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On –*Yesamarî* and Laterality: Waiwai Meanderings

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January 2008, during a period of fieldwork in Northern Amazonia. The telephone rings in the public phone booth that has recently been installed in Anauá, a Waiwai village close to the border between Brazil and Guyana.[1] It rings loudly many times, but nobody stops to pick it up. A Waiwai man passes by, then another one; none shows the slightest interest. The phone continues to ring until a child finally approaches and picks it up.

I am watching this scene from an outhouse close to the *umana*, the Waiwai ceremonial house and collective meeting place. I imagine the probable reaction of the employees that brought the phone here only a few weeks ago in fulfillment of Brazil's Law 9.472/97, Decree 4.769/03, which requires that at least one public telephone be installed in every locality of at least one hundred inhabitants. They would look at the villagers' lack of enthusiasm and interest with perplexity. Among the Waiwai, however, it is not the medium of communication *per se* that matters, but, rather, the ways in which signs circulate through it, the way to go not seeming to be the same as the way to come back. At the beginning, Anauá's new telephone is a rather enigmatic and confusing object. [2] It stands as a provisional composition, open to the fusion of diverse possibilities of cultural elaboration, all diverging from the conventional meaning granted by the State. What is at stake here is not an operational question, since the Waiwai have, from the start, perfectly understood how to use their public telephone, but, rather, a relational one. Diverging modes of conceiving relationships and dealing with them are elicited by the new object. The phone and its communicative possibilities cannot be taken for granted, in their immediate fluidity; relatedness always requires cultural elaboration.

This ethnographic vignette brings me to differentiate to differentiate two modes of conceiving relationships among the Waiwai. One mode, which

works through direct unmediated relations and is predominant in Western conventions, another, which works through specifically non-direct mediated forms of relating and constitutes a strong Waiwai cultural option while escaping common state understandings of relatedness. My aim here is to explore the gap between these two forms of relatedness, while raising questions on demands and expectations as well as promises and potentialities that usually accompany their deployment. These questions are articulated here throughout a sequence of conceptual images that go from the so-called *-yesamarî* or meanders in Waiwai life to the plurality of emerging options uncovered by the irreducible diversity of detours, the potential *afterlife* through translation, or the generative effect of comparisons. [3]

What I try to describe here is a specific way of relating or ‘mode of laterality’ through which a diverging space is created to allow for the emergence of others. Even if a relational perspective has now widely been adopted in the cultural and social sciences, much work still remains to be done on the differentiated forms of the relations under examination. In other words, if we agree that it is a matter of relation(s), we still need to ask which (kind of) relation(s) we are talking about. To this issue laterality suggests a different tack, also fostering further questions.

The genitive of *Waiwai* anthropology should be understood in a subjective sense, that is, as an outcome of their reflective work on the relationships they cultivate, not only among themselves but with other beings as well - both human and non-human. [4] Unlike the dramatic experiences described in many field reports, my first encounters with the Waiwai were not instances of cultural shock. My arrival in December 2001 at the community of Jatapuzinho (on the Jatapuzinho River, an affluent of the Jatapu river, in southern Roraima, Northern Brazil) did not raise great excitement or curiosity. In the following months, there was nothing in the village’s general mood of laxness, [5] confronting my presence. Except for the children and several adults accustomed to dealing with foreigners, the majority of the Waiwai treated me in an evasive manner, most often avoiding any direct visual contact. Most people would avoid looking at me directly, as if unaware of my presence amongst them, or, even, as if there was absolutely nothing to see where I stood. This made me acutely aware of the central importance of the encounter between two gazes in our own culture, through which one feels the power of recognition and the certainty of existing.

It took me a long time to learn that this kind of laxness was neither a product of indifference nor a form of distrust or timidity, as I initially

thought. The persistence of people's sideway gazes and, above all, the recurrence of an oblique configuration in many other aspects of Waiwai life progressively convinced me that their evasive way of dealing with me had nothing to do with lack or deficiency; rather, I inferred, their behavior communicated a *sign*. Why a sign? Crucially because of the possibility to inscribe this sideway gaze into a series comprising other events, which share this sophisticated lateral - or oblique - mode of relating and of conceptualizing relationships.

One of such events occurred during an afternoon in December 2002, when I went with Mikaiasa to visit Makipi, who also lived in Jatapuzinho. As we were walking to Makipi's house, I became aware of the fact that Mikaiasa, far from taking the more direct path, was making a long detour. I asked him why he was not taking the shortest way. He answered that I, coming from abroad, could transit on all the village's paths, but not the Waiwai. When we finally arrived at Makipi's, the two Waiwai men drew on the ground all the paths that connected the village's houses. They showed me the village space as they configured it, that is, as a vast network extending to the gardens, including the hunting paths. There are many -*yesamarî*, they told me; every Waiwai may transit on a specific and singular path named according to their respective relatives or household members. [6]

From their cartography, I started to see that the line joining two points, like the relation between two terms, needs not reflect immediacy or straightforwardness. In drawing lines and relations, the Waiwai prefer to emphasize and elaborate mediations according to a specific and consistent design, -*yesamarî*, or, as I propose calling this arrangement in a more general way, laterality. These articulations appear as distinctive marks of an inalienable form of motion, to such an extent that it is not an exaggeration to say that the Waiwai perceive themselves not in the fixity of identity, but in the trace they leave behind when they walk, that is, in their way of going from place to place. [7]

The Waiwai sideway glance sheds light on a visual aspect of -*yesamarî* which can be described as the possibility of a social relation through the joint production of interposed images. Sideway glances, in other words, constitute an alternative to the direct and immediate visual recognition that is usually so important for us as a form of mutual ratification. If the instantaneity of contact in the encounter of two gazes may have for us something of an epiphany, no revelation can be born of such immediacy for the Waiwai, as they prefer to cultivate the lateral perspective. In this perspective, immediacy is a symptom of unsophisticated experiences

of life, for the frontal view leaves no margin for mediation, which is crucial in personal interactions among the Waiwai.

For instance, Waiwai interlocutors sit side by side during the *Oho* ceremonial chants without ever looking directly at each other and interacting through sounds as they envision together the chants' avatars (cf. Fock 1963, 1968). The lateral glance operates here as an invitation to be part of the unfolding narrative, through which connections are set up, and relationships formed. Like the glance with which the Waiwai receive visitors, it also has the effect of creating a space of interpolation easy to overlook, which enables that a reception imperceptibly turns into an initiation. If opacity could be devoid of negative connotations, I would then use this term to describe the Waiwai mode of visibility, since their cultural configurations emerge from the increasing density of the mediations they elaborate within each relationship.

Meanderings (i.e. the sinuous design of each *-yesamarî*) appear also in the constitution of the Waiwai person, which is exemplarily formed through the figure of *yewru yekati*. This figure, translated as "eye soul" by Fock (1963: 19), is described by the Waiwai as "the small person one always sees in the eye of others." [8] The person acquires no certainty about who she is through this figure, neither by self-recognition nor by transfer of a constant appearance; she only obtains a provisional and fluctuating form of herself. Since the images come from shifting others, the underlying relation in this process is better thought of as a flux of reflexivity without ratification. The figure of *yewru yekati* points to estrangement or, rather, *excentration*, which is the very condition of the Waiwai person, who sees herself only by means of a never-ending translation through the glance of ever-changing others. It must be noted here that this interaction does not lead to pure dispersion, since the impossibility of having any certainty about one's own identity is a matter of reciprocal effect. Mutual precariousness correlates here with the potentiality of togetherness.

This form of *excentration* can also be found in events that constitute the Waiwai collective when we follow the trace of a particularly vast *-yesamarî*, such as the expeditions the Waiwai organize periodically in search of the "unseen people" (called *enîhni komo*, *enîhni* indicating unseen and *komo* a collective form). These travels constitute milestones of Waiwai history, as well as a fundamental component of their image as the "Argonauts of Northern Amazonia" (Howard 2001). It calls attention that the Waiwai campaigns focus on their paths rather than in any kind of end result. Since, as soon as they enter in contact with any "unseen people", they are ready to restart a further expedition. For example, Yakuta, a famous

Waiwai leader, expressed “that he never felt more exhilarated than when he was on the trail of a group” (Howard 2001: 408). This is why the really exciting part of these expeditions for the Waiwai seems to be the before, rather than the after, contact. A transitory form of plenitude is reached, not in the actual encounter, but in the trace, the presentiment, the disquietude that the other awakes. I agree with Howard that the *Waiwaiization* of these travels transforms both the Waiwai and those with whom they interact, but I disagree that this has to do with domestication and control, as in my view this mode of relating is rather inscribed in a logic of interdependence producing a conjoint relation of reciprocal alteration, not annexation. [9] If the reader accepts my invitation to remove all negative connotations from the term, then I wish to say that both the Waiwai and the *enîhni komo* slide together towards what could be called a condition of *impropriety* [10], where both extremes of the relation appear suspended without any autonomous foundation. [11] What looks like pure negativity on the vertical axis turns out, laterally, to be a consistent form of sustentation.

Another scenario interwoven through lateral ways of relating can be found in the so called “animal imitation dances” (Fock 1963: 72), “animal imitation games” (Howard 2001: 221), and “animal joking (farsa)” (Dias Junior 2000: 92, 2006: 179, Howard 1993), all rituals during which Waiwai actors take on the appearance, language and behavior of other beings (that we call animals). These rituals used to be performed alongside other cherished rituals in the context of annual festivals called, in the 1950s, *Shodewika* (Fock 1963) or *Shoriwiko* (Dowdy 1963). Today, they are held at Christmas and Easter and called, following the Waiwai pronunciation of their Christian Names, *Kresmus* and *Istu*. [12] These contemporary rituals have not lost their connections with the *Shodewika* myth (cf. Fock 1963: 56-74), which tells how a Waiwai couple got invited to a *Shodewika* festival, along with other “animal people” wearing animal clothes as dance costumes. On the long way to the festival (another remarkable detour!), the Waiwai couple composes many songs by imitating the animals they meet. These songs become a huge success at the festival; everyone wants to learn them and dance to them. When the festival is over, all those who have not married and return home without a spouse turn into animals; those who have married remain human, and become the Waiwai’s neighbors (cf. Fock 1963: 56-74). Fock, who attended a *Shodewika* festival at the end of 1954, describes it as a loan from the Mouyenna Indians, “a loan that acquired a Waiwai stamp on account of the fact that the new version employed song texts in Waiwai language” (Fock 1963: 72).

When performing these “animal imitation dances” today, the Waiwai allude to the myth with reference to: 1) the human-looking “animal people” wearing animal clothes as dance costumes who *imitate*, or, to be more precise, *translate* the “animal-people” (see below); and 2) the songs that *imitate*, or *translate*, the voices of different “animal-people.” These dances still recall the Shodewika myth, as well as other features of the *Shodewika* festivals described by Fock. This is surprising, given the intensity of the contact between Waiwai and Non-Waiwai today, and given their acceptance of missionary reforms, particularly the request to stop preparing and serving manioc beer during the festivals and to hold church sermons instead, especially at Christmas and Easter. However, the Waiwai have not accepted *all* the missionaries’ demands. For instance, they do not accept the missionary tale of how to best reproduce: “They (the missionaries) told us: ‘the longer we wait, the happier God is (...).’ All of us (Waiwai) just laughed (...). ‘That’s certainly not how we practice sex!’ we (Waiwai) said. And we still don’t. That’s a custom we never imitated!” (Warapura *apud* Howard, 2001: 61). They have also decided to continue performing dances, games and plays throughout the night during festivals, despite missionary disapproval and concern over extra-marital relations. It is noteworthy that the Waiwai themselves comment their refusal in terms of imitation (“a custom we never imitated!”).

These rituals, which, I suggest, could be called, *translation rituals*, point to the correlation between seeing and being seen as one more attempt to deviate from the immediate or frontal gaze. Seeing is something dangerous and full of risks, even more so when supernatural beings are involved. The “imitation” of “animals” performed during rituals is particularly dangerous. [13] For this reason, these beings are only evoked through redundancy, that is, through a repetition that does not point to identity; we are thus dealing with difference, rather than with mere imitation. What the Waiwai seem to display and to reflect through ritualistic exaggerations and excesses is a way of seeing in between, that is, an oblique mode of seeing and of looking that simultaneously withdraws and exposes itself to the non-familiar. We could thus speak of a Waiwai conception of translation as something or someone that cannot be brought or made present, but whose afterlife can be transmitted as a life through translation.

The Waiwai word for the performance of these rituals is *yukuknome*, a word referring to imitation (“*amna nukuknomesî*, “we (exclusive) are imitating”, or, more literally, “we are presenting a sample”) and to the visual field (*/yukuknome-/*, */yukuknoke-/*, “take a picture, make a drawing”), which is also used to refer to translation, for instance when a speech turns into

another. This term is also used to speak of a canoe that turns over; a cassava bread that is flipped on the other side; an experiment with food or sex; or to refer to the imitating of animals during a hunt. All these examples give us some indication of the ways in which the Waiwai think about the complex connections between these very different processes, as well as the powerful transformative effects of figuration. The Waiwai told me that during a ritual their bodies, having become light and fast by means of the *weñemene* (quati) song, can walk twisted or fight with the *pisko* (jacamin bird). Sometimes, the effect is so powerful that even a slight trace of body painting is enough to deviate the gaze of another person. The transformative power of performances is such that it becomes practically impossible to identify participants. As a Waiwai friend told me: “when a body is painted, we no longer know who it is.”

Let us now consider more closely the clothing, which often appears both in rituals and in myths. For example, the myth about the *ponoyosomo* (“the master of clothes”) of the *kamara* (“jaguar”) narrates how the Waiwai decided to hunt and kill a jaguar who had killed so many of their children, while suspecting all along that the beast may have been one of them. After following his footprints, they found the jaguar’s clothes in the forest; they decided to wear them and wait until the *ponoyosomo* (“the master of clothes”) returned, to then, effecting an inversion of sorts, inflict a lethal attack on him. The supplementary reference that since this event the Waiwai dress as jaguars when they go hunting leaves inconclusive the question as to whether jaguars masquerade as Waiwai or Waiwai masquerade as jaguars, or whether it is a matter of ‘masking the masks.’

What is at stake here is not the bridging of differences between the one and the other, but, rather, the desire to slip in the gap between them and accept the loss of balance which constitute the very condition of such a relation. Everything happens as if the *mise-en-scène* of this relation could only be achieved through its *mise-en-abîme*, that is, the infinite lateral resonance from one onto the other. What is at stake here is not only the process through which the Waiwai may transform themselves into jaguars or the jaguars may into Waiwai, but, rather, that both the jaguars and the Waiwai jeopardize their own certainties and discover on themselves those *soft* places that can translate and allow transformation.

In this sense, we can suggest here some of the guidelines that underlie Waiwai ways of relating. The ethnographic figures described above point to a cultural emphasis which foregrounds neither immediacy, nor transparency or univocity, but which favors a relational modality based on laterality. Waiwai laterality overcomes the self-confidence of identity and, giving

place to opacity in a search for connection through digression, recovers distance as a magnitude of relation. Their processes of mediation demand detachment from oneself as a condition for everyone who seeks knowledge of what a relation may be and of how it may operate as a transformation.

A further image regarding the significant difference between two modes of relating appears in a report by the Scottish trader John Ogilvie about his exchanges with the Waiwai in Guyana at the beginning of the twentieth century. It refers to a Waiwai trader who, despite Ogilvie's growing impatience, persists in telling him with a wealth of details the social life of each of the items he wishes to exchange:

“I now found I had something to learn in the art and especially in the speed of bartering... I was now subjected [to] the history of the hat itself! These crowns are made of feathers from a number of birds – powis, toucans, green parrots, macaws, eagles and others. I was taken on a verbal hunt after each bird, just who was at the hunt, how and where it was shot, and countless long-winded details [...] it was a slow, tiresome job” (Ogilvie *cit. in* Howard 1991: 54).

The digressions of the Waiwai trader are certainly not irrelevant for the exchange; on the contrary, they constitute the very conditions of its possibility. The Waiwai performance indicates clearly that what gives value to an item is precisely its social and cultural insertion, whose historical avatars accompany each transaction. [14] This is why nothing contrasts more with this sophisticated mode through which the Waiwai relate to their objects than the frontal style that is condensed, for example, in formulas such as “just do it.” For the Waiwai, everything seems to occur as if their starting point is the conviction that a direct and immediate relation, if it still can be called a relation, constitutes a kind of level zero of relatedness and the instance from which its cultural reworking can only just begin to develop.

By adopting a symmetric perspective and taking its reflexive consistency (as well as the conceptual images that articulate it) seriously, I propose now to relate the Waiwai figures I have described above with the concept of laterality in three different constellations: the plurality of *detours* (*Umwege*), the *afterlife* (*Überleben*) through translation, and the happening of an event as an effect of comparison. What qualifies them as *constellations* is the suspension and the localization of their components as an effect of phantasmal vectors (i.e. ghost lines), which link and guide each one to the

other. Laterality emerges from these radical modes of relation, or invisible forms that structure the visible.

There is a distant resonance between the Waiwai concept of *-yesamarî* and the concept of *detours* (*Umwege*) in the work of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who does not conceive them negatively as a lack of proportion or rationality in the balance of means and ends, but, on the contrary, as eminently creative ways in a radically distinct cultural topography. Following Blumenberg, *detours* become specific forms of circulation that emphasize the elaboration of mediations rather than the pretension to preserve an origin or to reach an end efficiently. As forms that are not predictable in the same way as direct routes are, detours can be seen as modes resistant to the economy of means dictated by the Cartesian maxims of clarity and distinction. Yet, this is no reason to see detours as derivate or deficient. One of Blumenberg's several contributions consists in showing that detours do not intrinsically presuppose a reference to direct connections. A detour or, better, detours (as they always exist in the plural) does not presuppose the existence of a straightway, but, rather, of another detour and, in principle, an open infinity of them. A direct route, then, would result from the reduction of a plurality of ways. If there is only one unique direct way, there are always many detours.

This crucial distinction seems not to be considered by Tim Ingold in his book *Lines*, where he traces the prolegomena of a comparative anthropology of lines. The leading disjunction there is Paul Klee's central contrast between *dynamic* and *static* lines. The former is a line associated with wandering (as when one "goes out for a walk"), while the latter is characterized by a constant reference to aim or finality (thus progressing "more like a series of appointments than a walk" [Ingold 2007: 73]). Ingold deploys this disjunction in several analytical contexts and situations, for example, the contrast between the unforeseen path of wayfaring (where travel affects the agent's moves and becomes interwoven with it) and the itinerary of transportation (where the relation between the passenger and her route gets instrumentalized through a narrow and focused interest on the arrival or destiny). This contrast also appears in the experience of the dense web that articulates modern life, where, according to Ingold, everything depends on whether the attention is on the threads or, on the contrary, concentrated in the points of intersections of the weft. Ingold gives many other examples, but the terms of his analysis remain the same, repeatedly

setting out the disjunctive nature of the movement in terms of either the thread's fluidity or the connector's interruption in it.

Many of Ingold's insights regarding the attributes of lines in motion can be observed in Waiwai *-yesamarî* or in Blumenberg's concept of *Umwege*, but there are notable differences as well. Ingold's approach seems to limit itself to the tensions that structure each travel between the line and the point (of departure or arrival) and the trajectory and its destiny. The Waiwai concept of *-yesamarî*, by contrast, requires that one pays serious attention to the range of lateral and concurring options. The possibility of a detour is only conceivable as one possible option among a wide range of potential detours. From this perspective, travel is not conceptualized solely with reference to the opposition between trajectory and destiny, but, rather, within the space of diversity in which it is inscribed. Such a space, which is bound to have non-Euclidean presuppositions, is not dominated by the straight line, but open to a symmetric plurality.

By taking into account the diversity of the *-yesamarî*, it is possible to think the tension between traces and connectors from within the antagonism of detours and straight lines. Such a procedure can be described following Ingold's analysis of the sinuous and the restless line traced by the whip of a character in an illustration of Tristan Shandy. This example enables Ingold to show the immobilizing effect resulting from the segmentation of a line into articulated connectors. However, what becomes observable as well is that each of the lines united by these connectors is constitutively a straight one, since the connectors can only control movement within an economy of direct lines. If the arrangement between connectors would allow for detours, the breaks would not hinder their ceaseless circulation. Ultimately, it is the option for, or the exclusion of, detours that decides whether a line will be dynamic or static, that is, whether a line's potentiality to exceed itself will generate digressions and supplements, thus new impulses leading to unexpected movements.

Ingold's general - and audacious - proposal, which raises the question of colonialism as a conflict of lines, is certainly worth pursuing. [15] But perhaps the pertinence of this formulation and the vastness of its implications may be apprehended differently by considering, with Blumenberg, the political imposition linked to the western conceptual presupposition that the straight line represents the epitome of rationality, while detours are figures of superfluity and excess. For Blumenberg, it is from this kind of excess and heterodoxy that cultures take impulse, while straightness, with all its potential for exclusion and unilinearity can only lead to barbarism.

Furthermore, by moving through detours, the lateral approach allows to look sideways, that is to look in a different way, and produce a lateral effect on what is being seen and to see something different. It is actually the aim itself that changes through these means. There is no need for the detour to arrive to the same point as the straightway, nor for those who look sideways to see the same things as those who lose themselves in pure contemplation. [16] This is not simply a question of perspective; what happens effectively is that the world itself changes. Detours are different ways of accessing the world, as well as different forms of world occurrences; they enable the emergence of different worlds.

Looking besides detours, we can find other constellations as modes of relating that evoke themselves mutually in their tensions and extensions, for example translations, which too may be considered as performances of laterality. As translation too runs sideways (at least as soon as the illusion of transparency is abandoned), transformation becomes its very medium of expression. The move from alleged authenticity of the original to sovereignty of the translation is what Walter Benjamin accomplishes in his famous essay *The Task of the Translator*. In other images: the move from the supposed natural unity of “a fruit and its skin” (i.e. the original) to that of the “royal robe with ample folds” (i.e. the translation), showing the need for a different class of belonging, away from the presuppositions of reproduction, which the shift requires. What translation offers to the dethroned original is, in Benjamin’s terms, the possibility of an *afterlife* (*Überleben*), that is, survival through transformation. Conceived in this way, translations reveal their significance beyond the text, emerging indeed in every event where history, rather than reproduction, matters, that is, where differences are being elaborated. Following Benjamin, the potentiality of working on differences is a distinctive attribute of living beings, which cannot be reduced to their organic nature. As operators of historicity, translations open and sustain a horizon of *afterlife* (*Überleben*), which does not merely offer a form of preservation, but also a kind of survival drastically submitted to change (*Wandlung*) and renewal (*Erneuerung*).

Comparisons, in turn, have also something significant to say about the potentiality of lateral ways of relating. At first glance, it may appear strange to invoke the effect of comparisons on constellations that strive to avoid all forms of reduction. Too often, comparisons have been used to catalogue, rank, and build typologies of hierarchical and asymmetric relations. [17] However, a closer look to such interested uses indicates that comparisons in

fact only play a secondary or external role; they are not constitutive of these categorical objects. The kind of comparison I have in mind and which emerges from works such as Patrice Maniglier's (2006) book *La vie énigmatique des signes* is of a very different nature, as it puts the identity of its terms at risk. The general purpose of this study is to recover the ontological dimension of structuralism. Maniglier approaches Saussure as the author of an entirely new type of entity, the sign, according to which "*ce qui varie est comme tel réel*" (Maniglier 2006: 465). The sign thus is more than a model that accounts for diversity; it constitutes a mode of being *in* diversity. Crucially, what qualifies the sign as a device for an *ontology of multiplicity* is the fact that if it proceeds by comparison, it also proceeds *from* comparison. The matter is not simply of comparing pre-existent elements, but rather of allowing their constitution through comparison. If modes of knowing diversity depend on comparison (and perception is one of them), then diversity is an effect of comparison, rather than the other way around. Cultural facts do not simply result from the interplay of heterogeneous series, for they can only be perceived through connections. For example, a mytheme like the sun is not separable from the tale in which it appears, and its eventual reappearance in another myth is only possible under a new form, one that may even contradict the initial occurrence. In this sense, to repeat an item one needs to adopt a new form, since what appears to be the same may in fact be something completely different – both in role and meaning, even under the same appearance. To think the *faits culturels* is therefore to think diversity, insofar as they only become alive as transformations of other events, together with which they have to be conceived. It is this kind of sign circulation that allows us to outline a different conception of what is, can or should be an event (an *Ereignis*) as something that not only occurs without renouncing movement, but that also exists as an effect of movement, $\text{\textcircled{R}}$ that is as a transformation of an Other, as the Other of the Other.

It would be misleading, however, to consider these successive *mouvements d'à côté* (Saussure) of comparisons, translations, detours or *-yesamarî* as materializations of a hypothetical matrix of laterality. [18] As if the mode of laterality would, through the means of inversion, assume the functions and the position that until now were held by the direct perspective. The problem therewith is that the wide and plural world in which those alternatives coexist would shrink again drastically under a common pattern. This is why instead of reducing comparisons, detours and translations, I would like here to suggest laterality as a further option beside them, not as a matrix, but as a supplement. Laterality designates a mode, or better, a

movement, in which difference occurs beyond the evidences of direct presentation. It alludes to the evasive, blurred and uncertain forms that circulate on the borders of the visual field. Laterality assumes this marginality as a constitutive feature, searching in it a possibility of relationship. In this sense it is a matter not only of a disposition of seeing, but also of a condition of what is being seen. Alterity happens in laterality and irreducibly persists within it, hence the attempt of an *ontology of laterality*. Such an ontology is sensitive to the emerging zone of existence with its collection of unfixed entities, which are not elementary figures, but, rather, appear close to the potentiality of transformation of *larvae*. [19] From the corner of laterality, the margin of indetermination of the coming others becomes perceptible. It is in this incompleteness that every alteration needs to take impulse. The larval state should be evoked each time a reordering succeeds. In other words, what the lateral perspective displays is a supplementary layer of transformation, where the agents of a relationship appear as in backlighting, allowing a glimpse at the never-ending oscillation of their being. A sign may be considered in its laterality by envisaging its imprecision without negative connotations. Intercourse with emerging others depends largely on the openness to the unfocused lateral mode. Idiosyncratically, the slanted figures that appear in the distracted view of laterality cannot be captured in clear and constant coordinates and demand an approach that admits a coefficient of laxness, a kind of sensitivity in accordance with the interplay of appearances and the constitutive instability of larval entities. It seems therefore crucial to imagine a way of knowing in which imprecision is seen not as a deficiency, but, rather, as a mode of looking beside, as well as a greater degree of exposition to unforeseen connections. This is the case, for instance, of the Waiwai conceptual images -*yesamarî*, *yewru yekatî*, or *enîhni komo*, which can be considered as inventions of the interweaving of seeing and thinking, where images appear as blurred concepts and concepts as fixed images. [20]

NOTES

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1. The name “Waiwai“ is used nowadays to designate both a very small subgroup and all the *comunidades Waiwai* (or, sometimes, Wai-Wai) that comprise different subgroups and languages or dialects such as, among others, the Katuena, Xerewyana, Karapayana, Mawayana, Hixkariyana, and Taruma. Their main language is a Karib language called Waiwai. They live on both sides of the Acarai mountains in the border region between Brazil and Guyana (and a few families in Suriname). For further information see my contribution to the website of Instituto Socioambiental: <http://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/povo/waiwai>.

2. Confusion is one of the “undesirable” terms that I am revisiting in order to challenge the negative connotations with which they are usually associated. My attempt to move from negative to positive connotations, however, has nothing to do with sign inversion, as this would simply perpetuate the dualism on which the negativity of such terms is predicated. My aim therewith is rather to suggest their belonging to a kind of a proliferating string of concepts, which allows place to further working instances.

3. Before describing these conceptual constellations, I wish to point out that they act as paradigms in the particular sense highlighted by Giorgio Agamben (2002), that is, as instances allowing us to understand something by showing (*deiknunai*) what is beside (*para*) it (Agamben 2002). What these constellations seem to share is the premise that nothing and nobody shows oneself through oneself, for this can only be done through others, and in such a way that unfocused perception bears fruitful meaning. Furthermore, the following reflections in this paper take the shape of a sequence of configurations without closure (i.e. an open and mixed list akin to the Borgian catalogue commented by Foucault at the beginning of *Les Mots et les Choses*) so as to welcome differences without reducing them to any excluding criteria. What is sought is not an aim or an end, nor any totalizing ambition, but, rather, a disposition to interweave elements together

over and over again, so as to examine the scope of relationships in their unfolding potentialities.

4. This genitive could also be understood as an inter-subjective one (see Schuler Zea 2008).

5. Laxness is another complicated term. However, it still seems to me a better option than nonchalance, with its shadow of Baudelaire and its connotations of dandyism and modern stylization. Even if often used pejoratively, laxness is not a negative term. It also means to make something free; dissolve one's debts or obligations; or put something into a wider place. Taking into account its suggestion of *loosing* articulation (as for example in relax), what I mean here with laxness is a kind of mood that assumes that things exceed any fixed localization and therefore let place to fluctuate, waiting for the slow display of a distinctive story.

6. The root of *-yesamarî* is *esama* (and *rî* the possessive pronoun, indicating with whom it is related) which may be translated as 'way' or 'path,' or, as I suggest, through the concept of detour. As with many other Amerindian words, *-yesamarî* is always used relationally. In the example under discussion, we were going to Makipi's house on the *Ahmori-*, *Asakno-*, *Mikaiasa-*, *Emram-*, and *Makutáyesamarî*.

7. Waiwai mobility is shaped by considerations analogous to the cultural choices that Rival (2002) has shown in the Huaroani kind of trekking, which cannot be reduced to material or deficient factors.

8. I propose to translate *-yewru yekatî* as "eye vitality" (*ewru* indicating eye and *ekatî* vitality, vital force, used relationally like *-yesamarî*) instead of "eye soul," the latter being influenced by missionary translations linked to the desire to evangelize them and make them follow God's way (which in turn they translated as "*Kaan yesamarî*", but with their conception of God's way as being "the" way, the only right way, which differs significantly from the Waiwai use of *-yesamarî*). The missionaries perceived the importance of the exchanges of *-yewru yekatî* and this is why they introduced as translation for the Holy Spirit the idea of "*Kiriwan Yekatî*, that is, the "Good Spirit" of God with whom one should be constantly exchanging (see this translation for the Holy Spirit in Howard 2001 and Valentino 2010).

9. Whereas I fully agree with Catherine Howard who stresses the active agency of the Waiwai in relation to others, her reliance on *domestication* as an interpretative term seems to me a complicated choice, especially because its reductionism is reinforced by the emphasis Howard gives to a certain vocation of *dominion* and *control* she reads in Waiwai culture. Perhaps my objection can be better understood by moving to the

field of translation theory, where domestication appears clearly as a strategy of neutralization of differences in the source text (see Venuti 1995, 1998). What seems to me to be suspicious in this analogy is that what in one case is usually questioned as a colonizing praxis can, in another case, such as that of the Waiwai, appear under the sign of cultural resistance.

10. This is probably the most difficult term. Its opposite, propriety, is complex and not easily understandable. Furthermore, impropriety is a widely stigmatized condition. This is why the best mode of approaching it is probably through a detour, in this case through the field of metaphor studies. What these studies increasingly suggest is that the literal meaning of words, that is, the so-called *proper* meaning is no more than an effect of surface in the sea of language, whose profound flows move rather around metaphoric vortices. Even the meaning of ‘concept,’ despite its pretension of rigor, is rooted in its metaphoric predecessors, which remit to the semantic field of taking something with the hands (*capere*). ‘Idea’ also evokes an image or the visual aspect of something. Bearing in mind the constitutive effect of metaphors, it would be, however, a step back to put them in the place occupied formerly by concepts. What metaphorization implies is, on the contrary, that impropriety itself becomes a major status of language. A way to think various other dimensions of this remarkable transformation, that is not limited to an inversion, can be found in the Waiwai elaboration of a kind of relation that, renouncing to the autonomy of its terms, opts for the interdependence between them.

11. Taking also into account what Giorgio Agamben calls the “appropriation of impropriety” in the particular sense of an appropriation in which the most proper is not the immediately available or something of direct disposition, but, rather differently, that what we still have to learn.

12. Whether the diverse actors subjected to evangelization effectively substituted their philosophical and cosmological conceptions remains to be seen. In my view, rather than a logic of substitution, we find a logic of transformation and selection, as this example illustrates.

13. Such as *amaci* (anteater), *morura* (big armadillo), *kapayo* (small armadillo), *meku* and *poroto* (kinds of monkeys), *pisko* (jacamin bird), *pakria* (little wild pig), *warakaka* (mandi fish), *wayawaya* (otter), *wenu* (bee), *weñemene* (quati), *rere* (bat), *poniko* (big wild pig), *kamara* (jaguar), *yawari* (opossum).

14. The Waiwai items mentioned by Ogilvie constitute ornaments that are neither simply economic nor static objects of aesthetic contemplation but rather “visual counterparts of processes – of attracting, influencing,

acquiring and assimilating” (Howard 1991: 54). See also Mentore (1993) on the significance of such body adornments.

15. Ingold’s thesis about colonialism targets “anthropologists” who not only assign a strong linear vision (of history, of time) to western societies, but also exclude this vision from other societies. So, “alterity, we are told [by them], is non-linear,” that is, it would happen rather in the way of a circle, where the beginning and the end come into contact with each other. In this view, “life is vivid authentically on the spot, in places rather than along paths.” But, Ingold asks critically, “how could there be places [...], if people did not come and go? [...] To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere” (Ingold 2007: 2). It is nevertheless curious that Ingold (2008) does not return to this question in his review of George Mentore’s *Of passionate curves and desirable cadences*, which precisely and profusely stresses the circular shape of Waiwai aesthetics. Attending to body experience, gender relations and residential space, Mentore emphasizes the alleged Waiwai propensities to balance wholeness and complementarities: “from a Waiwai point of view it [the village house] takes all the vibrant contradictions and encircles them, thereby transforming the *kicicime* (badness, danger, and ugliness) of society into the *kirewani* (goodness, safety, and beauty) of encirclement” (Mentore 2005: 305). Following Mentore, the Waiwai curves are always going to close. But what the Waiwai detours show me, by contrast, are the vanishing lines of this social architecture. A detour could be seen as a line that curves, but a curve that does not close – that is, as a potentially never-ending curve.

16. Fruitful distant comparison could be made with the distinction between seeing as contemplation (the passive perception of an essence) and seeing as an action that engenders agency, as proposed by Thomas Filitz (2002: 204-222).

17. As Strathern indicates – by giving neither the game nor the name away – the problem within this kind of comparison is not “objectification as such (do we not want to make new objects of ethnographic knowledge?), but something about the way comparison was being programmed” (2002: xiv).

18. It is important to note, in this sense, that among the Waiwai the direct mode of seeing is not absent under another totalizing mode, the *-yesamarî*. To think that would be as misleading as to exclude detours, deviances or what can be called the factor of impropriety in western history. What matters is to see which way of relating is being conceived, emphasized or elaborated at the moment of thinking the constitution of the person, the collective, or alterity, that is, the crucial constellations that articulate Waiwai

life. In these instances, *-yesamarî* displaces the privileges of transparency, immediateness and clarity of distinct relations.

19. Following the Latin etymology, I use the terms ‘ghost’ and ‘mask’ to refer to a being that is precarious, but at the same time full of potentiality.

20. Lateral connections appear as well in debates about scientific knowledge. As Polanyi shows, there is always a silent, but not less relevant component of science work. This tacit knowledge demands a kind of subsidiary awareness, the counterpart of focal consciousness, as well as the condition of its possibility (Polanyi 1958). In the context of the scientific laboratory, Rheinberger summarizes this configuration with the idea that the corner of the eye is also the place of its attention, in his words: “Der Augenwinkel ist der Ort des Augenmerks” (Rheinberger 2005: 67).

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