

**Anthropology as Cosmic Diplomacy:
Toward an Ecological Ethics for the Anthropocene**

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Forests think. This is neither a metaphor nor a cultural belief. There exists a kind of thinking, which I call “sylvan,” that is made exquisitely manifest by tropical forests and those that live with them. This kind of thought extends well beyond us humans and, in fact, holds our human forms of thinking. Thinking with the sylvan logics that thinking forests amplify can provide an ethical orientation –a mode of thought– that is adequate for these times of planetary human-driven ecological devastation that some call the “Anthropocene.” I here discuss three projects in and around the tropical forests of Ecuador whose goal is to capacitate sylvan thought. This research, which has brought me into collaboration with indigenous leaders and shamans, lawyers and conceptual artists, and even forest spirits and archaic pre-hispanic ceramic figures, has encouraged me to see my anthropological vocation as a kind of “cosmic diplomacy.” This form of diplomacy is “psychedelic” in so far as its goal is to make manifest the mind manifesting nature of the sylvan thinking on whose behalf it advocates. Another word for this kind of emergent mind is “spirit.” I here explore alternative “sylvan” means to give voice to the spirits among us, and I trace the challenge this poses for how we should think about what it means to be human.

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Introduction: Anthropology as Cosmic Diplomacy

I’m an anthropologist. My job is to immerse myself ethnographically, to chart relations, and to find new ways to listen. Garbed in the flesh and skin I’ve come equipped with, protected by my words and the stories I weave together with them, I take these tools that make me human into the world we call “the field.”

Perhaps today our vocation’s name might feel a bit outdated given that our task to immerse ourselves can take us to fields where not all of the beings we encounter are

of the anthropic sort. Working as I do in and around indigenous communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon threatened by the destruction of ecologies –of relational worlds– these other than human beings include plants, animals, and even, and perhaps especially, spirits. Learning to listen to these other kinds of others has forced me to divest myself of some of the human trappings that equip me and to thus travel beyond the schemas through which I normally think.

Despite the fact that its theories are fashioned almost entirely from our human equipment, anthropology, thanks to its immersive method, is a vocation that can uniquely open us to the worlds these other kinds of beings inhabit. Our attempts to grapple with what we learn there, as well as how we learn it, can allow us to capacitate other kinds of concepts, perhaps even, as Manari Ushigua, my Sápara brother and colleague suggests, other kinds of gods. Giving life to these other kinds of concepts involves understanding thoughts from one world in terms of those from another with a view to grasping the emergent concepts that might unite these thoughts as one. In this sense a synonym for anthropologist is *yachak*, or “knower,” which is the Quichua word the humans I work with use for shaman.

Moving among worlds is not merely a scholarly endeavor. It is a political act. We do so in order to recognize the ways we take part in that larger flow of life that is today under grave threat. In this sense, another synonym for anthropologist might be “diplomat,” more accurately, in Bruno Latour’s terms (Latour 2013), a *cosmic diplomat*; for the aim of moving among worlds is to find ways to avoid a cosmic –by which I mean an ecological– cataclysm.

In recognition of the ways in which culture is now a force of nature, some geologists have proposed the term Anthropocene for the geological epoch in which we live. Living in the so-called “time of humans” requires us to rethink what we mean by

the human, and to rethink for the future (this epoch is far from over) a kind of ethics appropriate to a time in which separating humans from nonhumans is no longer practically or metaphysically thinkable. This involves recapturing the shamanic and diplomatic valences of the anthropological vocation –donning other kinds of clothing and equipping ourselves with other kinds of tools, not all of which are of the human sort. Working, as I do, in the Amazonian rainforest my task as cosmic diplomat is to allow sylvan selves –the plants, animals, and especially spirits that also make their homes in the forest– a mode of expression that can be heard within our scholarly, biological, political, and legal idioms.

Thinking Forests

(1) With this end in mind I wrote a book called *How Forests Think* (Kohn 2013) based on long term field work in and around Ávila, a Quichua-speaking Runa community in the northwestern part of Ecuador's Amazon region. When I say that forests think I don't mean it as a metaphor, nor am I referring to a culturally embedded belief. The claim is rather part of a diplomatic effort to convince you of the reality of things that can sometimes go unnoticed given the limits of certain metaphysical assumptions that form the axiomatic foundations for Western scholarly thought, including anthropological thought.

(1) By saying that forests think I mean that life is mind –that life is thought. What we share with other beings isn't so much our bodies, but our capacity to think. Mind here refers to that process, wherever in the universe it is found, of learning by experience. Evolutionary dynamics, in this sense, are mental dynamics because they imply the ways in which a lineage, over time, and via natural selection, learns something about its environment. Wings, as they evolved, have come to increasingly represent

something about the currents of air on which they glide, for those lineages of organisms that have them. This is an example of thought; it is a kind of intelligence. One could say, in philosopher Charles Peirce's terms, that it is a "scientific intelligence." This kind of thought, like all true –by which I mean living– thought, does something. Flying becomes a new mode of being for a new kind of avian creature. When thought is alive it is because it makes this kind of worldly difference.

There are places in the world where this kind of mental dynamic is amplified – places where there is more mind, more thought, places that exhibit more scientific intelligence. One such place is Ecuador's "mega-diverse" Amazon region. If lives are minds, these dense tropical ecosystems would be sites for the emergence of ecologies made up of an unprecedented multitude of minds, thinking an equally unprecedented multitude of thoughts.

We humans have developed many techniques to amplify this kind of thinking. The great success of the scientific method is due –in part, I'm well aware of the power structures through which Science operates– to the fact that it is a form of thinking that can self-consciously tap into the ways in which evolutionary dynamics themselves learn by experience. That is, the scientific method, and the coming community that thinks through it, harnesses and amplifies the ways in which the world itself thinks. It is its own evolutionary dynamic that has learned to think by listening to the scientific intelligence already operant in the living world.

(1) But it is not the only kind of science. Amazonian shamanistic practices that involve the ingestion of the psychedelic decoction *ayahuasca* or the cultivation and interpretation of dreams, to give two examples, are also sciences in the sense that they constitute specific techniques to accelerate and amplify a process of learning by experience. Their great advantage over other sciences is that their particular form of

learning involves the systematic disruption of some of our human schemas for thinking. That these practices have unfolded in that place on our planet with the richest proliferation of nonhuman minds is no coincidence, and it makes them a privileged form of thinking scientifically with the scientific intelligence inherent to life. (1) I find the etymology of the word psychedelic productive to think with. From the Greek *psychē* (soul or mind) and *dēloun* (to make manifest), *ayahuasca* makes manifest to us the mind of those thinking forests that are themselves, mind-manifesting.

So, forests think. But how do they think? The biggest obstacle we face in grasping this kind of thought is that we confuse what thinking is with a specifically human form of thinking that tends to erase other more expansive, but more fragile, forms of thought. What makes human thinking distinctive is a representational dynamic that, following Peirce, can be termed “symbolic.” Symbols come to mean by virtue of the relationships they have to systems of other symbols, which form the interpretive contexts that gives them meaning. The English word “dog,” for example, refers to the animal in question indirectly thanks to a prior relation to the system of symbols that give it meaning. Thinking in symbols is what makes us so special as humans; it is the basis for language, culture, and consciousness.

(1) But we are also open to other forms of thinking that reach well beyond the human, forms of thought that we share with all other living selves. This kind of thinking has another kind of dynamic whose logic is based more on the image than on the word. It traffics in two non-symbolic representational modalities, those that are “iconic” and those that are “indexical.” Of these, indices are the easiest to grasp. An index is a kind of sign that corresponds to or correlates with something it is not. For example, a monkey’s cry of danger is not the dangerous entity it indicates.

Indices, however, are the product of complex interactions among a much more counterintuitive iconic sign process that underlies it. Icons refer to their objects of reference, not by pointing to them –they don't actually in and of themselves refer at all, and they therefore exist at the very margins of semiosis and of thought– but by sharing in and of themselves something of the properties of the object in question. If ontology, in the classical sense in which I use the term, is the exploration of those realities that are independent of how we humans might relate to them, then iconicity, being the kind of sign that is what it is regardless of how it relates to its object, might confer an interesting vantage from which to explore such realities.

Indices and icons make up the form of thinking proper to forests. When, for example, a spot-winged antbird's alarm call *points to* a jaguar's presence, and a hunter simulates that call he heard in a way that *resembles* it, both partake in a form of thinking that is imagistic. And when we cultivate our dreams or take *ayahuasca* we are also thinking with and like forests, for these techniques temporarily break parts of the symbolic systems that house and sustain us as humans, permitting our thoughts to rejoin that kind of thinking that goes beyond the human. This form of thinking, which, as living selves, is something that is also ours, I call sylvan, as in a *sauvage*. Sylvan thinking (a veritable *pensée sauvage*), like all good scientific intelligences, amplifies, and thus makes available for further thought, certain properties of the sylvan worlds with which it thinks; it has a psychedelic potential.

To my mind the phenomenon we are calling the Anthropocene is an actualization of the dualism inherent to symbolic thinking. Symbolic thought creates virtual and relatively closed thought worlds that relate indirectly to the more concrete worlds to which they also refer. Agriculture, animal husbandry, the rise of cities and states, the industrial revolution, the accelerated flow of capital and information are

increasing, perhaps historically contingent, realizations of this human tendency to create realms of “culture” that are increasingly separable –perhaps alienated– from “nature,” to such a degree that culture can eventually actually become a “force” of nature.

A great danger of being human is to get too caught up in what makes us distinctively human. Trump’s particular brand of me-first “thoughtlessness,” (the term is Donna Haraway’s), which aligns individual, national, racial, gender, and even species narcissisms with in an ever-expanding arc exhibiting a brutal fractal-like symmetry, is a chilling consequence of this isolation from the worlds that hold us. In this regard, the human sciences haven’t helped. Conceptual tools that grow out of working with the distinctive symbolic properties of human thought (I’m thinking particularly of social construction in all of its variants) make it even more difficult to understand a way of thinking beyond the sort of dualism that pulls humans out of those worlds that both make us and are *not* us.

Harnessing the Logic of Sylvan Thinking (1)

Given the ways in which our lives and thoughts are so entangled with dualism, how can thinking with forests help us? Sylvan thinking holds dualism in the sense that it is a form of thinking that is larger than the human. This can help us work conceptually with the connections we have to the nonhuman despite the separation that our distinctive forms of thought create. **(1)** Cultivating sylvan thinking as an ethical orientation for the Anthropocene involves harnessing some of its other than human properties. I will briefly discuss four of them. Sylvan thinking involves: 1) images; 2) absences; 3) play; and, 4) something I’ll call “generals.”

Sylvan thinking’s imagistic qualities confer on it a host of counterintuitive properties. **(1)** Consider the cryptically camouflaged Amazonian katydid *Cycloptera*

speculata pictured here. How did such a katydid come to look so much like a leaf? This does not depend on anyone noticing this resemblance—our usual understanding of how likeness works. Rather, its likeness is the product of the fact that the ancestors of its potential predators did *not* notice its ancestors. These potential predators failed to notice the differences between these ancestors and actual leaves. Over evolutionary time those lineages of katydids that were least noticed survived. Thanks to all the proto-cryptic katydids that were noticed—and eaten—because they differed from their environments, *Cycloptera speculata* came to be more like the world of leaves around it.

How this katydid came to be so invisible reveals important properties of iconicity. Iconicity, the most basic kind of sign process, is highly counterintuitive because it involves a dynamic in which two things are not distinguished. We tend to think of icons as signs that point to the similarities among things we know to be different. But semiosis does not begin with the recognition of any intrinsic similarity or difference. Rather, it begins with *not* noticing possible differences. It begins with indistinction or confusion.

(1) Let me say something else about the imagistic logic that characterizes sylvan thinking: it is deeply personal. Icons share something in common with the objects they represent. In a way they *are* their objects. There is an emotional correlate to this—a feeling of identification, a feeling of knowing—a feeling of oneness. But, convincing others of this can be quite difficult. To “get” an icon you have to feel it for yourself. In my lectures I often illustrate iconic thinking by having people guess at the meaning of a Quichua imagistic “word,” such as *tsupu*, which is used to describe an object making contact with and then submerging under water. I then contrast this word with other more standard conventional words in Quichua (which, being conventional, don’t have this kind of sonic imagistic connection to what they mean). Once I tell them *tsupu*’s

meaning, many people in an audience will immediately come to feel what it means. It is a likeness of an object plunging that they feel inside them. Invariably, however, some will not feel it, and no argument I can make will make them feel it. Sylvan thinking shares these qualities. The only way to grasp this imagistic logic is to feel it for yourself. Doing so requires a being/becoming sylvan, insofar as you need to find within you some of its qualities that you already share to iconically identify with its mode of being. This has important methodological implications for how we should go about thinking with forests, to which I will return.

Thinking with cryptic insects leads to my second observation about sylvan thinking: that it has an absential quality. We usually think of nature in terms of presence: matter, materiality, and existence are the foundations for our metaphysics. But absence is central to life; it is a kind of non-existence that is real. Think of the ways in which such katydids are multiply absential. They have become “invisible” (that is, absent) because they *re-present* (an absent) leafy environment. The environment is absent, in the sense that, after all these katydids aren’t their environment. They aren’t, in fact, leaves. Katydids do this for (an absent) *future* generation –the future katydids in a lineage of katydids. They can do so thanks to the (absent) *dead* who were noticed and eaten by predators.

My third observation about sylvan thought is that it involves play. By play I mean a dynamic in which previously tightly coupled means/ends relations are loosened such that something new can emerge. Play is ubiquitous in the living world. But this is because means/ends relations are intrinsic to the living world, and not just something we humans impose on it. In this technical Weberian sense the forest is enchanted. By saying that life is semiotic, that forests think, I am also saying that function,

representation, purpose, and telos –in short, ends– are part and parcel of the living world.

But if we think of means and ends as tightly coupled –transitive and deductive– there is no room for something new, for growth, for flourishing, which of course is also central to life. This is where play comes in. The biological production of variation is a form of play; Gregory Bateson’s nip, that bite that denotes the bite but not that which the bite denotes (a ludic suspension of aggression he saw in dogs and other social mammals), is also a form of play; and any relaxation on selection creates a space for play. Growth requires play in this sense. And we should remember that for Lévi-Strauss the *pensée sauvage* is also a form of play in that it is a kind of thought that asks for no return.

The final observation about sylvan thinking is that it involves generality. Thanks to all the katydids that were not noticed there is now more “leafiness” in this world. Not only are leaves that leafy but so too are some insects. Generality is a real property of the world –one that grows in the realm of life. Life proliferates generals. Through a process of constrained confusion living dynamics create *kinds*. Think of von Uexküll’s tick, the one that is “world poor” because it doesn’t do a lot of differentiation. By not discriminating between humans and deer, indiscriminately parasitizing both, confusing them, it creates a *kind* –the kind of being through which, for example, Lyme disease might pass. The world, then, is not just a continuum waiting to be categorized by human minds and cultures.

This logic extends to biological concepts such as the distinction between individual and lineage. It may be that only the individual exists, but the lineage is the reality that makes that existence possible. Any individual katydid is only what it is by virtue of a lineage that temporally exceeds it. This is true also of the species. It too has this kind of

general reality. In this regard, the species is not unlike the Amerindian concept of the masters of animals. A master of animals is a being that is the protector and general instantiation of the species in question. All hunting passes through this generality. Hunters dream with or about this domain of the general in order to connect with the individual that will become meat. This generality is real even if its existence is only instantiated in the forest encounter.

(1) The reality of forest spirits, then, is on par with the reality of a species or lineage. Out of an ecology of selves there emerges an ecology of spirits –or gods– as well. And this reality is not reducible to “the social.” It is to this emergent spirit-life that we must also learn to attend. For these gods, or other like them, will be the ones who can *orient* us in the way that a kind orients an individual, and a dream orients the hunter. An ethical orientation for the Anthropocene must thus necessarily also involve a spiritual re-orientation. Spirits, gods, and souls are part and parcel of the sylvan thinking we need to inhabit once again.

The Politics of Sylvan Thinking (1)

Having thought a great deal about sylvan thinking, and convinced that thinking with it can provide ways to think for our times, my current research projects focus on finding spaces of collaboration with others who seek to sustain and capacitate domains of sylvan thinking by tapping into their imagistic, absential, playful, and general logics.

This has brought me in close collaboration with a far-flung community of thinkers whose human members range from indigenous leaders and shamans, to environmental activists, (1) conceptual artists and (1) human rights lawyers. On the nonhuman side it has led me to explore ways to think with the spirits of the forest as they make themselves present to me (1) This, in turn, has raised many questions: (1)

What methods should one develop to listen to these other beings? And, given that the “Modern Constitution” has relegated spirits to the realm of belief, how can one bring them back into concept-work and conversation without being branded a “believer”?

I should say at the outset that Ecuador is a privileged place to cultivate an ethics of sylvan thinking for the Anthropocene. First off, as I’ve mentioned, this is because it houses an unprecedented amount of biodiversity, and diverse communities of people who continue to think with it, especially but not only, in its Amazonian forests, not all of which are, at least for the moment, in ruins. This kind of life and human forms of living with it are given unprecedented recognition in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, which was the first in the world to recognize the Rights of Nature. This constitution is also framed in terms of *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir*, an idea of living well that is not based on the modern metrics of progress and unfettered economic growth, as well as a respect for indigenous plurinationalism and self-determination.

As lofty as this document appears, its aspirations are rarely given a practical existence. Although written at the beginning of Rafael Correa’s presidency, the Correa regime was characterized by an increasing suppression of alternative voices –sylvan and otherwise– and a ratcheting up of extractive policies and practices. Large-scale mining projects, roads, hydroelectric dams, and oil concessions have proliferated and many of these are funded by China, to whom Ecuador now has massive debts. Ecuador’s “neo-extractivist” tendency, as this logic is known in Latin America, runs counter to these innovative constitutional principles, as it has sought to feed a state whose top-down logic became increasingly amplified under the increasingly authoritarian Correa regime. If a vibrant democracy should resemble a dense forest, Ecuador is increasingly becoming a monocrop plantation. This is the terrain through which sylvan thought must learn to navigate.

Three Examples of How Sylvan Thinking Goes Political

I now turn to the three collaborative projects I am working on, all of which seek to give voice to sylvan thought in a way that can help us think how to live life differently in the Anthropocene.

Project 1: Sarayaku's Living Forest (1)

The first involves Sarayaku, a Quichua-speaking Runa **(1)** community located on the Bobonaza River in Pastaza province **(1)**, and famous throughout Ecuador and the world for a kind of political activism focusing on territorial rights and indigenous self-determination that harnesses the logic of sylvan thinking as a way to resist the imposition of top-down state oriented relational modes. **(1)** This has had tangible results, including the legal titling to indigenous communities of over a million hectares of land in the south central Amazon, and a 2012 landmark victory in the Interamerican Court of Human Rights against the state of Ecuador for conducting oil exploration on Sarayaku territory without prior consultation.

(1) In October 2015 Sarayaku leaders asked me for help with a document they were due to present at the COP21 Climate Summit in Paris later that year. This document, known as *Kawsak Sacha*, or Living Forest, sought to present a radical rethinking of territory and sovereignty based wholly on animist principles. It's a call for a new way of relating to the forest and its beings by recognizing it as a vast ecology of intercommunicating living selves rather than as a collection of objects to be exploited for human gain. My responsibility has been to do the diplomatic work of translating Amazonian concepts into idioms that would highlight the conceptual impact on western modes of thinking about "nature."

Project Two: A Sápara Conduit to a Spirit Ecology (1)

Hearing about my work with the people of Sarayaku, Manari Ushigua, the leader of the Sápara Nation, whose members inhabit territory to the north and east of Sarayaku (7), contacted me to see if I might help them write a document that would communicate their own understanding of the animate forest. (3) Manari is a spiritual and a political leader. In fact, he doesn't distinguish between these two facets of his vocation. When I first met him he told me about the conversation he had had the night before with President Rafael Correa. Correa's stash of tobacco had run low and he had come to Manari asking him for some –a clear sign that his presidency was in crisis. It took me a few moments to realize that Manari was talking about a dream encounter. Manari's intense oneiric activity takes him all over the world and the cosmos. (He often wakes up exhausted.) He has told me of nighttime battles with the Chinese oil company that has recently acquired a concession on Sápara territory, and of journeys to explore the origins of the universe.

(1) What was so exciting about working with the Sápara document involved our approach to it. Traditional ethnographic methods, as the work proceeded, were increasingly made over by the sylvan thinking we sought to channel. Part of this involved ingesting *ayahuasca*. As Manari advised me, one should only take *ayahuasca* with a clear intention, otherwise one risks getting lost in the many cosmic wormholes this decoction might open. (1) My primary intention would be to better understand what the forest spirits want to tell the world, for this is what we were seeking to channel in the document. But this, Manari made clear, could only be approached by asking a more fundamental question: I needed first to understand who I am, and how this fits

with the question of who “we” –that emergent self made up of myself, the Sápara people, and the forests they inhabit– are.

According to Manari the future does not exist in and of itself, it is an effect of correctly recognizing and aligning oneself as a self with a trajectory suggested by one’s past. This has an imagistic or iconic logic. For who I am, even as I emerge as a new kind of *I*, can only stand in some sort of imagistic continuity with my previous self. Manari, which means caiman in Sápara, attests to this. It was the nickname given to his father. The son adopted it as his leadership role increasingly led him to inhabit his father’s mantle and what Greg Urban calls the “projective *I*” that father and son share.

I’ve worked in the Amazon for 25 years, and in personal as well as formal terms, I have become convinced that the rainforest constitutes a vast ecology of selves that, “thinks.” It is only, however, during this year that I have begun exploring this communicative cosmos through more manifestly shamanic vehicles such as *ayahuasca*. These experiences have been terrifying as well as exhilarating, and, needless to say, I have grown from them. I touch only on a few of the things I’ve learned and only as they pertain to the political project of giving life to sylvan thought.

In my experiences with *ayahuasca*, first in Sarayaku and then in Llanhama Cocha, Manari’s home community, the first thing that happened was an erasure of everything I held dear. It was as if before I could begin thinking anew, any conceptual tenet had to be abandoned. Having worked so hard to articulate a vision of sylvan thought as something supremely “natural” and one that involves wholes and generals, my initial vision was of a neon-lit universe composed entirely of atomistic, Lego-like bits of plastic. I felt like the butt of a great cosmic joke. Could everything I had ever thought about the forest be false? But later what became more disturbing was the growing realization of the *truth* of what I had written in *How Forests Think*. It is one

thing to write of shamanic metamorphosis. It is quite another to feel my human flesh peeling away as I became nothing more than a yawning jaguar's throat channeling the forest's cosmic life force—a tube-like conduit for the life that was flowing through a *me* that no longer existed in any embodied form I could recognize as my own. In those days I had been thinking a lot about Peirce's aphorism that, "the individual [...], since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation." Smugly quoting this (which is something I often did when discussing with folks in Sarayaku and Llanachama Cocha how to write a document whose author is the forest) is one thing. It is quite another to experience my individual selfhood dissolve as I abandoned myself that night to the reality of that larger flow of life that vastly exceeded my errant self.

The political question that Manari and other members of the community kept coming back to—for they too would interrogate me in their dreams and visions—is what role I, as an *I*, would play in giving life to sylvan thought. Answering this for myself required going back to my childhood, to my adolescence, to the lives of my parents and grandparents, back thousands of years to the world of my priestly ancestors, (1) the *kohanim*, and to find the nodes where that trajectory aligned with the one of the forest and the Sápara people. Not all of these pasts involved filial relations. Of particular prominence was a boulder perched in front of our suburban Princeton house, with whom, as a child, I developing a lasting but long since suppressed "friendship" (1). A tremendous sense of gratitude for my parents emerged for not disrupting the sensuous relation I developed with that other kind. Those relations I called up that were filial also involved relations with other kinds of beings. I saw my grandmother (1), an amateur archeologist who first introduced me as a child to my future vocation, swoop in on the

back of an enormous cobalt-winged jaguar. (1) And later I thought back to the daughter of one of her neighbors in Quito (1). In my late teens I had such a crush on her that I decided to transform a short visit with my grandparents to a semester-long long stay. That's when I discovered my first true love: the Amazon forest. This young woman's brother was exiled to France for his political activism, where he completed an advanced degree in linguistics at the Sorbonne. On his return to Ecuador he wrote the first Sápara dictionary. This endeavor is credited by the Sáparas for revitalizing their culture, and is an immediate precursor for UNESCO's recognition of the Sápara culture and language as "Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." Forty-five years ago my path was already merging with that of the Sápara Nation. My *I* was part of our *we*. Only on that night, on the banks of the River, was I able to recognize this. And only by recognizing this am I now able to act on it.

This opening to a larger *we* has not been easy. Since that night I've had several oneiric and psychedelic experiences in which I give up being myself and become part of this projective "I" –where Manari voices this "I," we now share, through "me" (here are some of my attempts to draw this 2). This process of becoming "oddkin" in Donna Haraway's terms, or "brothers," as Manari says, has been so frightening precisely because it requires I dissolve that which delimits me as an individual self. If my thoughts, if and when they are true to the world, are wholly subsumed by the thoughts of the world, what is there left for me as an individual to do? How could I be part of a greater *I*, who nonetheless in keeping some vestiges of my individual self, might also be a novel causal locus in ways that could contribute to that greater *I*? Why this life? The question applies to me as well as to the *we* that includes the forest.

The Sápara document *amplifies* the spiritual and the personal nature of a living forest. Regarding the spiritual, the Sáparas speak of a mythic time before the current

division between the spiritual and the material where the world was just spirit. And they think of themselves as sharing a unique personal connection, through dreams and visions, with the spirit origins of the world. They are its emissaries. Because persons of all kinds are nothing more than the stabilized forms assumed by the emergent concepts – or gods– that think them, the forest, which is at base an ecology of persons, is more appropriately an ecology of spirits. And this means that any ecological politics aimed at giving life to sylvan thinking will also be a spiritual politics.

Regarding the personal, the document argues that if the forest is made entirely of subjects, then knowing these on their own terms requires developing a personal relation to them. This has an imagistic logic. Icons can only be known from the inside –so to speak– through a process of recognizing that one already embodies a likeness of the object in question. Iconism can thus never be felt from a third person perspective. This of course has its dangers. The only way to verify such experiences is to have them oneself, and not having them can serve as a ready position from which to refute the generalizable validity of iconic experiences. I'm well aware that bringing my personal life and my shamanic forays into scholarly discussion makes me vulnerable to easy critique for this very reason.

If only I, as an *I*, can know the *Is* of the forest, how to encourage others to come to know these? In recognition of the ways in which true knowledge of the animate forest world must always be personal knowledge, the Sáparas have created a healing center, called Naku (“forest” in Sápara), where outsiders come to the community to establish their own personal relation with the forest spirits. The hope is that through this a reciprocal relation will emerge. With the help of their Sápara guides, visitors find ways through this immersion in sylvan thought to cure themselves of humanity's ills as

they take on an increasing role in protecting the forest –that great font of sylvan thinking– from the ill that we might call “humanism.”

Writing this document, I realized, would require me to cultivate and maintain my own personal and spiritual connection to the beings of the forest I got to know in Llanchama Cocha. (1) Back in Quito, I would only write the document before sunrise and only after ingesting juice made from the tobacco that had been given to me on my forest visits. When I would meet with Manari to discuss the document, it would, again, only be done before sunrise, outdoors, facing Ilaló, the mountain on whose flanks I was living, and whose spirits, Manari felt, welcomed our endeavor, and only after having taken *huayusa* tea and tobacco. Manari would listen to what I’d written with an ear for how the spirits of his forest home reacted to it. There were parts that the spirits didn’t like, and we changed these. There were other parts that agitated them a bit, and some of these we decided to keep –cosmic diplomacy moves in multiple directions.

Project Three: Sensory Archeology (1)

During this period I was also involved with donating the archeological collection belonging to (1) my grandmother Costanza Di Capua to a museum in Quito. She amassed this collection in the 1960s and 1970s and thought with it until her death in 2008. It comprises over 3,800 ceramic objects –seated shamans, jaguar-persons, anaconda vessels, snuff vials, sonorous instruments, and the like– all shamanic attempts to access the vast animistic forest universe of the Ecuadorian Coast in the millennia before the Spanish conquest.

When I took *ayahuasca* in Llanchama Cocha I had a striking vision of one of the figures from this collection, a seated Jama Coaque shaman with large blank eyes (1). Upon my return to Quito I went into the collection to find this figurine, which I hadn’t

seen in many years. And then I stumbled across another one that looked just like the Sápara shamans as I saw them in my visions. (1) When Manari was in Quito, I brought him to see the collection, and he took it upon himself to communicate with the spirits of these figures in order to explain to them what we were doing. His schedule that day was packed, with meetings with government officials and a trip to Puyo. As we left the museum and were driving to get him to his first meeting he asked me to turn the car around to go to my grandmother's house. I had mentioned to him earlier that my grandmother had some *llanchama* bark cloth, probably fabricated in the 1960s or 1970s, of the kind used traditionally by the Sáparas to make clothing and that today is used to make the ceremonial gowns that Manari and other Sápara leaders wear in political contexts. At the house I found the cloth in a storeroom, dusted it off and presented it to Manari as a posthumous gift from my grandmother in thanks for his interest in the collection. He observed that the quality of this cloth is much higher than what is produced today, and we mused that perhaps it had been fashioned by Manari's father and that this was another way in which our pasts formed part of a common trajectory, one that we could recognize as such, if we could just stop long enough to recognize it.

I have come to the realization that caring for these archaic pieces might be part of the same political project of capacitating sylvan thought for the time we call the Anthropocene. Part of the conceptual challenge of thinking in the Anthropocene is to grasp, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, how different temporalities, historical, geological, and perhaps even that of spirits, become coeval (I think too to the work of Stuart Mclean and Thom van Doreen on intersecting temporalities). Manari, for his part, is obsessed with time, how it speeds up and slows, how he can learn to work it, and Amazonian shamans think deeply with clocks and watches (1). My ayahuasca visions led me to reflect on this. In one, I entered a cosmic Timex store flanked by a sea of

watch-wielding Amazonian shamans, which took me to a renewed appreciation of Lisa Stevenson's chapter *Why Two Clocks?* (1) Does another way of being in time emerge when temporalities are multiplied? I feel that learning to listen to these archaic prehispanic figures might tell us something about the Anthropocene as a temporal problem.

Accordingly, I am designing a permanent archeological exhibit that would be part of this larger project to listen to and give voice to the generals that emerge from an archaic animate world and to look to these as anachronistic guides for a world in ecological crisis. This is a collaborative effort involving Manari and the Sápara Nation, the conceptual artist Fabiano Kueva, critical museographers, architects, the sound artist Rubén Silva, who is versed in the craft of exploring the sonorous qualities of prehispanic artefacts.

It involves experimental research methods to give voice to the spirits these pieces conjure (these are some ways in which I've been exploring imagistic techniques for actualizing how the sylvan spirit life of these figures has moved through me. There are lots of stories here..., which we can discuss later if there is interest 45). The goal is to harness these alternative imagistic and sensorial modes to allow different publics to enter this kind of sylvan logic.

(1) Manari's interpretation of that seated shaman highlighted the distributed nature of the self, the man on top is the father guiding him, just as Manari's deceased father continues to guide Manari through dreams and visions. To understand this figure as part of a lineage, to understand its spirit life I tried different things: drawing it, with an attention to the relation between the two I's; I have also have taken to adapting theatre techniques to understanding this relationship (3) –Here at Bruno Latour's and Frederique Ait-touati's seminar at Sciences Po two months ago.

(1) My grandmother's collection, like so many private collections in Ecuador of the time, is the product of "*guaquería*," the informal, often violent, and manifestly unscientific excavation of pieces by locals with a view to selling them to collectors. The standard interpretive context that archeology demands is missing. The destruction of archeological sites by *guaquería* is of course highly problematic, but this has to be understood as a distant aftershock of the much greater cataclysm of conquest that destroyed the world that produced these.

(1) How can something true to that world and ours emerge from those ruins? Is there a way to allow the beings these figures imagistically *re-present*, a mode of expression we might comprehend? What might we learn? I began to realize that perhaps the fact that they were free of "context" might in fact liberate them.

My grandmother somehow already knew this. In fact, she practiced something I've taken to calling "sensory archeology," which is a form of inquiry that she cultivated that privileges an appreciation for forms, patterns, and the tactile as legitimate modes of archeological knowing. (**Show Clip**) In its disruptions of the discursive and contextual her particular kind of archeology was "psychedelic" (1). And as such it fits with the psychedelic orientation of the figurines, which, being shamanic, are tapping into sylvan thinking in ways that break the human symbolic logic that creates the systemic structures of meaning that classical archeology seeks to reconstruct. Might not a sensory archeology be more appropriate to their mode of being?

Today the last vestige of that forested animistic world that made up the equatorial region of current day Ecuador, and that extended into the areas where these ceramic figures were produced, lies in the Amazon. This is where there are still forests inhabited by spirits, and humans that live in relation to them. What can we learn about those archaic but potentially living forest spirits by entering the living forest that

produced them via an Amazonian portal? What might they, as generals, have to tell us about the conditions necessary for their and our life?

In order to get at this we got permission to take some of the collection's sonorous instruments to the Amazon in order to try to better listen for the messages they may transmit. We played them in the forest (3), by the river (1), in ayahuasca ceremonies. Playing them in the forest at night even attracted a wild bush dog (1), one of the rarest of Amazonian mammals. In these experiments we tried hard not to bring conventional musical phrasings to the instruments, but rather to allow the vast orchestra of sylvan sounds with which these instruments were participating to think themselves through us. These recordings will be part of the exhibit. Our question to those who come to immerse themselves in it will be: can this open a conduit to a spirit world in a way that can allow you to capacitate sylvan thinking as part of an ethical orientation for the Anthropocene? I'd like you to hear a snippet of a demo Fabiano created (**play**)

Conclusion: Toward an Ecological Ethics for the Anthropocene

I see these three examples as small steps toward cultivating and capacitating for our times a kind of sylvan thinking with the political goal of holding open spaces where such thinking might continue to flourish. As its own ethical practice sylvan thinking would take as a legitimate form of knowing the logic of the image. It would cultivate absential dynamics as causal modalities alter to the push-and-pull agency of our metaphysics. Its object would be to hold open the spaces of play from which it continuously emerges. And it would operate under the guidance of its own general emergent psychedelic properties, which, in other words, we might call *spirit*.