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The Strength of Thoughts, the Stench of Blood: Amazonian Hematology and Gender

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Joanna Overing has argued that if the study of Amazonian menstrual practices were to avoid falling in a Catch-22 that would sentence women to the losers' bench in the game of prestige against men, it had to distance itself from theoretical assumptions about patriarchy and draw instead directly upon indigenous understandings of autonomous selves and thoughts-made-bodies (1986). Her depictions of the Piaroa necklaces of "beads of knowledge of menstruation," brought from celestial crystal boxes and worn by women on and "in" their bodies, became classics of Amazonian literature, setting a landmark for the study of indigenous theories of corporality and thought. Men and women's beauty, skills, fertility, products and children, she states, are their thoughts: they are the outcome of their capacity for knowledge, carefully incorporated from the gods and put in action autonomously in their work. According to Overing:

For the Piaroa all cultural capability is wizardry, including menstruation, which is considered along with hunting, fishing and sorcery as transcendent knowledge acquired through *maripa teau*, or "lessons in wizardry" (1986:147).

In Piaroa classification all creation for which an individual is responsible is said to be that person's *a'kwa* (thought). Thus, the products of one's labor, a person's child, and a sorcery transformation, such as the wizard's transformation into jaguar or anaconda, are all said to be that person's "thoughts" (1986:148)

Twenty years later, a growing wealth of ethnographies enables us to put together a cross-cultural picture of what blood is to Amazonian peoples and explore why the management of its flow is crucial to both genders. Here, I lay the groundwork for an Amazonian hematology aiming to unlock the significance of blood in relation to gender, knowledge and cosmology. I

focus on issues such as the embodiment and gendering of spirits, thought and strength in the blood, the management of blood through practices of diet and seclusion, and the processes of “change of skin” set in motion by bloodletting and the stench of blood.

Despite Overing’s inspiring insights, the study of menstruation did not make it to the central stage of Amazonian theoretical debates. In fact, the same may be said of gender, an unpopular category of analysis among Amazonianists (Descola 2001). I hope the arguments gathered here will contribute to reverse this situation. Most recent ethnographies of Amazonian perspectival shamanism and cosmology highlight the transformational multiplicity of the body conceived as a removable “skin” or “cloth” (Viveiros de Castro 1996; see also Rosengren (*intra*); Santos-Granero (*intra*), Storrie (*intra*); and Lagrou (*intra*). On the other hand, some recent and not-so-recent ethnographies also provide examinations of indigenous concepts of blood and its links to personhood (C. Hugh-Jones 1979; Albert 1985; Brown 1985; Crocker 1985; Lima 1995; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997; Karadimas 1997; Goulard 1998, Surrallés 1999; Guzmán 1997; Belaunde 2001; Conklin 2001a; Gonçalves 2001; Rodgers 2002; Garnelo 2003; Colpron 2004). There is a need to articulate Amazonian notions of blood with current views on perspectivism in order to position gender within the theoretical debates on cosmology. Indeed, our approaches to cosmology may miss their targets unless we tackle the question of blood. Substantial ethnographic evidence shows that among a diversity of cultural groups blood is conceived as a fluid embodying and gendering personal spirits, thought and strength, and transporting knowledge to all body parts. Blood operates both within people’s bodies and outside them. The blood let by people has a transformational effect upon lived experience, and opens the curtains of communication and perception usually separating daily experience from other cosmological space-times. Its interconnection with shamanism is therefore fundamental. Throughout Amazonia, letting blood is the “change of skin/body” *par excellence*, and it is women who most saliently bring it about in their menses and childbirth.

In order to tackle the question of what blood means to Amazonian peoples, I turn once again to Overing for inspiration. In the article mentioned above, she suggests that gender relations, like all other social relations, are articulated around a “philosophical notion of what it means to be different and equal” (1986:140), a Pan-Amazonian principle sustaining the appropriate mixing of things different and same for the creation of social existence. This principle underpins the Amazonian conception of reciprocity as both “a relationship of equality and of difference” at work in all dimensions, from daily life to cosmology (Overing 1981). The mixture

of difference and sameness sustains all relationships of reciprocity, including relationships between same-gender and cross-gender partners. Men and women are united in reciprocal links and transactions in siblinghood, seduction, marriage and other ritual aspects. Therefore, their relationships also respond to a dynamics of equality within difference, and of difference within equality.

Anthropologists from various theoretical approaches have incorporated Overing's suggestion, but they have done so primarily with respect to male affinal partnerships of political and cosmological scope. As regards male-female partnerships, the investigation has mostly remained confined to the author's students. For example, Gow (1991), Lagrou (1998), McCallum (2001), and Londoño (2001) have consistently demonstrated that gender relations are woven together by the means of intertwining processes of difference and sameness. My study of Airo-Pai gender (Belaunde 2001) is probably the most extreme as it sustains that men and women are, depending on where one stands, either the same species or two different species. Not two human species though, but two species of birds. Gender thus permeates Airo-Pai perspectival cosmology.

From the point of view of the Airo-Pai gods, men are carnivorous oropendolas (*Icteribus sp.*), singer birds and weavers of nests hanging from tree branches. Women are talkative green parrots (*Amazona sp.*), seed eaters nesting in holes opened up in tree trunks. Thus, each gender, or rather bird species, provides its own nest to bring up its chicks, as well as its material technologies, food, defensive strategies and understandings of power and gender relations within its species. Men are their father's young, women their mother's. Yet, such a species differentiation brings out the equality existing between the genders, since both men and women have the same full responsibilities towards the raising of their young. Conversely, from the point of view of the living, men and women are a same *pai* "people." Hence, their differentiation is constructed out of their sameness. A few days after birth, girls' genitalia are operated upon and the *canihuë neanco* "dark skin/body" border of their *labia minora* is cut off, causing them bleeding. Girls have their bodies made open—like a parrot's nest—lest they remain *ëmëje paiye*, "like men," meaning unable to menstruate and give birth. Thus constructed, the ability to let blood sets the genders apart, but not in a rigid nor definitive manner. Women are said to be "like men" when they carry no traces of blood, meaning no visible traces but also no traces of blood's stench. Men are said to be "like women" when carrying traces, or the stench, of their own or other peoples' blood. Although bleeding is primarily defined as a female attribute, for both genders blood-letting brings about a change of *canihuë* "skin/body." Such

a shedding is required for fertility and renewal, but it also renders men and women vulnerable to the attack of bloodthirsty spirits. Observing a period of diet and seclusion is the best means of regulating the transformational dynamics set in motion by bleeding and its stench.

Taking the the Airo-Pai ethnography as a starting point to lay grounds for an Amazonian hematology, I argue that blood constitutes the main vehicle of both gender equality and gender difference. Blood generates relationships that unite humans as much as they divide human beings into men and women. Indeed, many ethnographies show that blood is conceived as creating a relationship because it circulates through the body putting all its parts in communication and filling them with thought and strength for purposeful action. No one expresses this better than Michael Brown (1985) in his introduction to Awajun (Aguaruna) magic, when he asks Shajián Wajai's an apparently trivial question: "Do people think with their heads or their hearts?" According to Brown:

He drank from a bowl of beer that his wife held out to him, then said deliberately, "The people who say that we think with our heads are wrong because we think with our hearts. The heart is connected to the veins, which carry the thoughts in the blood through the entire body. The brain is only connected to the spinal column, isn't it? So if we thought with our brains, we would only be able to move the thought as far as our anus!" (1985:19)

With characteristic Amazonian sense of humor, Shajián Wajai makes it clear that blood is not something to be constantly spilt but to be moved through the veins endowing all body parts with thoughts. The heart is the center from which thoughts are propelled, reaching all the organs and enabling a person to act upon the world in interaction with others. The food, objects, words, music, smells and children produced, are manifestations of a person's good circulation of thoughts exteriorized in physical reality through their skilful and effortful work. In Awajun, as in many Amazonian languages, "thought" entails the notion of remembering with compassion those one loves and doing something to alleviate or to avoid their suffering.¹ The thoughts circulating in the blood therefore translate into work and the effective bestowal of care between kinsfolk.

Similar notions are found among many other Amazonian cultural groups. In Yine (Piro), *giglenshinikanuta* means "memory, love, thought, and thinking about somebody." The memory of the care received from others sustains real kin ties and the sense of lived experience and history, while lack of generosity brings about the breakdown of kinship (Gow 1991:150). In Candoshi, the characteristic expression *magochino* "my heart thinks" is better translated as "my heart thinks about somebody,

or something with regard to somebody,” since one’s thoughts are always intended to benefit someone whom one holds in mind, or rather, in the heart (Surrallés 1999:128). Among the Wari’ and the Airo-Pai, lazy, mean, and envious people, unwilling to bestow care upon others, are said to “have no heart” for they “don’t know how to think” (Belaunde 2001:107; Conklin 2001b:141). Such a lack of heart entails a lack of body given that thoughtless people do not exercise any productive bodily skills. Their bodies are “worthless” (*no vale*, the Airo-Pai say in Spanish). Lacking thought, lacking body and lacking kin are thus inextricably linked, a point often rendered explicit in Amazonian semantics, such as in Sharanahua, according to which “my kin” literally means “my flesh” (Siskind 1973:22).

Although the heart is a person’s center of thought, this does not mean that it monopolizes all thought processes. Thought may also be seated in other parts of the body, but the heart brings them all together under its unifying beat and flow of blood. Thinking with one’s heart means thinking as a fluent whole, rather than as disconnected bits. Furthermore, the centre of thought may not even be confined to a physiologically defined organ. Among the Cashinahua, for example, all body parts are said to be thoughtful since they all have *yuxin* spirits carried in the blood flow and in the breath, and molded in the human body. A living body is sustained by its spiritual capabilities of knowledge and agency, and is continuously learning from its interactions with others as it exteriorizes itself in its products of work (see Santos-Granero (*intra*), on noncorporeal modes of knowing). For this reason, a fully knowledgeable person, *una haida haiyaki*, is someone whose entire body is knowledgeable and who is hardworking and generous with knowledge and products (Kensinger 1995:246; Lagrou 1998:78; McCallum 2001:5; Deshayes and Keifenheim 2003:105).

Among the Muinane, the center of thought is lodged in a person’s “basket of knowledge,” corresponding to the thoracic cage, and is fed with the hearing of words of advice from elders and the consumption of spiritual foods, such as tobacco and coca for men, manioc, peppers and scented plants for women (Londoño 2004:28). Among the Macuna, *üsi*, a vital spirit linked to breath, resides in the heart and combines with *tüoiare*, a learning ability based on hearing and imitation. Thoughts are recorded in one’s “ear cottons” and kept in various “benches of thoughts,” one of which, in women’s case, is lodged in the uterus, whilst one of men’s “benches of thoughts” is an extension of their bodies—a ceremonial wooden bench used for sitting (Mahecha 2004:160). Among the Wari’, the physiology of the heart is inextricably linked to affect, digestion and breath. The heart transforms food into blood through the intermediary of breath. When a person makes a physical effort, deeper breathing fosters a stronger

heartbeat, which in turn facilitates the transformation of food into blood and fluid blood circulation, which in turn, leads to the accumulation of body fat and stamina to keep working and producing food for self and kin. Thoughtful people are hardworking, robust and healthy, whilst lazy, mean and envious ones are slim and ill. Sadness also contracts the heart, impeding good circulation and leading to the loss of fat and, eventually, to death (Conklin 2001b:142).

The heart and its blood flow, therefore, appear as the hub of a person's existence in constant transformation throughout his or her life cycle. This idea is also prominent in Christopher Crocker's (1985:45) groundbreaking examination of the Bororo "hydraulics" of *raka*. Blood and its derivatives, semen and milk, are *raka*, the site of the union of the *bope*, principles of organic transformation, and the *aroe*, the eternal soul-names recycled through the generations and that sustain all living beings with their spiritual vitality. The blood flow takes the immortal soul-names along the irreversible course of a person's life and social history, enabling that person to learn, work and be moved by predatory appetites specific to his or her being, gender and subjectivity. As Crocker suggests, due to their bloods, men hunt, women gather, birds fly and jaguars kill (1985:36).

Crocker's study provides key elements of Amazonian hematology, resonating with several other ethnographies, which I summarize as follows. Babies are born with little blood. For this reason, their spirits are weakly connected to their bodies, they have little knowledge, and they may easily become ill and die. The connectedness of their spirits increases as their blood levels grow after eating and incorporating names and capabilities from spiritual sources. Throughout childhood, learning through imitation and hearing follows same-gender lines, culminating at puberty, when boys and girls reach their maximum blood potential. From then on they should exercise their capabilities "copulating, carrying out physical labor, dancing and singing" (Crocker 1985:42). In their youth, men and women have different bloods, knowledge, stamina and appetites, and women's menstrual and postpartum blood poses a threat to men's health, upsetting their blood flow. In general, illness is conceived as an imbalance of a person's blood volume, speed, temperature, color, smell and/or thickness. Emotional states are also states of the blood and may end up in illness. Anger, in particular, entails an acceleration and heating of blood, and needs managing with care. The observance of periods of diet and seclusion, including sexual abstinence, is a key technique of blood flow regulation. Diet and seclusion are observed individually by men and women and, to a minor extent, collectively by all those close to them.² Blood runs down the generations. Through their bloods and derived

sexual fluids, men and women transmit to their children their “physical, moral and spiritual” personal characteristics (Crocker 1985:109). Blood also unites coresidents in circles of support and revenge in case of injury and/or death of a beloved one. As time goes by, people living together come to share their fluids and become alike. With aging, the blood of both genders weakens and the connection of their spirits is attenuated. Men and women lose their productive skills and their drive to predate, manifested in the loss of their teeth. Finally, ancestors never fight, they are never ill, for they have no blood (Crocker 1985:117).

Recent ethnographies provide new and more detailed links between blood, gender and knowledge. In her study of Cashinahua personhood, McCallum argues (2001:5) that body and gender are inseparable because there is no body preexisting gender. Rather, “gender is embodied knowledge.” I follow on from her argument to show that the embodiment of knowledge in gendered persons goes hand in hand with the gendering of blood. For example, Guzmán (1997:57) mentions the case of a Quichua Canelo man who had a blood transfusion following an accident. When he woke up, he worriedly asked whether he had received the blood of a woman or a man. For he considered that if he had received a woman’s blood, he would have incorporated aspects of that woman. What differentiates a man’s blood from a woman’s blood is not an immutable gender essence, but rather men and women’s personal life experiences: what they have learned, eaten, and done, and with whom; the spiritual powers and names they were given, and by whom; the company they shared the most during day time and dreams. All those lived experiences are embodied in the blood, differentiating men from women, as well as differentiating one person from the other in a unique way. Differences between women, and between men, remain highly significant and cannot be reduced to *en bloc* predefined static gender identities. Each person embodies being a man or a woman in his or her own personal manner.

Various recent ethnographies show that, generally, male blood is considered thicker, darker, hotter, and it carries stronger thoughts than female blood, due to the fact that usually men’s work usually requires more intense exertion and boldness to face danger. But this depends on the actual work carried out by individual men. The sight of a man’s veins beating protuberantly under his skin is a proof of his own personal manly thoughts. This does not entail that male blood is better than female blood. Rather, it means that gendered persons have the kind of blood corresponding to their own personal spirits, thoughts and work. Furthermore, hardworking women may have more strength in the blood than many men; certainly more than male urban dwellers, forever sitting behind a desk (Goulard

1998:119; Surrallés 1999:103; Colpron 2004:202). It could be argued that “vitality” is a more appropriate term for describing the indigenous concept. I suggest, however, that vitality and strength refer to two different, though intimately linked, notions. Vitality refers to the spirits, souls and/or names, infusing life, knowledge and strength in the blood (see Rosengren *intra*; and Santos-Granero *intra*). On the other hand, strength is more specifically the ability to carry out a skilled job requiring discipline and sweating, that is enduring “suffering,” as Amazonian people often put it when speaking in Spanish or Portuguese. Strength is, therefore, a crucial demonstration of spiritual vitality. This idea is made clear, for example, in the Uitoto words of knowledge, *rafue*. Men’s *rafue*, infused with the spiritual vitality of coca and tobacco, are nevertheless nothing but *bakaki* “stories” unless they “make reality dawn” with the suffering and sweat of a person’s work (Candre and Echeverri 1993:162; Echeverri 2000:43). Sweat is “the path of birth,” both the birth of products and the birth of children. As Yine women explain, “making strength,” sweating and coping with pain by themselves are the means through which women make babies dawn into this world (Belaunde 1993:134).³

Nevertheless, it is precisely women’s demonstration of strength and thoughts in childbirth that most significantly distinguishes their blood from men’s. Throughout Amazonia, postpartum bleeding is consistently regarded as the form of blood loss that brings about the greater spiritual dangers for the father, baby and mother, and for all those sharing their existence. Menstruation comes second, and ethnographies indicate that menstrual bleeding is regarded as a form of childbirth bleeding, inasmuch as it is often attributed to an interrupted pregnancy, and/or a purge of excessive and/or dirty blood needed to initiate a successful pregnancy. Menstruation is certainly not conceived as a “naturally” occurring organic process. It is produced by others, by the means of ritual intervention and physical manipulation of female genitalia, including sexual intercourse. Indeed, the ideas that sexual intercourse causes women to menstruate, that sexually inactive women “dry out,” and that the accumulation in the womb of large quantities of semen—from one or more fathers—is required to interrupt menstruation and complete gestation, are found across Amazonia (Albert 1985:580; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997:62; McCallum 2001:17; Conklin 2001b:116; Rodgers 2002:107). Menstruation is also widely attributed to women’s snake-like shedding of “skin/body” and their synchronicity with moon cycles.

Cross-culturally, as well as within cultural groups, men and women hold multiple, not necessarily consistent or integrated, understandings of menstruation. Unfortunately, there are few ethnographic studies on

this specific matter. Nevertheless, the point I would like to stress here is that the available evidence indicates that Amazonian views draw processual links between menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, contraception, and (possible) abortion. Methodologically, this implies that one stage of the process needs to be understood with relation to the others (Belaunde 1997). In order to grasp the significance of menstrual and postpartum bleeding, one should therefore situate bleeding within the process of gestation: gestation starts to be a possibility with menstruation; it is carried out with the accumulation of semen in the womb, and completed with postpartum bleeding. That is, bleeding marks both the beginning and the end of a process of *dédoublement* and generation of a new being. Indeed, across the Amazon, women's menstrual and postpartum bleeding is saliently conceived as a dangerous *dédoublement* effectuating a "change of skin/body."⁴

To further the study of bleeding, one should therefore turn to those masters of *dédoublement*, snakes and the moon. Throughout the Amazon, bleeding is related to women's intimate relationship with anacondas. The water anaconda is a master of *dédoublement*, for it has a two forked tongue and penis, may live in water as well as on land and trees (Lagrou 1998:241), and embodies the cosmic rainbow and underwater serpent regarded as the "mother" or "owner" of all snakes. Like snakes, women shed their skin/body and produce poisonous substances. Their poison is, as Guss argues for the Yekuana, "the most toxic and savage of all culture" (1994:67). But for a tropical forest people used to derive their livelihood from the skilful use of poisons, menstruation is a precious gift. More than any other poison used in a Yekuana's livelihood—curare hunting poison, barbasco fishing poison, bitter manioc, animal and plant psychoactive substances, etcetera—women's bleeding brings about the most dramatic transformations and requires the most careful processing. It also has the power of rendering other poisons ineffective, an idea held by various other cultural groups. Curare and barbasco, and even snake poisons, are spoiled by menstruation (Brown 1985:65). Manioc beer turns foul and dangerous. Material tools, blow guns, baskets and fishing traps become useless. Hunters miss their shots and become irritable (Lima 1995:203; Rivas 2004:15). Shamans are also affected. They may get headaches, suffer nasal hemorrhages and swollen spleens, and become unable to contact the divinities. Instead, during shamanic sessions they attract bloodthirsty spirits and have maddening "bad trips" (Arévalo 1986:155; Fausto 2001:342; Belaunde 2001:53). In general, contamination with women's blood is held as one of the major causes of illness (Garnelo 2003). According to the Macuna, the stench of women's blood "kills people's thoughts," soiling their "ear

cottons” with heat and making people angry (Århem *et al* 2002:207; Mahecha 2004:06). In other words, the blood let out of women’s bodies affects the blood circulating inside men and women’s bodies, and destroys its ability to convey spirits, thought and strength to all body parts. Using the Macuna expression, one could argue that the blood let by women is a “killer of thoughts” and skillful agency, and is therefore highly negative. Yet, at the same time, the observance of diet and seclusion cleanses and restores women’s blood flow, making it stronger and more thoughtful. It also gives women longer lives than men (C. Hugh-Jones 1979).

Women’s successful transformation when bleeding depends on the observance of strict restrictions, principally by themselves, but also by their partners. Bleeding women generally interrupt most, or at least some, of their daily chores and observe a period of sexual abstinence, eating food considered “bland,” such as vegetables and the meat of animals and fish said to have “little blood.” Their diet excludes the meat of animals regarded as having “lots of blood,” such as tapir. Women also avoid going to the river or the forest, touching any piece of material culture and coming close to men. Restrictions are particularly enforced during the celebration of a girl’s first menses and after childbirth, but they are also observed to a minor degree every time menstrual and/or postpartum bleeding occurs. At present, among many cultural groups, there is a trend towards abandoning such practices, as well as other indigenous reproductive practices such as contraception and birth-spacing (Mahecha 2004:162; Belaunde 2005:141). Until the recent past, however, female puberty was endowed with the highest social significance among many cultural groups, and celebrated in extraordinary gatherings of the entire kin network (Guss 1994:165; Gow 1999:235; Valenzuela and Valera 2005:60).

Men were fully involved in the organization of the feast and they were also ritually responsible for looking after their women whenever they were in seclusion. Among the Macuna, to this date, male healers are responsible for providing ritually chanted red body paint *carayurú* (*Bigmonia chica*) to cover the stench of women’s “peeling skin” with a hail of spiritual imperceptibility, protecting them from attracting bloodthirsty spirits.⁵ Schoolgirls, studying away from home, regularly receive special orders of chanted *carayurú* from their parents back in the village. Men often cook and look after their families while their wives remain in confinement (Århem *et al* 2004:210; Mahecha 2004:170). Women’s bleeding thus creates an arena where the balancing of power relations and interdependency between men and women is acted out.

Of all the aspects relating to women’s bleeding, women’s ritual subordination to men is the only one that has generated a profusion of

anthropological writings. Amazonian mythical narratives concerning the origin of menstruation as deriving from a dispossession of power, expressed for example through stories of how, originally, men, not women, bled, are put forward by several anthropologists in support of the argument that women have a subordinated status in society. Nevertheless, some authors contend that the ritual subordination of women does not translate into daily life (Murphy and Murphy 1974; Jackson 1992; Ladeira 1997; Franchetto 1999; Lasmar 2002; Coimbra and Garnelo 2003; Garnelo 2003). Regardless of whether mythical narratives are or are not indices of male hierarchy, it is undeniable that these narratives make a point of categorically assigning bleeding to women, thus sanctioning the imposition of severe restrictions upon them. But, it is equally true that the same narratives assign to men the difficult responsibility of “healing the world” and looking after the well-being of bleeding women in a cosmos filled with danger and revenge.⁶

Therefore, rather than reading such narratives as mere indices of female subordination, I suggest, following Overing’s (1986) footsteps, reading them as statements on the gendering of bodies and ritual responsibilities. In the mythical repertoire of each cultural group, menstrual narratives do not stand in isolation, but rather belong to wider mythical cycles that narrate the progressive acquisition of proper male and female agencies. Some narratives tell of the acquisition of menstruation, others of genitalia, others of breastfeeding, others tell how women learned to give birth through the vagina, and so forth. In the process of becoming gendered, male and female confront one another driven by their appetites for food and sex, progressively shaping their bodies and acquiring knowledge and responsibilities.

The Piaroa myth of the origin of menstruation (Overing 1986) provides a good example. *Buok’a* used to have such a long penis, he carried it wrapped around his shoulders. Women adored him, but instead of satisfying their desire, his penis made them insatiable for sex. Their husband, *Wahari*, *Buok’a*’s younger brother, driven by jealousy, chopped *Buok’a*’s penis to a smaller size and women acquired menstruation after copulating with him bleeding. As they bled, they dropped their work and *Wahari* “was left with all the work to do.” *Wahari* then decreed: “Men should not menstruate, women should.” A complementary tale is found in the Airo-Pai narrative about the *vagina dentata* (Belaunde 2001:63). Moon’s wives had a pair of clapping jaws in their vaginas, threatening castration to whoever dared to approach them. Moon used his wives’ biting jaws to carve palms in his hands and feet. Then, with his new hands, he rolled a piece of *Astrocaryum* fibers to make thread, and used it to pull out his wives’ jaws, causing them bleeding. These two narratives, which some may relate to castration

anxiety (Gregor 1985), are more precisely stories about the mutual shaping of gendered bodies and moderated appetites. While Piaroa women were ravenous for sex, Airo-Pai women fiercely rejected it. At the end, *Buok'a* is not castrated, but given a normal size penis, and Moon turns the threat of castration into a tool to get dexterous hands and feet, and to disarm the ferocious vagina. Nevertheless, both the Piaroa and the Airo-Pai narratives make it clear that the acquisition of gendered bodies goes hand in hand with the onset of rivalry and revenge: the revenge of blood.

The significance of revenge in relation to the transformations set in place by bleeding becomes clearer when considering that women's cycles are also closely associated with the moon. The moon governs the tides—the waning and waxing—of all liquids, including blood, as they run along meandering snakelike rivers and veins. In Amazonian cosmology and mythology, Moon is a major figure, often explicitly paired to the water anaconda, as in the Cashinahua figure of *Yube* “Moon/Snake” (Lagrou 1998:240). Yet, the figure of Moon has been left out of most theoretical debates. A major gap exists, in particular, with regards to a mythical theme found across the Amazon, which may be called the story of Moon's incest. Elsewhere (Belaunde 2005), I attempt to begin filling this gap by undertaking a comparative analysis of the theme. With unflinching Amazonian humor, numerous narratives—either separated short narratives or sections of longer ones—relate the origin of women's bleeding to an incestuous relationship between Moon and his sister.⁷ Typically, the stories go as follows. Moon visits his sister at night, hiding his identity in the dark. Wishing to know who her lover is, she stains his face with black paint (*Genipa americana*). His incestuous deeds are revealed when, in the daylight, she recognizes her own print on his face. Moon is then ashamed and/or killed, often by decapitation, literally losing face and placing his severed head up in the sky as a reminder of his deeds. The Sharanahua version reported by Siskind provides a good example.

“Listen, I will tell you,” said Basta: In the darkness Moon made love to his sister. It was evening and he kept making love to her. She wondered who her lover was, so in the darkness she painted half of his face with black genipa. The next day she watched the men going along the path. Suddenly she saw the man. “No, it cannot be, it is my older brother who has genipa on one side of his face!” “May you die!” she said. “May a foreigner (*nawa*) kill you!” He ran from his angry sister, crying ... (Siskind 1973:46).

As I have argued elsewhere (Belaunde 2005:261–80), the numerous variations of the story of Moon's incest and killing found across Amazonia have as a common leading thread a quest for knowledge: the desire to

know who one's lover is, a wish fulfilled by the means of a woman's first act of writing, which brought about Moon's killing. Before departing for the sky, Moon leaves the blood of his killing in remembrance to women, and in revenge for a woman having imprinted her palm on his face. Various versions of the story establish that after bleeding, women's bellies grew with pregnancy, thus directly linking menstruation to the onset of gestation. Moon, shining in the night sky with the inscription of incest on his face, is a primordial dead father breaking through the darkness of night and ignorance, and imposing his revenge upon the living in the blood let by women at menstruation and birth. His shame and death create the *sine qua non* condition for the existence of kinship through time: memory. The memory of the primordial incest and killing reenacted in the blood by which children are born.

From these narratives, it emerges that the differences between the bloods of men and women reflect their different knowledge of Moon and incest. Indeed, among various cultural groups, when women bleed they are said to "see Moon," reenacting in their blood flow the mythical events of Moon's incest and revenge.⁸ However, women's blood is seldom given attention in the dominant paradigm of incest established by alliance theory, such as in Lévi-Strauss' (1964:318) *Mythologiques* and in Siskind's Sharanahua ethnography. Exception made of the Barasana studies (C. Hugh-Jones 1979; S. Hugh-Jones 1979), the emphasis is placed almost unilaterally upon the establishment of the exchange of women between male affines, which is indirectly implied by anthropologists (since rarely mentioned in the narratives) to be a consequence of the incestuous brother's expulsion.

My own reading of the story of Moon's incest follows the explanations provided by Tomás Román, a Uitoto leader of Colombia. In a speech held in November 2004 at the University of Leticia, he explained in Spanish that although animals, referring to land mammals, especially peccaries, were people in mythical times and were similar to Uitoto people in as much as they too had leaders and lived organized in groups while roaming in the forest, they nevertheless differed from Uitoto because: "They do not remember their parents. When they are grown up they do not recognize their parents. That's why they commit incest" (Belaunde 2005:255).

Following Tomás Román's explanations, I suggest that the story of Moon's incest is a tale of how memory makes it possible for women to distinguish brother from husband. In bleeding, women assert, in an embodied form, their knowledge of incest and their ability to recognize their kin. Thus, the myth presents the differentiation of sibling from spouse from a female perspective, not a male perspective as presented in

alliance theory.

Bleeding is a female capacity for knowledge entailing the most socially significant consequences, and hence it can be seen as a female power rather than an index of female subordination. At the same time, the knowledge of bleeding is not solely confined to women, since men are also born from the blood let by women and may also bleed and cause bleeding to themselves and other. Although banished from among the living, the primordial incest of Moon is the founding instance of human kinship for it imposes the domain of memory. That is, it imposes the domain of enduring knowledge, or rather, the domain of a knowledge that returns—that does not get lost—like the moon finds its way back in the sky, like one comes back to consciousness, remembers and recognizes one's kin and surroundings after waking up in the morning. It should be pointed out that in various Amazonian languages, the word for “moon” is polysemic and, among other meanings, it translates as “time/season” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997:65). Moon's incest and killing therefore establishes the times of human memory.

The idea is crucial to Amazonian conceptions of knowledge since, as I have argued, in Amazonian languages “thinking” means remembering one's kin, longing for them, and acting so as to bestow care and sustenance upon them. The ability to recognize one's kin, inscribed in the blood flow governed by Moon, is determinant of human thought and its exercise in daily productive activities. Furthermore, Moon's incest and killing remains present in daily life and engenders children. Periodically, the blood women let during menstruation and the postpartum reenact the episodes of Moon's revenge. Incestuous and nonincestuous relationships therefore coexist as mythical and daily realities also coexist. Children are born from women's sexual intercourse with men (who are their children's non-incestuous living fathers) and with Moon (who is their children's primordial incestuous dead father).⁹

Although women's bleeding is the most salient form of “change of skin/body,” men may also undergo transformations similar to women's. For example, in the Xingu area, at puberty boys shed blood from their ears as a means of opening up their capacities for hearing and moral understanding. Excessive blood retention and blood loss, heat and cold, are considered harmful; therefore bleeding is used as a technique for managing men's health throughout their lives. Scarification, in particular, is frequently performed by fighters to become strong and to expel the excessive blood accumulated in the belly, which causes laziness (Seeger *et al* 1979). Blood in the belly also affects homicidal men, who are considered to “ingest” their victim's blood in the act of killing. The enemy's blood is said to

penetrate his killer's belly in revenge (Albert 1985:375; Lima 1995:132; Conklin 2001b:161; Fausto 2001:467; Viveiros de Castro 2003:47; Århem *et al* 2004:224). Ethnographies from various regions show that Amazonian people draw explicit parallels between male posthomicidal and female menstrual and/or postpartum seclusion. As Viveiros de Castro (2003) points out, posthomicidal seclusion rituals reveal the feminization of homicidal men inasmuch as the killer who suffers the revenge of his enemy's blood is somehow impregnated by it and spiritually bound to his victim's corpse and postmortem destiny. After observing a period of diet and seclusion, the killer emerges from confinement endowed with a new body, spirits and knowledge, ready again to begin eating, working, sexual relationships, and engendering a child from the transformation of his enemy's and his own blood.

The feminization of the killer, one should stress, does not mean that homicidal men may turn into women as a sanction for not following seclusion restrictions (Belaunde 2005:187). Rather, it highlights the fact that homicidal men are "like women," borrowing the expression used by the Airo-Pai and several other cultural groups, inasmuch as bleeding operates a *dédoublement* similar to women's "changing skin/body" during menstrual and postpartum bleeding. The inextricable association between bleeding and being female is not surprising, given that it is categorically stated in Amazonian mythology in numerous ways. Bleeding entails being in the female position and suffering revenge, which is necessary for fertility and renewal. Homicidal men do not bleed their blood, one may argue. It's their enemies' blood. But, women do not bleed their own blood either. They bleed Moon's blood. Both homicidal men and women find themselves under the revenge of their enemy's blood and vulnerable to similar dangers. In order to protect themselves from such dangers, and appropriately process their enemy's blood for renewal and fertility, they need to observe similar rituals of diet and seclusion.

The actual list of dangers attributed to the homicidal men and bleeding women who break their diet and seclusion varies from cultural group to cultural group. Some are more severe than others, including meteorological threats like the onset of floods, winds and darkness, and personal threats like bad posture, laziness, gluttony, precocious aging, illness, madness, seduction and abduction by spirits, pregnancy by spirits, and death (Albert 1985; Lima 1995; Conklin 2001b; Fausto 2001; Viveiros de Castro 2003, Reagan 2003; Århem *et al* 2004;). A common idea runs through all of these dangers: while "changing skin/body" men and women are susceptible to undergoing an uncontrolled transformation that would render them "other," and alienate them from their kin, either partly or completely. In

the worst scenarios, such alienation would either kill them or render them totally unable to recognize their kin: becoming lost (Belaunde 2005:187). For example, consider the words of Macuna healers:

A woman is changing skin with menstruation; that is why she cannot go to the forest or stay under the sun or go to the river [...] If she walks by the river, a violent wind awakes; in the trees there is a species of stalk called *butuasena* that come down to earth and take on the shape of any animal. They come down trees to attack the woman who has her menses and they may take her to their house; in that moment the woman becomes crazy when she sees how animals come out from everywhere to kidnap her (in Århem et al. 2004:211–213; my translation).

Throughout Amazonia, the blood let, and especially its stench, is regarded as having a transformational effect upon lived experience, similar to psychoactive substances, opening the curtains of perception and communication usually separating daily experience from “other” cosmological space-times. But, unlike psychoactive plant substances, the stench of blood does not enable the communication with divine space-times for healing purposes. Instead it sets in place uncontrollable space-times of transformational multiplicity, when/where animal/plant/spirits take human form—as they had during the primordial mythical space-times—and take revenge upon humans, seducing and stealing those who are made perceivable by the stench of blood, rendering these unlike themselves, sick and alien to their human kin.

The Asháninka homicidal rituals illustrate well the transformation of perspective and alienation attached to men who are impregnated with the stench of their enemies’ blood (Regan 2003). To the *mironti*, a spirit with the shape of a tapir who has an inverted perception of the genders, homicidal men are attractive women, whom he seduces in dreams. For this reason, it is crucial that killers should remain awake during seclusion. If a killer falls asleep, he would fall under the *mironti*’s spell and perception of the world, becoming pregnant by it and giving birth to monkeys and lizards. Madly in love, the killer loses the memory of his kin, fleeing from them, wailing for the love of *mironti*. The only strategy to chase a *mironti* away is to spray him with breast milk, since in its inverted perception of gender, women’s breasts are enormous testicles, which horrify him. The killer, however, may never recover the memory of who he was before falling under the spell. Some may argue that this ritual understanding highlights the extreme feminization of the killer. However, the killer seduced by the *mironti* does not become an Asháninka woman, mother of Asháninka children. He becomes an alienated being, unable to recognize his kin, and

mother to monsters.

Among the Asháninka and several other cultural groups, a similar threat of alienating fertility is placed upon bleeding women. Stories proliferate about women who, breaking their bleeding confinement, went by the river shore, fell under a dolphin's spell, and gave birth to dolphin children. Some women are said to have gone mad, irreversibly losing the memory of their kin, and drowning for the love of a dolphin. In various parts of the Amazon, both rural and urban, the children of unknown fathers—a social state practically inexistent in the recent past—are called “dolphin's children,” and when they are fair-skinned, they are “red dolphin's children,” for red dolphins are considered spirits of dead “whites.” The dolphin figure has thus been recast to make sense of the current breakdown of paternal responsibilities, population mixing and seduction exerted by “whites,” their ways of life and their money, and the disillusion often following relationships with such tricky and evasive “others” (Regan 1983:80; Slater 1994:202; Gonçalves 2001:371; Lasmar 2002:28; Cárdenas 2005:6; and Valenzuela and Valera 2005:43).

The aspects of Amazonian hematology brought together in this paper reveal what could be called a cross-cultural “snake-like” theory of blood, articulated around the notion of “change of skin/body” that is key in Amazonian perspectival shamanism and cosmology. If, as Viveiros de Castro argues, “the body is the site of perspectives” (1996:128), then I suggest that blood is an operator of perspectives. In Amazonia, blood is a psychoactive substance, probably the most powerful one. It carries thought and strength and embodies a person's spirits and knowledge, bringing back to memory the knowledge of self and kin sustaining livelihood. Blood unites humans as much as it divides them into men and women, first, because blood transports embodied knowledge gendering the person, and second, because bleeding is explicitly a female position, although it is not occupied by women only. Women's bleeding is the remembrance of Moon's incest and killing, the primordial instance founding memory, kinship and fertility, deriving from the transformational fertility of Moon's revenge. Men may also be “like women” when they find themselves under the revenge of their enemy's blood, similar to bleeding women under the revenge of Moon. Bleeding is, one may say, a primordial female prerogative shared by both genders, because both genders are fertile and bleeding is “the possibility to make other beings emerge” (Gonçalves 2001:233). But it is a possibility that needs to be managed with care to obtain a fertility that provides continuity to human memory. The stench of blood, betraying bleeding even when it cannot be seen or touched, sets in motion the transformational multiplicity of revenge of “other” cosmological space-

times, bringing about the danger of loss of human memory.

Given the salient place of bleeding in cosmology, I suggest that Amazonian shamanism should be better characterized as a shamanic reproductive complex. Studying shamanism as though it existed outside men and women's practices of blood management is an amputation of its scope.¹⁰ Even when women do not attend shamanic sessions, which is often the case given the restrictions placed upon them by their bleeding, they manage their blood flow jointly with their partners. Men may not practice shamanism either when they carry the stench of blood or of semen, a blood derivative. The couple's joint management of their blood bears salient consequences upon their reproductive life (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997:65). Furthermore, among various cultural groups, women possess a variety of techniques to manipulate their blood flow, acquire shamanic expertise, and attend and lead shamanic sessions when they are "like men," protected from the transformational multiplicity of the stench of blood (Perruchon 1997; Mader 1997; Belaunde 2001; Colpron 2004). Being a man, or being a woman, is not a rigidly defined dichotomy. Borrowing Overing's words, it is a matter of difference within equality, and equality within difference.

NOTES

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1. For comparison, in Iquito, a Záparo language of Perú, the indigenous concept of thought is expressed as *saminíjuuni* "being preoccupied with someone" and *tar++ni* "feeling nostalgia when absent." Interestingly, "to prepare food" is *saminíini*, evidencing the link between thought and food provision (Bier and Michael 2003; Sullón 2005:9).

2. Observing diet and seclusion together is an affirmation of kinship ties (Da Matta 1976). During gestation, childbirth and the postpartum, diet and seclusion are instrumental in constructing men's responsible paternity towards the fetus and mother (Ladeira 1997; Rival 1998; Belaunde 2005:271).

3. In Iquito *m+ra* "children" and *m+r++ni* "to engender, to have children," is semantically related to and *m+r+taani* "to cope, to endure in effort"; *cut++ni* is "to be born," *cut++t++ni* "to look after a birthing woman," and *.cut++t++ni* "to dawn" (Sullón 2005:7; Huamancayo 2005:8).

4. In Iquito, *Qu+raqui*, “menstruation” is the radical from which derive *qu+raani*, “to peel, to take the skin off.” *Qu+racama* is a hut used by women during their menses, regarded as a dangerous place, and *qu+rana* means danger (Sullón 2005:5).

5. Similar ideas about red body paint (*carayurú Bigmonia chica* and/or *achiote Bixa orellana*) are held throughout the Amazon (Vilaça 1992:67).

6. According to the Macuna, menstruation came about when the four male *Ayabaroa* “Living Beings” stole the *yuruparí* flutes from *Rómi Kumu*, the “Woman Healer of the World.” She consequently cursed them as follows: “Since you stole ‘that thing’ from me, even if you are good healers and have lots of knowledge, you will live having problems with other peoples, until the end of the world” (Mahecha 2004:158; my translation). During the *yuruparí* male puberty rituals, the boys are subjected to restrictions similar to bleeding women and homicidal men. If they were to break their diet and seclusion they would become pregnant of the *yuruparí*, go mad and/or die (Århem *et al* 2004:224).

7. Among the Desana, the girl is Moon’s daughter (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997:165). Among Iquito, she is his mother-in-law (Huamancayo 2005:3). Among the Uitoto (Belaunde 2006) the girl’s desire to know her lover’s identity is instigated by her mother, and among the Shipaia, (Lévi-Strauss 1964:318), by her non-incestuous brothers. The comparative analysis of the social significance of these variations still needs to be done.

8. Listening to the story of Moon’s incest has a performative effect upon women and may effectively cause them bleeding, as Siskind reports (1973:57) for the Sharanahua. Kensinger (1995:35) also states that at each new menses “men and women are reminded of the consequences of incest.”

9. Multiple paternity (Beckerman and Valentine 2002) may involve several living fathers, whose semen accumulate in a woman’s womb, and also several spirit or dead fathers. Moon is not the only spirit father found in the Amazon. Among the Shipibo, children may be fathered by living fathers and *cháiconibo* celestial spirits (Colpron 2002:267). Among cultural groups practicing homicidal seclusion rites, dead enemies contribute to fathering their killers’ children (Fausto 2001:467; Viveiros de Castro 2003:47). Among the Pirahã, gestation starts with a “fright” suffered by menstruating women due to the revenge of animals of prey with “lots of blood” (Gonçalves 2001:227).

10. Snakes and the moon also have a major place in Amazonian shamanism. Among ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) drinkers, such as the Cashinahua, ayahuasca is considered the blood of *Yube* “Moon/Snake.” It is also called *nawa himi*, meaning “enemy’s blood.” Ayahuasca makes those who drink it pregnant of worlds of images emerging from their bellies (Lagrou 1998:98).

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