

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Special Issue in honor of Joanna Overing: In the World and About the World: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge*

Article 4

May 2006

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Fernando Santos-Granero

Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, santosf@si.edu

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Recommended Citation

Santos-Granero, Fernando (2006). "Sensual Vitalities: Noncorporeal Modes of Sensing and Knowing in Native Amazonia," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol4/iss1/4>

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Sensual Vitalities: Noncorporeal Modes of Sensing and Knowing in Native Amazonia

FERNANDO SANTOS-GRANERO

Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute

santosf@si.edu

I received my first lesson on Yanesha theories of perception while fishing one dark night in May of 1977 in the Palcazu River with Matar, the traditional chief of Camantarmas and my self-appointed mentor. I was an undergraduate doing fieldwork for the first time among the Yanesha of eastern Peru and had been in the area for little more than two months. Tired of me asking too many questions, and constantly entangling my fishing line with his, Matar discreetly suggested that night that I should move farther away, where, he asserted with excessive enthusiasm, there was a fantastic fishing spot. While I was there, all alone, chewing coca leaves and chain smoking to dissipate my boredom, I started hearing people singing a beautiful song. It was a *sherareñets* song belonging to the female style of *coshamñats* sacred songs. The women singing were accompanied by what I recognized as *requërqueñets* panpipe sacred music. Their soprano voices merged smoothly with the high pitched sounds of the two leading panpipes, and with the graver tones of the large accompanying ones.

Although I still had difficulties in orienting myself along the loops and turns of the winding Palcazu River, I was quite sure that Shecor, Matar's older brother, lived right across the river from where I was fishing. While listening to the captivating music, I recalled that Shecor's daughter had been ritually confined a few weeks ago after having had her first menses. She was supposed to come out of her seclusion during the next full moon. Her parents had told me that they would like me to attend the coming out party. So I was puzzled that they had decided to hold the party earlier than planned and somewhat disappointed at not having been invited.

After listening to the music for a while, I decided to ask Matar if he knew about the party. When I did, he looked at me disconcerted. "What party?" he asked. "The one in Shecor's house across the river" I answered. "Can't you hear the music?" With an even more puzzled and alarmed expression, Matar told me that nobody lived across the river and that he could not hear any music. I thought he was pretending not to hear the music to spare me from the mortification of not having been invited to the party. But Matar's subsequent actions revealed that he certainly was not

pretending. He urged me to gather my fishing line and prepare to leave immediately. When I asked him why, he begged me to be quiet. After assembling our things hastily, we hopped into the canoe, and, in absolute silence, we steered downriver until we reached Matar's landing place.

It was only in the safety of home, next to the fire, and chewing a new wad of coca leaves that Matar told me that what I had heard were not human voices but the singing of Pocoy, a class of underwater river beings that Yanesha call *sirenas* (mermaids) in Spanish. Hearing Pocoy, he told me, is not only odd but very dangerous. Normally imperceptible during waking hours, Pocoy mermaids only reveal themselves to solitary fishermen. They do so in order to seduce them. If an unaware fisherman listens to Pocoy's alluring songs and calls out to her, she appears to him in the shape of a beautiful blond white woman. Such encounters are generally fatal. Beautifully painted, perfumed with necklaces of fragrant seeds, dressed in a sparkling tunic, talking in caressing tones, sweet to the taste, and soft to the touch, Pocoy overwhelms the senses of the chosen man. Ensnared by her guiles, he loses his will power and from then on is under the spell of Pocoy, whose only desire is to take him as a lover to her underwater world.

This is why Matar was so anxious to leave. If I had not left while I still had the will to do so, he told me, I might have been tempted to communicate with the mermaid. And if I had done so, I would have never been able to return home. I do not know exactly what happened that night. Did I actually hear the underwater river people? Did I experience an acoustic hallucination? Or was it only a trick of my senses? Be that as it may, that night I learned much about Yanesha understandings of the world and, above all, about Yanesha world sensing. In subsequent months I was to learn even more.

In this article, I present the main principles of the Yanesha theory of perception and knowledge, and discuss how it contrasts in important ways with our own. My purpose is to advocate for a renewed anthropology of the senses in Amazonian studies (see Howes 1991, 2005), as well as to propose a critical revision of the notion of Amerindian perspectivism. In so doing, I follow what I consider to be one of Joanna Overing's most powerful arguments in her edited volume *Reason and Morality*. In it she states that "Humility comes only through an acquaintance with the epistemologies and ontologies of other cultures, an acquaintance achieved through rich ethnography which is acquired by taking seriously what others say about their social worlds" (1985:7). I have abided by this wise precept ever since.

THE SELF AND ITS COMPONENTS

Yanesha ideas about the self and its senses are much more complex than those prevalent in Western societies. According to their notions, every individual is composed of a body and two incorporeal entities: *yecamquëñ* ("our soul/vitality"), and *yechoyeshem* ("our shadow"). The body is conceived of as the material dimension of the self. The term *chetsots*, meaning both body and flesh, underscores the body's raw materiality. At another level, however, Yanesha people conceive of the body as a tunic that cloaks its noncorporeal elements (see Belaunde; Rosengren; and Storrie, *intra*, for similar notions among other Amazonian peoples). This conception alludes to the full length gendered cotton tunics (fem., *cashemuets*, masc., *shetamuets*) that Yanesha people used to wear on a daily basis until recently, and that they still wear in the intimacy of their homes, or in formal occasions. This is not surprising, since wrapped in their tunics, Yanesha men and women become their tunics (see Figure 1).

Contrary to what Viveiros de Castro (1998:471) suggests for Amerindian people in general, in Yanesha usage the relationship between bodies and tunics is not metaphorical but literal. Bodies are tunics and tunics are



Figure 1: Bodies are tunics and tunics are bodies.

bodies. This is confirmed by both mythical narratives and shamanic beliefs. At the end of mythical times, humans retained their tunics—meaning their human bodies/tunics—whereas the decorated tunics of animals, spirits, and other beings were transformed into their present-day bodies. Thus, the scales of the armadillo, the spots of the jaguar, and the blackness of the curassow are said to derive from the patterns and colors of their mythical tunics. In addition, Yanesha claim that when shamans consume narcotic or hallucinogenic substances, their “souls” travel to other world planes, leaving their “tunics”—again in the sense of both body and tunic—behind. If their souls are trapped or devoured while traveling through other world planes it is believed that their bodies wither and that the shaman dies.

Yanesha people consider the body and its senses to be important sources of information as well as a means of communication in the material world. Nevertheless, they regard corporeal senses as incapable of perceiving the normally hidden, spiritual dimension underlying much of the visible world. Not even shamans can perceive the spiritual dimension of things with their bodily senses (see Viveiros de Castro 2004b:465, and Vilaça 1992:66, 81, for contrasting Amerindian ideas). Thus, these are conceived of as unsuitable means of acquiring or producing significant knowledge. This task can only be accomplished by a person’s noncorporeal constituents. There are, however, important differences between these constituents in terms of their connection with the body, their sensorial capacities, and their ability to produce knowledge.

Yechoyeshem (“our shadow”), is considered to be permanently attached to the body so long as the person of whom it is a part is alive. Its visible manifestation, as its name indicates, is a person’s shadow. Like shadows, which are totally dependent on the bodies whose projection they are, *yechoyeshem* are deprived of self-awareness, will, and senses. As such, they are incapable of perceiving the world and generating knowledge. Only at the death of the person of whom they were part are shadows liberated from the tyranny of the body. Only then do they acquire self-will and some of the sensorial capacities of the bodies to which they were attached. Known as *choyeshemats*, or (“errant shadows”) these former components of human beings sometimes stay close to where the latter lived and died, haunting and terrorizing the living.

In contrast, *yecamquēñ*, (a term Yanesha people often translate in Spanish as *nuestra alma* or “our soul”) is thought to be endowed with the same sensorial capacities as the body. In fact, Yanesha believe that it is the soul that imbues the body with sensory faculties. They assert that *yecamquēñ* is the individual manifestation of the all encompassing “soul stuff” of the creator divinities of the *yato* (“our grandfather”) and *yompor*

(“our father”) categories. Known as *camuequeñets*, this divine “soul stuff” is conceived of as the primordial source of life of the universe. Thus, *yecamquēñ* is the individualized human manifestation of the life force that creator gods share with all living beings. It is this noncorporeal dimension of the self that infuses life into the body and allows it to have both a life of the senses and a life of thoughts (see Overing, *intra*, for similar notions). Without it, bodies would be lifeless, mere raw matter similar to the tunics to which they are equated. Insofar as Yanesha claim that *camuequeñets*, the divine soul stuff or life force, is composed of vital breath or strength, the term *yecamquēñ* would be better translated as “our vitality” than as “our soul.”

Yecamquēñ has two manifestations. The first, the vitality proper, is capable of detaching itself from the body and wandering through this and other world planes. It has the same shape and physiognomy as the person of which it is part. In this sense, it could be asserted that from a Yanesha point of view the “person” and his or her components have a fractal nature (cf. Luciani Kelly 2001; Mentore, *intra*). However, in contrast with other Amerindian peoples (see for instance Rosengren and Werlang), Yanesha assert that vitalities are made of divine breath or strength and, thus, lack corporality.¹ Because of this, vitalities lack boundaries and can diffuse into the objects that are in prolonged close contact with an individual, such as, for instance, his or her personal ornaments. In contrast, *yecamquēñ*’s second manifestation is inseparable from the body. Under the form of a tiny homunculus, it sits in the pupils of the person of which it is a part (see Mentore, *intra*). When our vitality separates to wander about the world, the nondetachable part—known as *pacheñmer* (“his human-like being”)—keeps guard over the body, which, deprived of its source of life, is vulnerable to all sorts of accidents and supernatural attacks.

As with the body, our vitality is endowed with sensorial capacities. But, according to Yanesha people, whereas the bodily senses only perceive the tunic of things, that is, their material appearance, the noncorporeal senses of our vitalities are capable of perceiving things as “they really are.” In other words, they can perceive the spiritual dimension of things. In perspectival terms, this is tantamount to saying that they can perceive animals, spirits, and other nonhuman beings as these beings perceive themselves, that is, as human beings. Note that in contrast with other Amerindian peoples (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 468) Yanesha attribute this capacity to all human beings and not to only shamans. They recognize three circumstances in which our vitalities are freed to exercise their sensual capacities and thus engage in processes of knowing (1) while people are asleep, (2) during ritual vigils, and (3) after consuming narcotics

or hallucinogens. From a Western perspective, under such circumstances the corporeal senses are diminished, deprived, numbed, or overstimulated. From a Yanesha perspective they are simply left behind, together with the body, thus allowing the senses of the disembodied vitalities to become activated. It should be noted that Yanesha theories of perception are not built upon an opposition between body and vitality. Rather, they are based on a contrast between the sensory faculties of embodied and disembodied vitalities, or, as Stolze Lima would put it, “between the reality of the subject and the reality of its soul” (2000:48). From this point of view, our vitalities, *yecamquëñ*, are the ones that endow individuals with the capacity to lead a sensual life. Whereas embodied vitalities can only perceive the tunic of things, however, disembodied vitalities can perceive their human spiritual dimension.

THE BODY AND ITS SENSES

Just as with average Euroamericans, Yanesha people consider the body to be endowed with five basic senses: hearing (*e'mueñets*), sight (*enteñets*), smell (*mosyeñets*), touch (*a'pñeñets*), and taste (*amñeñets*). All these senses are considered to be indispensable in gathering the kind of factual information required to live in this earth (*añe patsro*). Not all of them, however, are attributed the same importance. As with Euroamericans, Yanesha people believe that sight and hearing are the two most important senses. But, in contrast to them, they—as well as many other Amerindian peoples—attribute greater significance to hearing than to sight (see Belaunde, *intra*; Murphy 2004; Passes 1998, 2001; Seeger 1981). This confirms McLuhan's (1961) proposition that whereas literate societies privilege sight and the visual, oral societies tend to favor hearing and the aural. Although this assertion has been recently contested by Classen (2005), it is clear that nonliterate peoples often privilege senses other than sight as being the most important means for acquiring knowledge.

I was never more aware of the importance of hearing than on an occasion in 1983, during my second fieldwork experience among Yanesha people, when I invited Mañor to come to Lima to help me transcribe and translate a number of myths that I had recorded in the field. It was dusk and we were working together in the living room when we saw a rat creeping into the house from the garden. We chased it but could not see into which room it had entered. We checked all the bedrooms and bathrooms and we looked under the beds and behind the furniture, but to no avail. It was then that Mañor said that he could find it, but that he required total silence. He entered into the first bedroom, turned off

the light, closed the door and sat in silence in the dark. After some ten minutes he came out, saying that the rat was not there. He did the same in the second room, and with same result. After five minutes in the third room, however, he emerged and declared that the rat was there, inside the closet's top drawer. When I asked him how was he able to tell where the rat was, he said that when the rat first heard him entering the room it stayed perfectly still. But after a few minutes of total silence, the rat felt safer and started to move. The almost inaudible screech of its feet against the drawer's bottom betrayed its location.

Sight is the second most important sense for the Yanesha. Hunters and fishermen have incredibly discriminating eyesight, both during the daytime and at night. When hunting during the day, they could discern a curassow, a monkey, or even a sloth slowly moving head down along a branch, where I simply saw a mass of indistinct greenery. When fishing in the dim light of dawn or dusk, they had no problem adjusting their sight to the refraction of the water, and could shoot fish with their three pointed arrows at a distance of up to two meters. When hunting at night, sitting in the forest, or navigating along the river on a canoe, they had little difficulty in identifying with their flashlights the gleaming eyes of animals that were sometimes as far away as twenty meters.

The third most important sense is smell. This sense provides useful information for hunt and for performing other subsistence activities. Yanesha hunters have a very fine sense of smell. When walking along a forest trail they can discern whether a certain palm tree is fruiting in the vicinity, or a certain resin producing tree can be found nearby. More importantly, they can tell whether and how long ago a certain animal has walked along the trail. Matar claimed to be especially good at smelling animals. One day when we were walking in the forest in search of a certain liana I had proof of his capacity. At a certain point, Matar stopped abruptly and signaled me to do the same. He sniffed the air and said that a jaguar had crossed the trail not long before. A few meters further on, we came across the footprints of a jaguar, freshly imprinted on the soft clayey ground.

Yanesha people are not as clear about the order of importance of the two remaining senses, touch and taste, as they are about hearing, sight, and smell. Touch is crucial to some activities as, for instance, the catching of catfish. Since catfish feed by sucking microalgae, they are always found attached to the rolling stones at the bottom of the river. People who want to catch them wander about the shallower parts of the river sensing with their hands the stones of the river bottom, where catfish usually hide. Sight is of no help in this activity. It all depends on touch. When the armored scales of a catfish are felt, it must be quickly grasped before it slides away.

Taste is probably the least important sense for gathering information on the natural world. It does provide, however, relevant data to carry out certain activities. Previously, in forest expeditions to look for appropriate clay to make pots, Yanesha women would taste and smell the different clays they found in order to determine which was the most suitable. Taste and smell are also crucial in order to identify certain plants, bushes, and weeds of medicinal or magical importance, as they are among the Matsigenka (Shepard 2004) and the Bororo (Crocker 1985:160).

Although Yanesha consider bodily senses to be indispensable to human praxis in this earth, they have little trust on their own capacities to apprehend what they consider to be the true nature of the world and its beings. Like the Cashinahua (Kensinger 1995:237–246; Lagrou 2000:157, *intra*) and other Amerindian peoples who claim that knowledge resides in the body, Yanesha believe that knowledge/memory resides in the heart (see Rosengren and Belaunde, *intra*, for similar ideas among Matsigenka and Airo-pai). However, Yanesha are clear on the fact that thoughts (cotapñats) are not produced by the body but by an individual's *yecamquëñ*, or vitality. The Amerindian notion that the material world is the envelope of a spiritual dimension—that is a crucial source of extraordinary knowledge—seems to be as universal in Lowland South America as the idea that this spiritual dimension can only be perceived by a person's soul or vitality. Even those Amerindian peoples who claim that knowledge is always embodied, seem to agree that the spiritual dimension of the world can only be apprehended through noncorporeal components of the self. In relation to the Cashinahua, according to Kensinger, "To see the true nature of people and the things that make up the natural world one also must understand the *bedu yushin*, the eye spirit, sometimes also called the real spirit, *yushin kuin*" (1995:240). Yanesha, Cashinahua, and other Amerindians argue that what we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch while awake are only the tunics of the living beings and material objects that populate this earth. These other beings and objects also have vitalities that can only be perceived by a person's vitality under very specific circumstances. These vitalities have bodily form—always human—and even sensorial capacities, but, at least from a Yanesha point of view, they lack corporality.

THEORIES OF PERCEPTION

Yanesha people are closer to Plato than to Aristotle in terms of their ideas about how knowledge is produced. In Aristotelian philosophy, sensual perception constitutes the basis for all knowledge. The physical

world, it is argued, is made of objects composed of matter—the material of which they are made and which form their shape. Through their senses, which apprehend the form of material objects, individuals collect information about the world. Under the guise of percepts, this sensorial information travels through the blood system to the *sensus communis*, the primary perceptual faculty according to Aristotle. For the Yanesha, the *sensus communis* is located in the heart region. Its main function is to discriminate between the percepts it receives from the various sense organs. Aided by intellect, which for Aristotle is the faculty that enables us to know, understand, and think, this information is judged and interpreted. In this view—which, in slightly altered form, is the basis of present-day scientific thought—knowledge in Yanesha is the product of sensorial information processed by intellect or reason.

In contrast, Plato makes a clear distinction between the “sensible world,” that is, the world of perception, and what he called the “intelligible world,” the world of abstract “forms.” Marked by constant flux and change, the sensible world is a world of appearances. Plato contends that knowledge must have as its object the genuinely real rather than mere appearances. He asserts that significant knowledge cannot be attained through the sensorial apprehension of the physical world. Rather, it must be grasped by applying reason to the understanding of the eternal “forms” or substances that constitute the real world. These abstract entities exist independently of the sensible world. Ordinary objects, imperfect and changeable, are distorted copies of their perfect and immutable Forms. Since we have a notion of such abstract forms as “orange,” “table,” or “justice,” and since the corporeal senses are imperfect means of knowing such forms, Plato argues that the apprehension of the real world can only be possible through the soul.

The similarity between Yanesha and Platonic theories of knowledge stops here, however. As Descola (1996:375) has pointed out, we should be wary of the kind of naïve Platonism sometimes attributed to Amerindian peoples. Plato proposes that we are born with a notion of the abstract forms which comprise the real world. Because the corporeal senses are incapable of apprehending such forms, we must conclude that (1) the soul precedes the body, that is, it must be eternal and immortal, and (2) that knowledge precedes the existence of the body and can only be apprehended as a recollection of a past life.

Yanesha also believe that *yecamquëñ* (our soul/vitality) is eternal and immortal, and that significant knowledge can only be attained through its agency. However, given that they consider vitalities as mere manifestations of *camuequeñets*—the breath/strength of the creator gods—rather than

discrete never changing entities, they divest them with the capacity of passing from a deceased individual to a newborn, or the possibility of transmitting knowledge from one to the other. Instead, they believe that the creator gods insufflate vitality into every newborn, and that this vitality returns to its divine source—located in Yomporesho, the celestial residence of the creator gods—once the person dies. Vitalities are thus in constant circulation and transformation, passing from a generic divine state to an individualized human form and back again to its generic state. Knowledge, from this point of view, cannot be a recollection of the past. Existing knowledge can be passed from person to person through teaching and learning, but the production of new knowledge is always an individual feat. It can only be possible through the activities of an individual's vitality. Unless it is transmitted through teaching, it is lost once a person dies.

THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

From a Yanesha perspective, knowledge (*eñoteñets*) is always extraordinary knowledge originating in beings that inhabit other world planes. It is true that Yanesha people have gathered an impressive amount of what we would consider empirical information about a broad range of subjects: agriculture and astronomy, botany and zoology, hydrology and meteorology, navigation and architecture, medicine and poisons. Doubtless, this is the result of centuries of accumulation of empirical knowledge by countless generations of Yanesha. If one asks Yanesha people how this knowledge was originated, however, not one person will mention patient observation, recording, and interpretation of natural facts. Neither will they attribute it to trial and error experimentation and the collective accumulation of its results throughout the ages. Real knowledge, they would argue, always comes from other world planes. This holds true even for knowledge concerning very basic empirical tasks such as manioc cultivation, obtained from Agouti, the use of barbasco fish poison, derived from the semen of the horny giant Hua'tenañ, and processing salt and iron, learned from the generous mythical beings Posona' and Asreso.

This kind of knowledge was bestowed upon the collectivity of Yanesha in mythical times. At present, however, extraordinary knowledge is acquired, either directly through one's individual efforts, or indirectly from wise, generally older persons. In both cases, however, the learning process is understood as a quest for knowledge, one in which seekers must prepare themselves both physically and spiritually. For it is believed, firstly, that the acquisition of extraordinary knowledge can only be attained through

the mediation of one's vitality and that the acquisition of this kind of knowledge is a dangerous task that must be accompanied by increasing forms of self control (see Overing 1975, Santos-Granero 1991, and Gow, *intra*, on the dangers of excessive knowledge).

Dreams are an important source of knowledge, available to everyone: men and women, the old and the young. Yanesha people assert that when asleep our vitalities detach from our bodies and wander about this and other levels of the world. Our dreams reflect the wanderings of our vitalities and their encounters with other, normally imperceptible beings, including the vitalities of other human beings, the shadows of dead people, the primordial souls of animals, plants, and objects, or a vast array of spiritual beings and divinities. Dreams can be deceiving, however, and the knowledge that can be obtained through them may be haphazard. Wandering vitalities are only able to collect random bits of knowledge encountered while visiting other world levels. Unless people train themselves to "lucid dream," that is, to attain awareness while dreaming and act consciously to alter the course of events within them (see Santos-Granero 2003), their vitalities are unable to produce knowledge and they can only be passive receptors of knowledge.

In order to obtain new knowledge, Yanesha people must embark on a knowledge quest. These quests may be brief, simple, and with very specific objectives. They may also be long term endeavors demanding greater concentration and personal devotion. Adult Yanesha embark on a daily basis in simple quests for knowledge. The hunter who chews coca leaves to divine what prey he might expect to catch or the woman about to harvest manioc, who sings the praises of Agouti so that the latter will indicate to her which plants have the largest tubers, are examples of this kind of search. Such daily quests for knowledge do not require much ritual preparation. Almost all adult Yanesha know how to divine with coca leaves, and many of them know magical songs used to elicit the guidance of extraordinary beings.

In contrast, obtaining other types of knowledge requires longer quests and a stronger personal commitment. During these quests, generally associated with initiation rituals, the boys and girls involved strive to learn two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge dispensed by their parents and close relatives, and the knowledge acquired through their own personal quests. Both require ritual preparation and experienced guidance. Young men are trained by their fathers, grandfathers, and paternal uncles in the art of hunting. During their training, they must follow a large number of dietary proscriptions and prescriptions. They are given *epe'* magical plants (*Cyperus sp.*), which they chew with coca leaves. While consuming

them they must keep vigil. They also have to beseech Rrera, the harpy eagle, master of all animals and an exceptional hunter, or Pueyomp, the primordial mythical hunter, to guide them. These extraordinary beings present themselves to the apprentices—or, rather, to their vitalities—in ritual vigils or in dreams, to bestow upon them special hunting knowledge or precious hunting charms.

Female puberty rituals also entail a knowledge quest. In the past, young girls were confined in a small palm leaf hut for up to one year after having their first menses. Today they are secluded for no more than two months. During this period, the confined girl must learn much of the knowledge an adult Yanesha woman needs to know. They receive daily lessons from their grandmothers, mothers, and maternal aunts. Secluded girls are taught to spin cotton, weave, make baskets and mats, prepare manioc beer, plant a garden, and rear children. The training entails not only the transmission of the physical skills necessary to do these things, but also of the “secrets,” that is, of the extraordinary knowledge necessary to be successful in all these endeavors. Such secrets include songs to make manioc and other staples grow abundantly, herbs to induce or prevent pregnancies, and *epe*’ magical plants to keep children healthy, train hunting dogs, or retain the love of one’s spouse. To enhance their ability to concentrate, the secluded girls have to keep vigil and maintain ritual silence. They chew a great deal of coca, and are subjected to strict dietary restrictions. During ritual vigils, or in their dreams, they obtain important information from extraordinary beings. This becomes part of their personal wealth of knowledge.

Quests for knowledge linked to initiation rituals can take a big toll on the initiates. The most demanding quests, however, are those required in obtaining specialized knowledge. To become an herbalist (*apartañ*), tobacco shaman (*pa’llerr*), or ayahuasca shaman (*ayahuasquero*), apprentices must go through a taxing training period under the guidance of an established specialist. In the past, priests (*cornesha*) had to undertake a similar training. In both cases, the trainees acquired important knowledge from their instructors. Unlike other types of ritual training, however, the success of shamans and priests largely depended on their capacity to obtain significant knowledge in the form of personal revelations. All these specialists chewed coca leaves and practiced prolonged ritual fasts and vigils. In addition, some of them also consumed narcotic or hallucinogenic substances. Any of these practices, Yanesha claim, induce the detachment of our vitalities from our bodies. But whereas in dreams vitalities generally do not obey the person’s conscious will, when either keeping vigil or consuming toxic substances they can be consciously directed. This is achieved through the strength of one’s thoughts.

Yanesha people assert that those who want to obtain spiritual knowledge—whether from wise people or extraordinary beings—must concentrate their will on what they want to achieve. Since this is an oral culture, the learning process is understood as the memorization of thoughts (*yochreta yocsapech*). The more thoughts one accumulates in one's heart, the stronger one becomes. A wise person is believed to derive his or her power from the strength of his/her thoughts (*huomenc poctapñot*). It is through this kind of strength that shamanic and priestly apprentices are capable of directing their vitalities as they wish.

THE VITALITY AND ITS SENSES

Vitalities have the same senses as the bodies they energize. In contrast to bodily senses, however, the noncorporeal senses of our vitalities are capable of apprehending the spiritual dimension of the beings and objects of this and other world levels. Corporeal and noncorporeal senses are not intrinsically different. They operate in the same ways and are classified in a similar hierarchy of importance. This is not surprising for it is the vitality or soul that endows individuals with a sensual life. Hearing is considered to be the vitality's main sensorial organ. From a Yanesha perspective, the most relevant spiritual knowledge is obtained by acoustical revelations from spiritual beings, either in dreams or while under the effects of hallucinogens. This is true for many other Amerindian peoples, such as the Wakuénai (Hill 1993:214); Arawak speaking peoples such as the Yanesha; and the Achuar, Shuar and other Jivaroan peoples, whose so called "vision quests" are in fact aimed at obtaining a message or a prophecy from the arutam soul of a powerful ancestor (Taylor 1996:208–9). In all these cases, it is through the sensorial agency of a person's vitality that knowledge is acquired or produced.

Yanesha shamans and priests strive to persuade animals, spirits, or divinities to share with them magical chants, sacred songs, prophecies, and other formal locutions. Jeñari, a renowned old shaman, told me that during his training as a young man he was instructed to practice long vigils so as to obtain the guidance of familiar spirits. He had to chew coca mixed with concentrated tobacco juice on a daily basis. After a while, he started hearing the song of the opossum and other animals. When something like this happens, he told me, one has to be extremely careful, for it may be an evil spirit imitating a given animal. If one pays attention to an impostor's songs, the evil spirit might steal one's vitality, potentially causing one's death. Only after hearing the same song ten times, he said, should the

apprentice start repeating and learning it. This is the way to enlist the song's animal owner as a friend and spiritual protector (Santos-Granero 2006). With the acquisition of their first familiar spirits, apprentices also acquire a new incorporeal entity. Called *chañapchenaya*, this shamanic soul is capable of adopting the form of a shaman's animal protectors. Thanks to these souls—which only they possess—Yanesha shamans have the unique capability of turning into their familiars. The most important among them are jaguars, hummingbirds, and anacondas, but they can also adopt other forms, such as air, wind, or fog. Embodied as one of their familiars, shamans not only acquire the capacities and mores of the animal in question, but also their particular “perspective”. Thus, while wandering under the form of jaguars, Yanesha shamans see humans as animals of prey, and can attack them (see Werlang, *intra*, for a discussion on the extreme fluidity and mutability of “bodies” and “souls”).

Would-be priests (in the Yanesha sense) also sought acoustic revelations. But rather than addressing animal and plant spirits, they entreated the creator gods—especially Yompor Ror (Sun)—or friendly *mellañoteñ* spirits. These beneficent beings only reveal themselves to devote Yanesha, that is, to those seeking their guidance through regular fasts, vigils, prayers, offerings, good thoughts, and an attitude of suffering love. If their efforts were deemed legitimate, the divinities manifested their love and compassion for them by revealing themselves through words: songs, warnings, and other formal locutions. Priests claimed to hear the voices of the divinities during vigils or in dreams. Such messages could refer to the imminent arrival of Yompor Ror, or one of his emissaries, to render Yanesha people immortal. They could also consist of warnings about imminent catastrophes sent by the divinities as punishment for the failings of their human creatures. *Coshamñats* sacred songs were especially appreciated. These were revealed to faithful priests and were subsequently passed on to other people, and sung in temple celebrations to praise the divinities and to ask for their deliverance (see Smith 1977).

Although less vital, sight is also an important means through which our vitalities can gain significant knowledge. An important aspect of Yanesha shamanic training is the development of the capacity to direct our vitalities to wherever one wishes. This condition is achieved through fasts, vigils, and/or the consumption of narcotics and hallucinogens. Apprentices are taught to leave their bodies behind, and to travel to hidden regions of this earth, or to other world levels above and below this earth. Yanesha shamans claim that in such soul flights they see animals, spirits, plants, and objects “as they really are”, that is, they can see their human-shaped

vitalities. Under such states, they visit different mountains where the “owners” of particular animal species dwell. Shamans visit their abodes, as well as the mountain dwellings of spiritual beings—such as the Mother of Herbalist Medicine—whose guidance is crucial to their healing activities. On other occasions, they visit the underwater world, where they converse with the mermaids, or with the owners of a particular fish species under human shape. They also visit the caves in which live the shadows of dead people who have led a correct life, and can witness certain diseases, such as smallpox, in their human form.

Sight was not as important as hearing to priestly quests for knowledge. Yanesha people affirm that no one can see the divinities. To see them, one would have to practice an eternal vigil, which is tantamount to saying that one would have to be immortal. The priests of old also chewed coca leaves, together with concentrated tobacco juice. But in contrast with shamans, they did not engage in soul flights, and they did not attempt to gain animal familiars. Some priests, however, were able to detect and fight off *jo'* evil spirits, and *oneñet* demons threatening a particular region. And it is said that sometimes friendly *mellañoteñ* spirits allowed themselves to be seen by devoted priests. All in all, however, priests depended little on sight as a source of knowledge, placing much more importance on hearing, and the strength of their thoughts to learn and memorize oral information. This was especially relevant in the learning of *coshamñats* sacred songs, some of which have up to seventy-five verses (Smith 1977:282).

The senses of smell, taste, and touch are much less important as sources of knowledge for the Yanesha. Some shamans mentioned to me the delightful fragrances of the women they met during their soul flights. Others described the rich smell and taste of the food they were invited to eat when visiting the houses of extraordinary beings. In addition, Yanesha shamans attribute some bad odors to the presence of evil spirits and demons, and claim that certain fragrances are sure evidence of objects that have been magically worked upon to act as charms. Along with Muinane people (Londoño Sulkin, personal communication), they consider that odors can affect subjectivity, in some cases maddening and corrupting people, in others restoring their moral discernment. This is especially true of the stench of menstrual blood, which can weaken or even deprive shamans and hunters from their magical powers (see Belaunde, *intra*). By being able to detect odors, people can take the necessary measures to fend off, both evil beings and dangerous charms. However, among Yanesha these senses generally do not play as relevant a role in the acquisition/production of arcane knowledge as hearing and sight.

PERCEPTION AND PERSPECTIVISM

The notion of Amerindian “perspectivism” (Århem 1993; Stolze Lima 1999, 2000, 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004a and b) has opened new and exciting avenues of inquiry in the field of Amazonian studies. It has, however, generated little discussion about two issues that should have been central to the debate. The first concerns the role of the different senses in intra- and inter-specific relationships. The second concerns the question of consciousness about both the different sensorial capacities of embodied and disembodied souls, and the perspectival nature of perception.

Scholars of perspectivism have not explored the sensorial dimension of this phenomenon of perspectivism, except to state that Amerindians attribute to animals, spirits, and other nonhuman beings the same cognitive and sensory faculties that they possess (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 1998:474). They have mainly focused on sight and on how different kinds of beings “see” other beings. One could argue that the notion of perspective is synonymous with point of view, and that it is therefore justified to focus on sight. However, given the emphasis on the “embodiedness” of perspective, and on the notion of body as “a bundle of affects and capacities”, a less “vision centered” perspective on perspective would have been expected. The predominant role attributed to sight over the other senses as the privileged means to forge relationships between different beings thus seems to be a projection of our own Western hierarchy of the senses. For Yanesha people, as well as for many other Amerindian peoples, hearing is a more important form of perception and mode of knowing than sight, or any of the other senses for that matter. This is true in contexts of both intra- and inter-specific relationships. The Kayapó term *mar*, meaning simultaneously “to hear” and “to know,” is an expression of this widespread conception (Murphy 2004:43). Similar notions are found among the Suyá, for whom *ku-mba* means “to hear-understand-know” (Seeger 1981:83), and among the Pa’ikwené, who translate the term *tchimap* as “to hear-listen-understand” (Passes 1998:46, and *intra*).

Similarly, little attention has been paid to the differential sensorial capacities of the various components of the self and, more importantly, to the degree of consciousness that different kinds of beings have about these differences. Scholars of perspectivism recognize the pervasive Amerindian “animic” notion conceiving all beings as composed of a body, and one or more souls. But they assume that different beings have similar sensorial capacities. In the radical version of perspectivism advocated by Viveiros de Castro, all beings see themselves as human, and see all others as their structural opposites. “(I)n normal conditions,” we are told by Viveiros de

Castro, “humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators)” (1998:470). In other, extraordinary circumstances, however, the souls of all beings see themselves, as well as the souls of other kinds of creatures, as being human. This is in consonance with what Viveiros de Castro calls the “multinaturalist” character of Amerindian ontologies. Such ontologies presuppose the spiritual unity of all beings, first insofar as they all have a human soul—in contrast to their corporeal diversity—and second inasmuch as different categories of beings have different kinds of bodies. The difference in perspective, from an Amerindian point of view, would thus reside in the body.

The presumed spiritual unity of all beings has been persuasively contested by both Rosengren (*intra*), who argues that souls are not generically human but are rather highly individualized as the result of specific personal, social, and historical conditions, and Londoño Sulkin (2005, and *intra*), who contends that the souls and bodies of different species differ in terms of the substances out of which they are made, which, in turn, makes them more or less moral. My analysis introduces the variable of consciousness to this discussion—a consciousness of the differential sensory faculties of embodied and disembodied souls, but also of the differential sensorial and cognitive capacities of different kind of beings. Radical perspectivism admits that embodied and disembodied souls have different sensorial skills. Whereas the former see themselves as human, and other kinds of beings as their structural opposites, the latter see themselves and all disembodied souls as being human. What is not clear is whether all beings are equally conscious of the spiritual unity of all beings and of the perspectival nature of perception. Although Amerindians claim that all beings perceive themselves as human and others as animals or spirits, they also maintain that humans have the capacity to perceive the human spiritual dimension of all beings. This ability is always attributed to one of the noncorporeal components of the self—*yecamquẽñ* among the Yaneshá; *bedu yushin* among the Cashinahua; *mekarō* among the Kayapó; *likáriwa* among the Wakuénai; or *wakan* among the Jivaroan peoples. These components are believed to be uniquely endowed with the sensory faculties and agency needed to perceive the spiritual dimension of the world, and thus to engage in the acquisition and production of knowledge. Humans may see animals as animals, and spirits as spirits, but they know that these animals and spirits have a human soul form. They know that they can interact with them through the agency of their souls or vitalities.

It is not clear, however, whether animals and spirits have a similar

capacity to discern. This could be the main difference between present-day humans and “primordial” humans or “former” humans. Humans are human because they know—that is, because they possess the noncorporeal sensory capacity to know—that the material dimension of the world envelops a spiritual dimension that is different in form, and that bodily perception is always perspectival. Animals, spirits, and other nonhuman beings are distinct from humans in that they do not seem to know this. Jaguars, we are told, see humans as peccaries, and peccaries see humans as jaguars. But do they know that the spiritual dimension of the animals they see is human? Do they know that perspectival perception is multidirectional? From what I have gathered, the answer is no.

According to Stolze Lima for instance, “The peccary knows itself to be human, knows that a Juruna is a similar, but does not know that it is a peccary for the Juruna.” (2000:50) What distinguishes humans from animals or spirits is, above all, that humans are aware of the perspectival nature of perception, whereas animals and spirits are not. This could very well be an outcome of the fact that animals and spirits are differently constituted—either lacking proper souls or proper bodies—and have, therefore, different modes of sensing and knowing. In many Amerindian societies animals are not believed to have proper, individual souls (Viveiros de Castro 1998:471). Rather, they are thought to be the individual manifestation of the primordial soul of the species, often known as “master,” “owner,” or “mother” of the species. In turn, spirits lack a proper body. They have bodily shape and, as Viveiros de Castro (1998:481) indicates, they are not completely immaterial, but they are not endowed with the kind of bodily or sensual life that is characteristic of humans. Deprived of proper souls or proper bodies, these beings are endowed with perspective, but they are unaware that other beings are similarly endowed. It is this capacity—awareness of the perspectival nature of perception—and knowledge—an awareness of the human essence of all beings—that animals and spirits lost or did not acquire when they were transformed at the end of mythical times.

For this reason, it cannot be asserted that Amerindian peoples think that animals are human. Rather, what they claim, as Stolze Lima has so aptly put it, is that “animals think they are human” (1999:113). This calls into question the radical version of perspectivism, which implies that all perspectives have equal value (Århem 1993:124). However, it does not imply the opposite, to wit, the existence of an absolute perspective. Humans, animals and spirits can impose their perspectives on each other but the outcome of such exchange of perspectives, as Stolze Lima (2000:48) has argued, cannot be determined *a priori*. Rather, the fact that animals

“think they are human,” but are unaware that humans are human, indicates that in Amerindian cosmologies awareness of the perspectival nature of perception is only attributed to present-day human beings. This, in turn, suggests two things. First, many Amerindian peoples might uphold more anthropocentric views of the world—if by the prefix “anthro” we mean present-day humans as opposed to primordial-era humans—than we are prepared to accept (Viveiros de Castro 1998:477).² Second, rather than advocating a single, monolithic type of Amerindian perspectivism, it would be better to talk about a variety of perspectival cosmologies in which core perspectival elements are combined in different permutations and with different weights (Londoño Sulkin 2005:24; but also Stolze Lima 2000:7, note 6). From the standpoint of these less radical forms of perspectivism, it is the delusion under which animals live—a delusion that makes them think they are human—that makes human life so dangerous (Stolze Lima 1999:113). Such a danger is augmented further by the deficiencies Amerindians attribute to both corporeal and noncorporeal sensory faculties.

PERCEPTUAL DEFICIENCIES

Were it not for two problems, the differences that Yanesha attribute to embodied and disembodied vitalities in terms of their sensorial capacities would make for a neat system of knowledge and perception. From a Yanesha perspective, however, neither the corporeal nor the noncorporeal senses are infallible. They are imperfect and deficient and, thus, open to making mistakes. Additionally, the material and spiritual dimensions of the world are not self-contained and strictly separated. They may exist in a sort of parallel way, but since they harbor no discontinuities between them, they are thus one and the same. Because of this quality, the embodied and disembodied vitalities of different beings often enter into contact in ways that transgress normal—meaning waking life and corporeal—means of perception. Both situations—perceptual failure and perceptual transgression—entail grave dangers to the beings involved in the relationship.

Yanesha people are careful to indicate that sensual perception, whether corporeal or noncorporeal, may be deceptive. There are many instances in which the bodily senses deceive a person during their daily activities. Yanesha also believe, however, that the senses of their vitalities are also imperfect. They say, for instance, that when visiting the mountain residence of Shemellama'yarr (the black Stinging Wasp Jaguar) owner of the red

flowered variety of tobacco used by sorcerers to bewitch, the jaguars, in their human soul form, offer shaman apprentices chunks of smoked or roasted meat that looks like game. It is really human flesh. If the naive or careless apprentice eats the meat he is offered, he develops a craving for human flesh. From then onwards, his *chañapchenaya* soul transforms into a man-eating jaguar each time he craves meat.

Encounters with spiritual beings during soul flights may also be deceitful. When a shaman's vitality visits other levels of the world, its senses can only perceive the human soul forms of its inhabitants. It cannot detect its nonhuman bodies as they would appear to him while awake. Thus, during their soul flights, shamans cannot always distinguish among the different beings they meet (see Vilaça 1992:82, concerning similar Wari' notions). Beautiful women with long hair, clad in bright tunics, painted with intricate designs, and adorned with necklaces of fragrant seeds can be a female jaguar, a mermaid, the mother of *ayahuasca*, the daughter of the primordial Tapir, or a female *mellañoteñ* spirit. With the passage of time, shamans learn to distinguish one manifestation from the other, by their ornaments and, particularly, by the patterns on their tunics. But during their training period their inexperience might lead them to have sexual relations with any of these women. If the woman in question is a benevolent spirit, the encounter can be not only pleasurable, but highly beneficial. The apprentice might obtain from her extraordinary knowledge of great value. But if the woman is an evil spirit or a man-eating female jaguar, then she might steal the apprentice's vitality, causing him to die.

Perceptual transgression is equally perilous. Perceiving the soul form of another being with one's bodily senses—which normally would only be perceptible through one's noncorporeal senses—is always dangerous. This was the case when I heard the music of the underwater Pocoy, as recounted in the narrative with which I began this essay. And this explains why Matar was so anxious to take me away as quickly as possible. When a Yanesha fisherman vanishes and his body is never found, the disappearance is almost always attributed to the actions of seductive mermaids. Yanesha hunters are also prone to this kind of encounters, although in their case they tend to meet the vitalities of individual game animals or the primordial soul forms of different animal species. Such encounters are always dangerous. They entail passage into a liminal space-time in which the embodied vitalities of humans enter into contact with the disembodied vitalities of animals. The primordial Tapir might reveal himself to the hunter who has shot one of "his" tapirs but has abandoned it in the forest badly wounded to punish the hunter's carelessness by stealing his vitality. Under other circumstances, in turn, the vitality of an individual collared

peccary may appear to a hunter lost in the forest as a beautiful woman intent on seducing him and taking him to live with her in her mountain dwelling (see Rosengren, *intra*, on similar liminal encounters). In such cases, the hunter adopts the peccary's point of view and with it its animal shape (see Viveiros de Castro 1998:483). Keeping one's bodily senses from perceiving the vitalities of beings different from oneself is therefore as important as training one's noncorporeal senses to identify the human soul forms encountered in dreams with the bodies to which they really pertain.

CONCLUSION

Yanesha ways of sensing and knowing are very different from our own. Although there are important similarities between their theory of perception and the theory developed by Plato, the latter differs in substantial ways from it, not the least because it lacks the perspectival dimension so typical of Amerindian cosmologies. From a Yanesha point of view, significant knowledge is extraordinary knowledge, that is, knowledge from and about the spiritual dimension of the lived world. This kind of knowledge cannot be obtained through our bodily senses. It can only be acquired through the conscious agency of one of the several noncorporeal components of our selves. Whether obtained directly or learned from other individuals, significant knowledge always originates through noncorporeal modes of sensing and knowing. Knowledge is always embodied, as Belaunde (*intra*) so persuasively argues in her discussion of Amerindian haematology. But significantly, the body is the locus of knowledge, not its causing agent.

It is through knowledge acquired from beings living in other world planes that Amerindians have learned how to make and remake human bodies. Amerindian people generally claim that initiation rituals, all of which require some degree of transformation of the initiates' bodies, were taught by extraordinary beings: Moon, Harpy Eagle, Jaguar, and so on. Bodies are modeled and shaped through the knowledge obtained from these beings. The acquisition of new knowledge also induces important bodily transformations. Jivaroan peoples claim that the men and women who have had an *arutam* revelation acquire greater self-confidence, a feeling manifested in their demeanor and bodily movements. Those persons who have not had such a revelation can be identified because they have neither a proud demeanor nor a commanding deportment. Yanesha people attribute the same kind of bodily transformation to those shamans and priests who have been successful in obtaining an acoustic revelation—either a message,

or a song—from any of a vast range of animals, spirits, and divinities. Even the bodies of the deceased are transformed through ritual knowledge, as Caiuby (*intra*) shows so compellingly in her discussion of the processes of defacement and refacement that take place in Bororo funerary rituals. Thus, I would argue that, from an Amerindian perspective, instead of being the cause of knowledge, bodies are caused by knowledge and knowledge is always acquired by their sensual vitalities.

NOTES

Acknowledgements. I wish to thank the participants and attendants at the “Conference for Students in Appreciation of Their Teacher Joanna Overing” for their helpful comments on a previous draft of this article. I am also much indebted to George Mentore for the rich dialogue on Amerindian modes of knowledge that we had prior to the conference. Special thanks are due to Carlos Londoño Sulkin and Steven Rubenstein for their enlightening comments on different aspects of my argument, and to Olga F. Linares, my esteemed colleague and friend, for taking time to correct my English.

1. As did Wittgenstein (1974), some recent authors (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Stolze Lima 1999:122) conceive of souls not as immaterial entities, but as living human beings. In their view, the equivalence of body and soul—insofar as the human body is seen as a picture of the human soul—confers souls with a certain degree of corporality. Although Yanesha people would agree that souls are not immaterial, they make a clear distinction between the raw and bounded materiality of *chetsots* (body-as-flesh) and the light and diffuse materiality of *yecamquēm* (vitality-as-breath/strength), thus, denying the latter any kind of corporality.

2. For instance, it is notable that most Amerindian perspectival accounts focus on how humans see animals and spirits, and how different types of animals and spirits see humans. Little is said about how predator animals see spirits, how animals of prey see predator animals, and so on. Amerindian cosmologies may be multinaturalist, but they continue to be predicated on the centrality and primacy of humanity, that is, present-day humanity.

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