ecology of relations. They are a way to engage in knowledge practices that cut across the sedentary rationality of the Western archive. Such a learning moment may be able to tell us how *mambia* comes into being as a powerful non-modern force where subjects and objects no longer precede their encounters. Moreover, such a learning moment with the *mambia* points out the option of a compositional relationality (Lyons, 2016) where eco-centric modes of knowing, feeling, and acting emerge in the middle of entangled forms of violence and survival in the Amazonian region.

***Mambia* as a decolonial practice?**

In what way can the human use of coca leaves be rendered a decolonial practice in the Amazonian region? Is it relevant to understand connections between *mambia* practices and modern geopolitics of knowledge? Decoloniality attempts to provincialize Western knowledge practices. It offers a toolkit to light up (while undoing) colonial violence across time and space; a violence that renders inferior people, ways of being, and epistemic practices that refuse to be placed within Euro-American universalistic logics. Moreover, decoloniality also emerges from the difference and multiplicity inscribed in race, gender, sexuality, class, and ecological relations both in the present and in the past. In the case of human and other-than-human encounters, decoloniality highlights corporeal experiences of mobility over sedentary abstraction and universal reason. Furthermore, decoloniality proposes a temporality and spatiality of co-existence attuned to indigenous circular geometries of time and space. This is a temporality and spatiality that imagines ancestral and contemporary practices of life in a level of relative symmetry.

12 Don Antonio also traveled with seeds back and forth between sites: “Yo traje unas semillas del Ecuador y pienso hacer una investigación con ellas, experimentar para ver si se dan aquí. Tengo estas semillas de durazno. Las pongo a ablandar en agua por ahí unos quince minutos, y luego las pongo a germinar en semilleros. Les echo agua a la sombra para evitar los insectos”.

Affirming the existence of agents furnished with human-like attributes might expand decolonial agendas in order to include other living beings as subjects of knowledge (and even of rights) in their own right. Going back to the *mambia* night, the-plant-in-relation-with-the-human enacted a collective memory of existence, which the colonial violence attempts to conceal time and again through civilizational fantasies as well as development discourses and agendas. To be sure, the methodology employed by the plant was to sensitize, to awaken, and to empower the skin as a territory of knowledge. As a result of this capillary collaboration between the plant and the human, the *mambia* produced an effect of reality in the *piel* [skin] of everybody; an ecology of vibrations translated into the language of skill, labor, and emotions as collective forms of knowledge necessary for living and dwelling-together as an ecology on the move: a nomadic ecology.

Again, I refer to a humble resonance that I was unable to translate into signs, but also unable to represent or even to know at all. This very happening was telling stories on how the plant goes about telling stories, teaching, and producing action beyond the horizontal transmission of lettered forms of knowledge, but also through the co-production of a form of 'ephemeral life' [the vibration]. This ephemerality involved the active collaboration between the jungle, the plant, the *mambia*, the chewer, and the story as decolonial collective of life enhancing forces.

It all started with the skin...

Is this a kind of knowledge practice that the Western archive would be able to recognize, listen to, or even foster? In what sense is this kind-of-knowledge decolonial? A methodology to account for the role of vibrations in decolonial knowledge practices should also consider mechanisms of concealment and enhancement in plant-human encounters. In my view, lettered approaches (concealment) about how this dense relationality comes into being are rather insufficient. Instead, vibrations telling stories emerge as a form of knowledge where the body becomes a potential decolonizing partner that troubles Western non-organic approaches to theory and life.

More than a critique mode, in this example, decoloniality is a conversational experience between different peoples (human and not). For example, while foraging through the *selva*, Don Antonio engaged in conversation with manifold beings that procured his survival and aided his return to the *chagra*. Moreover, he took part in bodily interactions with non-human peoples capable of cognition and memory. During the *mambia* session, for instance, the plant was keen to meet the visitors while upsetting the trajectory of Western epistemology (nonhumans *knowing* humans), and affirming the relational ontology that made possible their encounter. In this sense, the plant was itself examining the very notion of human subjectivity.

In engaging with non-Western existential, epistemic, and ethical commitments, I also realized that the plant was pushing another understanding of colo-

nial relations in what Gunadule communities call Abya-Yala.¹³ Thus, humans and nonhumans could be simultaneously called upon as a decolonial praxis of delinking (Mignolo, 2011). The *mambia* was a part of this praxis. Yet, a change of epistemic direction also implies co-laboring a new body—a shared body: *mambia* was teaching a corporeal methodology necessary to weave unstable continuities between the world of the *jungle*—the unfamiliar—and the world of the *chagra*—“*la selva humanizada*”. In other words, delinking from the colonial matrix of power is to be done in partnership.

Furthermore, the act of walking through the *chagra* is itself a way to retrieve the past from the standpoint of the present whereby all members of the natural family co-laborate. To be sure, Don Antonio was not the exclusive force in his own survival since the *jungle* was willing to offer him cues to recover the trail back to the *chagra*. Again, knowledge of survival through bodily skill was possibly the only in the context of such a dense relationality between the human walker and other beings (see Ingold, 2000).

Finally, the *mambia*—and the vibrations it enabled that night with Don Antonio—might inform a non-modern understanding of time in which the practice of the *mambia* could grant access to the past. However, the past is not deemed distant but co-existent with the present. The present of the *mambia* was, simultaneously, the possibility of a collective future experienced as memory in transformation. On the one hand, the co-existence of a plurality of times complicated the idea of temporal boundaries as a result of the agency of plants. The simultaneity of times also enabled the existence of a collectivity of beings in its convergent trajectories of becoming-together (Despret, 2004). On the other hand, liminal spaces proliferated everywhere that night of *mambia*: 1) Between the slow-motionless of vibrations and the spins and accelerations of ecological cycles; 2) between knowledge embodied by words and knowledge embodied by experience (Maturana and Varela, 1994) and skill; and 3) between the skin as a site of suffering and pleasure, and the skin as a site of meaning making within a temporal register that superseded the linearity of modernity.

Temporalities of plant-human encounters

What can we learn about this temporality of co-existence and life relations between plants and humans beyond lineal notions of time and history? As a possible contribution to this largest question, I suggest that several temporal registers inform relations between humans and plants in the Amazon. In particular, different understandings

13 Abya-Yala is the Guna name for the expression “land in tis full maturity” or “land of vital blood”, and it is the name used by the Kuna people of today’s Colombia and Panama to refer to the American continent. On the notion of coloniality and colonialisms see Mignolo, 2000.

and practices *with* time co-shape the everyday of Amazonian human and other-than-human encounters (Ingold, 2000). This meeting of times creates a space where different peoples as well as their stories and multiple experiences of duration foster what decolonial scholar Rolando Vasquez (2012) calls “relational temporalities”.

Vasquez proposes a decolonial critique of time to liberate the past from the modern representations of history. He argues that

[t]he discourse of history, in its affirmation of modernity, the negation of its exteriority and the disavowal of the “other” (including the nonhuman), has been a key mechanism of the modern/colonial control over representation. History as the monumentalization and inscription of the past in textuality produces a narrative of the past that functions as a teleology of the modern hegemony of the present. (2012: 7)

Thus far, his take on temporality works as a critique of history from a decolonial perspective. Yet, when exploring how the notion of relationality brings to the fore a different understanding of time beyond the past/present dichotomy, Vasquez pushes the decolonial critique of time beyond historiography: “When speaking of the *muntú*, the philosophy of Colombian afro-descendants, Manuel Zapata Olivella says: the *muntú* conceived the family as the sum of those dead (ancestors) and those alive, united by the word to the animal, to the trees, to the minerals (land, water, fire, stars) and to the tools, in a world that is indissoluble” (2012: 8). Relationality, then, is not only limited to present connections between different beings. For instance, the beings encountered by Don Antonio in his roaming through the jungle. Rather, it also includes connections with the past of ancestors made present in the everyday. For instance, in the Aymara world, the idea that the “future lays in the past” also speaks to the co-presence of past, present, and future. Thus, ancestors, living-people, and people yet to be born are all part of the same community of life.

My take on temporality is slightly different when it comes to relations between plants —such as the coca leaf— and humans. I try to go beyond time organized as past, present, and future, that is, as an experience of duration. While the relationality of Vasquez is premised on the co-presence of these three modes of duration, I consider temporality as an embodied practice all the way through. Hence, more than recognizing the historical co-presence of beings from different times as a way to overcome the dichotomy identified by Vasquez, I suggest exploring how different beings (humans and nonhuman, living or dead) enact temporalities together. Thus, I attempt to move beyond the ontology of the line implied in the notion of duration. In my view, time as duration insists in one real only (Ingold, 2000; Escobar, 2015). Even though decolonial critiques of time —such as Vasquez— plea for the co-presence of these three modes of temporal expressions in the now, in making-the-present, and conjuring ancestors and non-living people of the future, Vasquez confines the issue of presence to the plane of the present time

from the point of view of the subject of enunciation. Again, the human is the one in command of the mechanism of representation. As I have suggested, my interest is to reclaim plants as subjects of knowledge, but also to re-claim relations as social agents in their own right.

I suggest switching the emphasis from duration to enaction. That is, from the idea of time as duration to the idea of time as practice and embodied experience of multiple beings (Varela, 1999; Ingold, 2000), to suggest that different temporalities create bodies and foster multiple historical trajectories of human and nonhuman encounters in the Amazon.¹⁴ In particular, I want to show in a future work how the ancestral time of indigenous sociality in the Amazon, the ‘bio-social’ temporality of plants, and the temporal registers of state agents become thickly entangled while compromising the messy materiality of multiple life forms in this region.¹⁵ Let me try to exemplify this rather obscure couple of paragraphs by returning to the story about chewing of coca-leaves with Don Antonio from the Murui community.

As suggested earlier, the plant meets the human in the space of colonial difference, thus forming an alliance where subaltern knowledge and political resistance of indigenous peoples, and their nonhuman partners become deeply entangled. However, such beings do not precede their encounters, but become-together through them. Here the past does not *exist* since it is actualized in the moment of the relation. In the case of the *mambia* experience, I claim that neither the plant nor the human traverse individual durational trajectories leading to their actual forms, but instead become-together as they practice the becoming together—always at risk of turning into the unexpected (Strathern, 2005). The temporality of the coca-leaf in the act of becoming-with the temporality of the human, feels like a humble resonance or vibration in the skin. I am unable to translate or represent such resonance, and I do not claim *to know it* at all.¹⁶ While the durational temporality of history is translatable into signs, this might not be the case with enacted temporalities of coca vibrations.

As the subject of enunciation of this experience, I have described such an encounter with the plant as a sensation of resonance in the skin. However, I will not claim that I was witnessing clear physical stimuli. That would be equivalent to saying that the plant behaves according to my own experience of duration, thus granting me the capacity to represent such experience using words. As I resist the impulse of speculative elaboration on this matter, and since my goal is to exemplify what I mean by “enacted temporalities”, I will stick to the premise of becoming-together with the plant beyond the search of a stable ontology on this matter. Howe-

14 For instance, rain cycles, mythical time, and temporality of progress, among others.

15 On the notion of ‘entanglement’ in the Amazon see Slater, 2002.

16 On the issue of vibration see Viveiros de Castro, 2004.

ver, the resonance was somehow telling of how the plant goes about telling stories, teaching, and producing action. As previously indicated, it was not through the horizontal transmission of lettered knowledge, but through the co-production of a form of “ephemeral life” (the resonance); a resonance involving the active collaboration between many life forces. Since all started with the skin, it is precisely the skin, which becomes a “knowledge” practice that decolonial archives might be able to listen to. Yet, a methodology to recognize the role of vibrations in decolonial knowledge practices should also ask how plants, resonance, body, and skin could all become the tissues of an archive of decolonial delinkings from the modern matrix of power. Hence, the urgency to undo the temporal, spatial, and subjective underpinnings of history making in order to include other temporalities, locales, agents, and relations.

I suggest that the *mambia*, along with the vibrations it enables, informs a non-modern understanding of time whereby the practice of the *mambia* grants access to a past already inscribed in the environment (rocks, rivers, forests, etc.). However, this past is not casted as a distant memory, but as living memory co-existing with the present of plant-human encounters. Appealing to duration seems less necessary when geometries of time expressed in manifold ecologies collide time with place, thus cancelling the need for teleology and even reversing teleology altogether (past, present, and future/future, present, past). Again, the present of the *mambia* grants a collective future experienced as memory in transformation in the very present of the encounter with the plant. I certainly agree with Vasquez in that going back to the past is bringing it to the present. Making-presence cancels the need for duration while inviting us to think about ways of rendering the passing of time an embodied experience all the way through.

Final remarks: decolonizing nature

Over the last 20 years, Colombia has witnessed a state-led campaign that criminalizes and eradicates hundreds of hectares of coca crops in the country. *La mata que mata* (the plant that kills) was the motto behind the elimination of coca-leaf yields around the country via the aerial aspersión of glyphosate (*fumigation*) (Lyons, 2015). The campaign inadvertently acknowledged that a plant has itself the capacity to *end* life, it holds a form of agency. However, coca crops, rather than the cocaine obtained by means of complex global networks of war, economy, politics, and chemistry, is the one deemed capable of terminating with a form of life considered “acceptable” or rather “legal” by state law: a life of tamed peasants and ecologies.¹⁷ However, the

17 For a detailed study of the relationship between Amazonian agriculture, peasant movements, war, and science in the Amazon, see Lyons, 2016.

criminalization of plants and humans in the Amazon has been contested for decades in this region.¹⁸ I suggest that plants have finally met humans in the space of colonial difference (Mignolo, 2000, 2011).¹⁹ By this I refer to the space where the potential for decolonization emerges not only from recognizing subalternized human knowledge, but also from plant-human assemblages (or shared bodies) as sites of knowledge. In fact, recognition goes beyond the acknowledgement of cultural differences. Instead, it refers to the local regeneration of ways of knowing that have been invisibilized, racialized, or otherwise rendered inferior by Western epistemologies.

In this article, I have engaged with vibrations as active material events taking place in the skin and fostered through the bodily incorporation of certain plants. At the same time, I have argued that knowledge is a matter of partnership and co-intentionality between different sentient beings (plants). The skin is not only deemed a bodily membrane, but also a site of knowledge making. To be sure, this take on the skin may open up the notion of *sentipensar* to other senses (Escobar, 2015). The association of *sentir* with the heart, and *pensar* with the brain might leave the presence of the skin (*la piel*) as a decolonial interface with the potential to enhance *sentipensante* practices out of the conversation.²⁰

The event of vibration conflates with the event of thinking by making it almost impossible to distinguish between the two unless one engages in some kind of analytical work. The skin, as it were, was itself thinking. Furthermore, the relationship between thinking and feeling-with-the-skin enabled by the plant has, in my view, the potential to interrupt the division between knowledge practices and bodily-perception through the senses. Perception as the act of engaging the world with the senses, and thinking as the act of signifying it, are both woven together. Thus, engagement with the skin in decolonial practices poses the question of what it means to compromise modes-of-being-in-the-world, and not only the way in which you produce knowledge. Working with the *mambia* entails the task of con-

18 See Maria Clemencia Ramírez, 2011.

19 Colonial difference: 'The colonial difference is the space where coloniality of power is enacted. It is also the space where the restitution of subaltern knowledge is taking place and where border thinking is emerging. The colonial difference is the space where *local* histories inventing and implementing global designs meet *local* histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored. The colonial difference is, finally, the physical as well as imaginary location where the coloniality of power is at work in the confrontation of two kinds of local histories displayed in different spaces and times across the planet. If Western cosmology is the historically unavoidable reference point, the multiple confrontations of two kinds of local histories defy dichotomies' (Mignolo, 2000, ix). Note: This definition do not pretend to be exhaustive. *Colonial difference* should be taken as a proposal always renewing itself contextually. It is an open space of decolonial imagination.

20 Escobar, Arturo. *Sentipensar con la Tierra. Nuevas lecturas sobre desarrollo, territorio y Diferencia*. 2015.

fronting our own habits of thought and practice, but also our practices of dwelling, inhabiting places, and being in place with other beings.

I would like to end with a few propositions on how an ‘organic approach to (decolonial) theory’ may push theoretical work beyond the necessary task of critique:

— When decolonizing ways of *being* (ontology), one is moving from *una grilla de lectura del mundo* (Varela, 2001) into a full participation in processes of ‘becoming-with’ all living (non-living) beings (Despret, 2004).

— When decolonizing ways of *thinking*, one is moving away from *una forma particular de hacer y pensar que depende de la diferencia entre quien hace y piensa, y aquello que se piensa y se hace*.

— When decolonizing *methodologies*, the human is in relation with the plant to produce knowledge *in partnership*.²¹ Restituting relationality through/with the plant entails in-corporating (embodying) a mode-of-being-together with a living knowledge —*conocimiento vivo*— as opposed to *conocimiento muerto, dislocado de los procesos vitales o separado de la vida*.

This might be a story of the decoloniality-of-nature. In other words, about the ongoing-ness of the (de)colonial subjectivity of life relations (non-humans and humans coproducing each other) as humans and non-humans engage in other forms of imagining, knowing, and dwelling together. For instance, the plant communicates with us through vibrations, and thus changes the direction of modern epistemologies (subject *knowing* objects) in order to experiment with the reverse logic whereby (former) objects get to ‘know’ (former) subjects.

I hope to have offered an instance of such an attempt to bypass the binary division altogether. In my own project, I strive to participate in moments of evanescence and vulnerability (Zakour and Gillespie, 2013), but I also want to join habits of thinking and doing whereby “becoming-with” other forms of life is no longer reduced to a ready-made academic discourse. The proposal of decolonizing research is somewhat closer to the experience of bodily exposure and co-creation with sentient ecologies (Smith, 2012). This gesture requires further explanation. For now it is suffice to say that such gesture aims at enhancing the scope of the decolonial conversation by approaching the question of bodily exposure, tactility, pleasure, and suffering within the very practice of knowledge/life making.

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21 Catherine Walsh names it as ‘co-intentionality’ (personal conversation).

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