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Children's Instrumentality and Agency in Amazonia

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Several scholars (Behar 1996, Fabian 1996, Marcus 1999, Marcus and Fischer 1986, Myerhoff 1978, Rosaldo 1989) demonstrate how intimacy brings to the forefront questions of subjective bias, personal expectations and emotions, and unequal power relations inherent in the anthropological fieldwork encounter – precisely the central targets in many of the critiques of the qualitative research methods that we champion. Perhaps it is for this reason that some anthropologists shun reflexive ethnographic writing (Salzman, 2002, Robertson 2002), as it falls on what is already considered “murky” ground – a soil still nurturing ongoing debates over issues of authority and representation and the possibilities of demarcating subjective-objective experiences. In this article, I argue that, instead, it is precisely by incorporating reflexive approaches that the production of knowledge, which is rarely crafted in isolation, gains greater transparency allowing more consideration to be given to power relations and other epistemological frames of reference within which the researcher and anthropology are inevitably embedded. As such, analyzing forms of knowledge that intimate field relationships produce exposes both the underbelly of our methodology as well as the underpinnings of our theories and practices. By focusing on children's instrumentality as a way to examine these issues, this article contributes to literatures on personhood, relatedness, secrecy, parenting, children and childhood studies.

I have been working in Ese Eja communities for over twenty years,¹ a dedication not terribly unique within anthropology, especially among Amazonianists who often find that their involvement with communities can make positive differences in terms of people's livelihoods and representation. During this time, I have been intensely involved with issues of Ese Eja sovereignty, territoriality and human rights – that have required being *in situ* in the Amazonian border regions of Bolivia and Peru – collectively totaling nearly a decade. The choices I have made that have rooted me in long-term fieldwork were not ones guided by ambitions for an academic career and yet now, in retrospect, I realize that I have benefited, perhaps fortuitously, from the depths I have permeated and the risks that I have taken.

I conveniently refer to this intensive involvement as “fieldwork” since it entails an unbounded time and place when I am not residing where I usually might and implies an anthropological approach toward living and working alongside people who at times I officially “study.” Yet this long-term fieldwork and its methodology are not quite the same phenomenon as that original stretch of doctoral research. Fieldwork, in my case, is very much freed from the meta-theory and meta-methodology of the academy and shaped instead by the very reality that we as anthropologists set out to understand. Allowing the field to direct anthropological practice towards issues of importance makes the contribution of anthropological knowledge more relevant to contemporary issues.

Within anthropology, “the field” is already acknowledged as a place that is “predisposed to postures of detachment and critique” of anthropology, an academic discipline that already lends itself to its own self-critique (Brightman 2004:191). This continues to be the case with longer-term fieldwork. The committed action of returning at length over and over again to a field site further reflects a theoretical appreciation for how greater complexity is exposed with time and accentuates the continual motion of social life. If fieldwork is a snapshot then continual fieldwork is a moving picture. Marcus (2007; 356) points out that fieldwork has a “norm of incompleteness,” an incompleteness that speaks of something that is ongoing and partial by its very research design. Going back is a way of expanding the research design of fieldwork, a way of managing its partiality.

The recognition of various influences and the disclosure of subjectivity's role in the pursuit of objectivity permit a more fluid and transparent understanding of the history of anthropological theory. There are indeed multiple contributors to the production of anthropological knowledge, including our literary and disciplinary influences, our academic institutions, our mentors, the politics of our discipline (Handler 2004) and, not the least, our research participants.² This article reveals yet one more layer of transparency by discussing how reflexive processes of intimacy and commitment in fieldwork create over time both depth and breadth of anthropological knowledge, allowing for even greater neutrality explicitly through subjectivity. Taussig (2008 interview) discusses how fieldwork is an insightful dialectic between an outsider's sense of the novel and unusual with that of his or her own ignorance. A committed, intimate fieldwork is potentially more powerful as it maintains this privileged outsider's position while minimizing his or her lack of knowledge or unawareness. Hence the prospect for intimacy in fieldwork is not a flaw but a tool, at least potentially.

My relationships with Ese Eja began before my academic pursuits and at most times in my life have remained primary to those pursuits. Narayan (1997) appropriately questions what meaning the people we pursue, and spend our time writing about, have in our lives: "...are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalized other, or are they accepted as subjects with voices, views, and dilemmas - people to whom we are bonded through ties of reciprocity and who may even be critical of our professional enterprise?" (23). What I emphasize in my fieldwork experience is more than just subjectivity but the *quality of my relationships* with Ese Eja individuals and communities and my *long-term* association with and the continued commitment to them and the difficult issues that they face. This degree of commitment has intensified over time alongside and contributing toward my understanding of Ese Eja realities, while hopefully contributing to their well-being.

In this essay I describe, in part, how bringing my son back and forth to live in the field has built upon and deepened a sense of dedication that began with my initial fieldwork and which has not diminished over time. The presence of my child in the field further obliges me to engage with anthropology on broad issues of childhood and culture that ultimately address individuals and society. Hugh-Jones (1987), in describing her and her husband's own experiences in conducting Amazonian fieldwork with their young children, suggests that anthropologists are often pressured into keeping 'family' and 'profession' separate in their academic writing. Yet experiences of multi-enculturation and socialization among children have inevitably brought the crux of fieldwork itself into the line of anthropological inquiry. The strong presence of and interactions with children has impacted my research experience, methodology and writings. Here I heed to Rubenstein's call for "methodological, emotional, and political transparency"³ by exposing the processes and changing experiences of subject-position in relationship to the people with whom I/we participate and observe. As such, I explore the extraordinary dynamics of human relations between adults and children in particular, and what they tell about reciprocity, exchange, secrecy, conviviality and ethnographic fieldwork. My research challenges ideas about exploitation in fieldwork by questioning the western assumption that caring for others is necessarily disassociated from using each other, and it also views children as powerful subjects, and non-linguistic behavior - including that of the anthropologist as a significant social resource (Bourgois, 1996, Hall 1959). Whereas previous writings on the presence of the anthropologists' children in the field focus on hardships, sacrifices, and logistics (Cassell 1987, Gottlieb 1995, Hendry 1999), this article focuses on their contribution to anthropological knowledge.

One of Rubenstein's (2004) main points in his exploration of power, desire, and exploitation is that through close relationships in the field, "intimate relationships agency and voice often present themselves as secrets and silences that resist representation" (1043). Whereas in Rubenstein's essay the revelation of such representations came through a negative series of betrayals, this article emphasizes positive bonds of intimacy and the more subtle limits of communication as reflected in children's voices and agency. It is only recent scholarship (Montgomery 2008, Schwartzman 2001) that has begun to recognize the limits in communication reflected in the multitude of children's voices that resist representation. This is ironic because it is not children themselves that resist representation but their category as subjects or as reliable informants. The limits of children's communication are dually stressed by a more general academic disregard for non-linguistic communication (Hall 1959). This "mutu-

al indissolubility” of culture and language (Ingold 1996) is amplified in motions and utterances common to children in acts such as playing, movement, laughing, crying and screaming –the very gesticulations and sounds that encapsulate their daily existence and form the background the visuality and ‘buzz’ of any community. Among Ese Eja, the actuality that children are not “owned” by their parents and instead have many more open-ended options for alliance, further corroborates them as independent subjects, something I had always written about and eventually experienced on a first-hand basis when my authority over my own child began to be contested.

Like many anthropologists, when I first arrived to the field I was grateful for the presence of children.⁴ At first, in general, children seem to be less outwardly political than adults, and to have less boundaries during first encounters – they are curious, friendly, and their interest and laughter often warm over a very awkward period of arrival, acquaintance, and acceptance in new surroundings. Many ethnographic encounters will mention the welcoming or curious presence of children but will usually skirt such interactions off to the side as more peripheral uninteresting aspects of the fieldwork context, certainly secondary to serious adult activities. Often, our association with children in the field threatens to clearly reveal our own moments of foolishness, awkwardness, and our general lack of preparedness for the predicaments in which anthropological fieldwork places us. If we focus on children and the vital bridges they often help us span, then we might be forced to confront our own perceived similarities with them: the innocence, the naivety, the marginality; or perhaps the craftiness, perseverance, and scheming.

Through identification with what are mostly essentialized traits, children have provided “the proverbial metaphor to characterize the ‘primitive other’” (van der Geest 1996:339), Montgomery 2009, Tylor 1871) something from which we want to keep a safe distance. As such, the expression of these vulnerable qualities may flag colonialist discourse and its racist implications as well as a general attitude toward children as “lower-order” beings (Lesko 2001). Yet Ese Eja children are not the sub-“subalterns” (Spivak, 1988), they are not silent beings with “muted” voices (Ardener, 1972), they do not allow adults to speak for them or make claims for them – they are generally outspoken and not easily intimidated. The silence and muteness attributed to children are often imposed upon them by the ethnographer who simply ignores their significance in the production of social life and projects his or her own social construction of children on to others. Furthermore, “children” as a category representing a whole is as untenable as the category of “men” or “women” (Montgomery 2009). Hence, for a variety of reasons, children remain categorically unacknowledged for their contribution to anthropological knowledge and our fieldwork encounters with them remain anecdotal.⁵

My relationships with Ese Eja children, *esho'ikiana* (small people) were quite important to me from the start and they evolved well beyond the initial period of arrival. My house was consistently filled with children. Not only were they welcomed but they were encouraged to come as they pleased; they came to eat, to play, to hide from each other, to shelter themselves from a drunk father, to cook food that they did not want to share or had just stolen or merely to watch us or talk to me and my husband.⁶ They also came to snoop, question and gossip. No matter what the reason was, I was extremely fond of them all, the worst and the best of them! Because of this and because of the close friendships that we formed with their parents, I was sometimes entrusted with children when families took short trips and in many cases, with the newborns and toddlers, my involvement was so intense that in a few cases I was strongly encouraged to practice the *couvade*.⁷

I derived tremendous and profound satisfaction from my relationships with children and I spent much time understanding them as individuals and addressing them in ways unique to each. I remember my reaction when a French anthropologist visiting Portachuelo, an Ese Eja community in Bolivia, remarked “The children here all *love* you!” Although he seemed genuinely awed by the evident strong and affectionate ties, I wondered if I should have somehow felt embarrassed, if perhaps it would have been better if he was impressed with my ability to understand Ese Eja kinship or something more academically valued.⁸ But then again, that is what children do so well – they reveal the obvious. They exposed the way that I prioritized them. Yes, it would have been impossible to visit any of the communities that I lived in and not notice that I adored the children and highly valued my relationships with

them, relationships that have continued to strengthen. Over the years, I have watched these children grow and have children of their own. I began to experience my own absences in the communities as losses that could be measured by the time that passed between the last birth at my last departure and the first newborn after my new arrival. Children began to embody time and space and, like my Ese Eja friends, I too began to refer to temporal blocks of time in terms of children's births, ages and size, and deaths.

After a decade of my husband and I being consistently harangued to "make a baby," we finally returned to the field with our own child. I had anticipated that people would be pleased to see us with child, particularly since they had invested so much time attempting to overturn my resistance toward becoming pregnant. I had endured countless sermons, merciless teasing, incessant questioning, and the destruction of my contraceptive methods. So, I knew that the arrival of my son, Dimitri, or Chijiyo as he is known throughout Ese Eja communities, was eagerly anticipated. Furthermore, since Chijiyo had been named "properly" while seven months in my womb by Shaijaime, the old shaman, he already had a place in Ese Eja worlds before he was even born and this too added to the anticipation of our arrival.

So, yes, I had expected everyone to be curious about seeing Chijiyo but I had not been prepared for the extent that the demonstrative intense caring that had characterized my own relationships with Ese Eja children would be mirrored by individual Ese Eja toward my own son. As far as I had known, my behavior was unusual. Chijiyo has been full heartedly embraced by our Ese Eja friends. Chijiyo was not just welcomed affectionately but indulged by our friends amidst endless waves of their generosity of spirit expressed physically and in kind. He is continually doted upon, hugged, lavished with treats, and addressed in endearing kin terms. It is not *just* that he is offered choice parts of meat and delicacies such as honey, that are normally reserved for the most intimate and privileged relationships, that speaks of the way he is fussed over but the outward joy that people allow themselves to feel toward him and the laughter they allow him to bring. It speaks of an emotional reciprocity that is significant in deep friendships and, as such, in many ways Chijiyo is seen as a gift from us. Our entrusting him is seen as a reflection of our friendship, of our belief that living in their communities is beneficial for children, and of our underlying respect for "Ese Eja ways of doing things."⁹

I realize that the doting affection poured upon Chijiyo, and which took me by surprise, deserves some attention. Before Chijiyo was born, I had many occasions to witness how people respond to children that they do not know and with whom they are not involved in a web of social relations. In these cases, adults are attentive of children's behavior but keep their distance, and although children are less cautious toward other children, they are certainly less inclusive with the children of strangers, setting up clear boundaries. Likewise, these "other" children themselves are quite distant and cautious, particularly if they are non-Ese Eja. This distance most often parallels the social distances of the families they take part in. I can surmise that full embracement usually indicates being part of an inner core of social relationships.

It is also important to convey how much Ese Eja immensely enjoy children, especially the children they are raising. In fact, households that do not have children are *kia eno nee nee*, very sad places, so much so that "keeping the house happy" has often been cited as a reason for adopting children. Rather than the edict being that children are not considered complete persons until they reach adulthood, the tenet is that households are not complete households without children (Peluso 2003). Notwithstanding the high value placed on children, expressions of affection do not usually involve embellishments of hugging, babying and/or spoiling, though these gestures are sometimes enacted upon small animals. In this sense Dimitri is in many ways almost treated like a little pet, a demonstrative way of making him familiar.¹⁰

Once, I was eagerly awaiting for Elico, a three year old boy who consistently spent a great deal of time at my home, to return from a foraging trip. He had been away for weeks with his grandparents looking for turtle eggs upriver. At last, long after being spotted by his siblings, he finally made his way up from the riverbank, and I was extremely pleased to see him. When I glanced over to his parents I noticed how visibly undemonstrative they were upon greeting him despite having missed him and worried about him, especially his father who had been nearly tormented by the boy's absence to the point that he was being teased about it. And yet, without any obvious physical display of affection or greeting, I knew that

Elico's parents were greatly relieved that he was home and I realized that Elico must have known it too.¹¹ Unlike in Scheper-Hughes' (1993) interpretation of a seemingly outward indifference toward children's wellbeing, I had lived through all the preceding moments with Elico's family and shared their worries and the expectancy of his return with them. Had an ethnographer witnessed Elico's arrival and nothing else, then an interpretation of his parents' ostensible indifference toward him using a reductionist explanation, which blames high child mortality rates in relation to high-risk activities, could have been easily formulated.

Once Elico's had resettled, I grabbed the little boy, squeezed him and picked him up and left him hanging from the small mango tree in front of my house; this was our favorite game to play together. I then tickled him and let him fall to the ground and watched him try to knock my tree down – a tree that is still referred to as belonging to me. Because I had missed him so much, I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with him. Like with Elico, my affection toward children and my apparent inability to contain my affection mostly created amusement. I am not sure that it was others who found my behavior unusual or if I found my own behavior to be different than theirs.

The outpouring of affection toward Chijiyó, by individuals of all ages, cannot be explained away as the sort of intimacy and familiarity and trust that solely results from repeatedly returning to the field. Although long-term engagement with Ese Eja communities offers an alternative to what Narayan (1997) has called "hit and run ethnography" or Wulff's (2002) "yo-yo" anthropology, intimacy is about something more. It is about *more* than giving "the subject" a voice; it is about the subject becoming an important part of your life whereby your life, too, becomes "the subject." It is about the kind of friendships that become so vibrant that there is an indistinguishable point where friends become family – the kind of family that you feel you cannot live for too long without. It is a commitment that subordinates my academic agenda just like many commitments in life do from time to time. I do not imply that this is necessarily how Ese Eja individuals feel about me and my family but that when you begin to deeply care for people there are certain responsibilities that are assumed and acted upon by all sides. Just as I have always cared for and fed my closest Ese Eja friends and their elders and children, they also feed us and care for my son. Just as I have been fraught with concern when their children have been ill – staying up all night, preparing remedies and participated in their healing so as to ensure their well-being – so do our friends worry, cure, heal, and provide for my son's overall health. This is also telling of how credibility and trust are established during fieldwork (Clifford 1983; Shumaker 2004).



Figure 1. Community life in Sonene, Heath River, Peru (photo by author)

Living in Ese Eja communities, there has been much care and subtle guidance regarding what Chijiyó needs and does not need. My friends quickly shifted me from feeling like a *lais-*

sez-faire, hands-off, non-intervening mother into feeling like an over-protective one. As usual, they became my teachers. The mere caution on my part to Dimitri not to eat food off the ground or put his hands in his mouth without washing his hands after touching certain things triggered glances toward me that were all too familiar from having also been on the giving end. In contrast, in New York City, fellow caretakers scorned me for allowing my son to eat things off the floor. I had wanted to ensure that he had a strong immune system but by doing so I had accustomed him to a habit that did not work in his favor in some of the settings that he now lived in. Ese Eja individuals questioned and challenged me on some of my childrearing practices – some that I later came to regret. For instance, although I had breastfed Chijiyo on demand, I had weaned him against his will at age two; it should have been a better negotiated choice between us but it wasn't. I was also criticized for not actively planning to have more children since having only one child is considered a mistake, a decision that I have also begun to feel sad about over time. My friends persistently ask me to this day "What will you do if he dies?" A question that many non-Ese Eja friends also have on their minds but no one dares to ask or even raise to their consciousness. My reply is that if Chijiyo died, I too would want to die and so their point is vindicated.

While in the States or in the UK, I had to organize Dimitri's time. In Ese Eja communities, it was neither necessary nor realistic to do so for Chijiyo. His friends – gangs of varying aged children who ranged from newborns dangling from siblings' hips to sixteen year olds – collectively decided what they were doing. The power of these gangs overtook me the day after I first arrived with Chijiyo. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes after dawn when I heard the calls for Chijiyo getting closer and closer. Suddenly the children's hands were in our mosquito net pulling him out. I thought this was quite adorable and it made me happy to think that they were claiming him in this way. Children had always known better than to disturb Michel and I in our mosquito net but the presence of Chijiyo granted them license, as he belonged to them, he was part of their group. Chijiyo was breaking down pre-existing boundaries. My wanting to watch over Chijiyo when he played by the river, following him to the forest or just making sure that he ate breakfast were instances and circumstances that were overridden by other people's authority over him. Clearly, it was Chijiyo that needed to form his wishes and desires. In one moment friends expressed a degree of sympathy but in the next moment, Chijiyo was being whisked away on top of another child's shoulders to disappear for what often was the rest of the day. I would sigh and yet I knew that this is the way that it had to be. After all, as I mentioned previously, I was here with Chijiyo for more than just the fieldwork, I was here because of the deep trust and profound respect that I feel for my friends and their way of life.

It was often the over-concerns that amounted to the few maladjustments that Chijiyo experienced. For instance, once when accompanying a friend to her chacra, we came upon a group of children collecting and eating *najja'ai*, a soft white leguminous fruit that must be removed by hand in mushy bite sized portions from a long pod. We spotted the children laughing around Chijiyo who was sitting on a stump as the children took turns feeding him; each fruit stamped with their unmistakable smudgy fingerprints. They exclaimed upon our approach "see, Chijiyo is not eating with his hands, he is not eating off the floor!" And so it went, many attempts on my part to safeguard his health ended up making things worse, but fortunately, I am not the only influence in his life.

The literature discussing extended families often describes how livelihoods, workloads, and responsibilities can be diversified and distributed among the various individuals in such household formations. This dissemination takes place over various cycles so as to broaden ecological, social, political, and economic options, implement autonomy and diminish risk (Baland et. al. 2003, Johnson 2003). However, seldom does the literature on extended families emphasize how parental roles can be shared among various family members and others resulting in a more balanced, less individualistic, parenting style that benefits children in non-material ways (Fonseca 2002, Peluso 2003). The idea that multiple parents additionally contribute toward an emotional and judicial balance in children's lives is not principally stressed. Given that Ese Eja relatedness is exceptionally fluid, ideas of parenthood can theoretically extend to all adults in the village and involve not only responsibility for other children but authority over them as well. Relatedness not only extends laterally but also expands through the widespread practice of adoption and an extensive acceptance of partible paternity: the

notion that the child is formed in the fetus through the cumulative amalgamation of sperm (Peluso and Boster 2002). As such there is a general sense that multiple people form a person.

In Ese Eja everyday ideologies, conceiving and raising children become open, flexible, and negotiated activities. Small villages with multiple and partible parentage translate into arrangements whereby parents can have many types of children and children can have many types of parents. I had previously understood this in terms of how easily I was able to take on parental roles but had never considered what this might entail in terms of my own child. As such, parenting does not only entail the caring and protection for children's well being but it also includes reprimanding them, enjoying the benefits of their labor and making use of them as negotiators. In turn, children bestow their virtues on adults with whom they build rapport and often blackmail those for whom they hold more trepidation. For instance, children often liaise between lovers in extra-marital trysts and some use their knowledge as a way of gaining favors and rewards. This active and instrumental agency signals how significant children are in an overall political economy.

It is by observing and experiencing the way that people treated Chijiyo that I began to appreciate how significant my own nurturance of Ese Eja children was in forming children as people. For Ese Eja, the growth of a child is not a spontaneous process but one that requires intentional action. Children do not grow the way that trees grow (*powaani*), or hair grows (*kwashaani*), or rivers grow (*javekiani*). Trees, hair, and rivers all grow on their own without the intervention of human action. But children grow the way that crops do (*tiiani*); they need to be tended, protected, and, in a sense, cultivated.¹² Ese Eja raising children say "*eyaya tiiaña*" which translates as "I'm causing-helping them to grow." Referring to an adopted child, Ese Eja say "*eyaya tiimeeña*" or "*ekwe tiimee*" which injects the infix *mee* linguistically reflecting the action of someone other than the subject.¹³ Both *tiiani* and *tiimeeani* imply that children are "made to grow."¹⁴ It is precisely this concept of causing action that reflects the importance of active nurturance and caretaking in raising children, an activity joined by others.

Whereas I had formerly understood my nurturance of Ese Eja children in terms of cultural models of parenting, Chijiyo emphasizes the possibilities that emerge through the multiple constructions of parent-child relationships. Concurrent to positions of parental responsibility and authority and the various rights over various types of children, children forge and test the extent of the relationships they can develop with various types of adults. Although Chijiyo may be "mine," he simultaneously belongs to others and to neither. Children are not simply born into a family or kinship matrix and made into people, they are continually crafting the process of relatedness through their needs and the choices they make.¹⁵ Through these choices, children derive their own agency, a sense of being able to create, change and influence their reality. In bringing Chijiyo to Ese Eja communities, I have implicitly consented toward his being "helped to grow" by others, as well as to his forging his own alliances. This undertaking has been embraced with much enthusiasm. His overwhelming acceptance certainly binds my husband and me more strongly to the people with whom we live and work while also making us more vulnerable as Chijiyo begins to mediate our relationships in the community.¹⁶

[from my fieldnotes 2003] This afternoon I overheard Dimitri's friends cajoling him to ask me for biscuits 'Go ahead Chijiyo – tell your mother that you want some biscuits. Tell her you are hungry! Tell her your stomach aches!'...I wondered how they knew about the secret stash of biscuits and laughed to myself about how sweetly sneaky they were being. I waited to hear more. After a few moments, Chijiyo nonchalantly and convincingly called out for me to bring him some biscuits. Just as I was about to call back, I was surprised to hear him whisper to one of the boys "O.K. now go and slingshot me a little bird!!" The more I thought about it the more unsure I was about whom he was mimicking. What was this, a trade? I was initially amused with how mischievous these children were and how unaware Chijiyo was about the way in which he was being manipulated, but his response suggested otherwise.

Surely these children were getting on with the ways of social life, and rather than just a trade, each one was using the other to get things that the other had better access to. This aspect of their relationship that children master so young, – that of using each other, at first embarrassed me because it was really no different from some aspects of my own relationships, though in a very crude form. Yet, what this coarseness also made clear was that through this process they were also bonding with each other, exploring their friendships and enjoying themselves. If I could also learn this lesson of unabashed give and take would I also get on as well as Chijiyo in the field or would it be different? What at first appeared to be so calculated was actually quite simple – intimacy at times involves using each other....and secrecy is the medium through which it most commonly transpires.

If as Simmel says secrecy is “an act of individualization” (1950: 334), then keeping a secret or sharing the secret are social acts, ones in which children excel, ones in which my child was no exception. The degree to which children harbor and create secrets speaks of their keen ability at managing and exchanging information. Like any child living in these communities, Chijiyo has become an informant, theirs and ours. In this way, it has also become clear to me that we are all using participant-observation methods to find out things that we want to know. The strength and meaning of the connections we make with individuals are directly linked to the quality and reliability of the insights we glean. All participants contribute toward processes of building trust and conditionality that rest upon various methods. Just as I triangulate stories, histories, and experiences, Ese Eja interlocutors similarly do the same.



Figure 2. Children hanging from the house beams. (photo by author)

Participant observation may be novel as a systematic methodological tool but its practices are not unique in terms of everyday life and the way that people acquire knowledge and information. Ese Eja certainly take mental notes and triangulate, often quite systematically – they watch me closely, they try to predict my actions and reactions, and they frequently use others to double check something I said, seeking consistency amidst contradiction.¹⁷ So what does this say about fieldwork? One thing it emphasizes is how meaningful connections happen *between* people and are thus multi-dimensional; each experience that brings you closer to someone, in turn, often brings them closer to you. If relationships allow for intimacy, then observation and participation in the lives of others occurs with a wider, more engaging scope. Intimacy is not just about being part of other people’s lives but also about letting others into your own life. It is not only about giving but also receiving. As such, this analysis serves as an allegory for “participant-observation” (both as a method and as a practice) in dealing with a commitment to and intimacy with individuals and community.

Whereas my first reaction to scenarios such as the biscuit trade was amusement, I somehow also wished that Chijiyo didn't want something back from his friends. As I listened more and more, children always seemed to be evening the score of reciprocity, unpacking Mauss's gift to show that it is all in "the give and take" and that the gift is a mere vehicle. Yet unlike Sahlins' (1972) characterization of generalized reciprocity as representing exceeding levels of trust and social closeness, children show how more balanced and symmetrical exchanges are just as intimate.

As I paid attention to further interactions between Chijiyo and his friends, their procuring and providing each other with food, their spontaneous sharing, their coercive sharing, their exchange of information about each others' families, their betrayals and liaisons – they all took place in ways that exaggerated, in speech and actions, some of the *differences* between ourselves and Ese Eja friends rather than similarities – at least this is how I saw it. Particularly upsetting was when Chijiyo gave people pleasure by exaggerating our relative wealth by telling his friends and their families that he has "a million toys" and a swimming pool (he is referring to a neighbour's pool in Puerto Maldonado). The more pleasure that he gives his friends by pronouncing our differences in wealth, the more he reveals, even if the specific details of his stories are somewhat untrue.

The set of social markers by which Chijiyo distinguishes himself – material commodities and/or access to them – are somewhat distinct from the social markers that his friends use when boasting, namely their astuteness and physical motor coordination skills associated with hunting, fishing, and soccer. Yet despite these different markers, in all of these circumstances, boasting is a form of exaggeration and perhaps even self-ridicule and humility; it is delivered in a fashion that is so over the top that their performers instantly become voluntary targets for amusement or mockery. Children are particularly fond of the bigger than life qualities of stories, especially the absurdities implicit in them. I eventually came to grips with children's mastery of this form of verbal play. Whereas I was shuddering when Chijiyo pronounced and exaggerated our differences in wealth, Chijiyo was actually neutralizing these differences, holding them up to the point of incredibility, a refreshing exposure. Unlike us, Chijiyo felt comfortable expressing everything he felt and was not expected to suspend emotional or moral judgments (McGrath 1998).

Children's ability to express themselves as they wish ties in with their general ease for non-verbal forms of communication – laughter, playing, imitation, facial and bodily gestures, actions, touch, and sounds – all of which bond them together as a fluid and elastic group of *esho'ikiana*, 'small people' of different ages. Even their silence often binds them together as a form of communication (Hall and Hall 2009). Adults learn to pick up on the significance of a silent lull when children are playing together, as this can mean that they are 'up to something'. Complicity obliges silence. One day I abruptly left Chijiyo and two of his rowdy friends in the house when someone came over to borrow my video camera. I had started walking across the field that forms the center of the community when I noted a sudden silence. I shrugged it off. Yet these five minutes of silence ended in Chijiyo screaming in pain. We all ran over and he was standing in the brush by the house with food in his hands while his friends were running away at top speed yelling at him to run with them. Before I could even reach him to see what was wrong they were already back to rescue him, visibly shaking him and carrying him into an open space. He was covered with fiercely biting army ants. Once Chijiyo was safe they rolled around in fits of laughter. Apparently, upon stealing food from the house, the three set off too hurriedly to notice that the brush had been invaded by army ants that morning. Chijiyo later explained how the youngest of his friends signaled them over to the food, and carefully removed it and distributed it planning to make an escape to the forest. The silence, the theft, the running, the screaming, the rescuing, the shaking, and the laughter are all part of an open dialogue of forthright interactions that echo children's unstructured communication, free will, and inter-dependency.

Chijiyo has spent half his life living in Ese Eja communities embodying our respect for Ese Eja ways of life and beliefs, as well as their notions of co-parenting which often override our own ideas. Partly raising him in Ese Eja communities reflects the overall extent to which I have actually grown older with them over time; raising Chijiyo is just part of the life cycle that is shared among those with whom you live closely, an ongoing relationship that long-

term fieldwork begets. Chijiyo speaks Ese Eja and Spanish, goes barefoot and shirtless, attends the same neglected schoolhouse, hunts and fishes with his friends, does not-so-nice things with his friends, cries with them, mourns with them, gets sick among them, and cured with them. Clearly, our children spending all waking hours together brings us closer together but not without also unearthing our distances – distances that we had tended to downplay before Chijiyo arrived on the scene. As anthropologists, many of the things we want to unearth lie as dormant public secrets protected by political systems that resist direct confrontation (Diamond 1974). Nonetheless, we are embedded in these systems despite our own critiques of them. Although we have tried to use our membership and familiarity with these systems as a way to facilitate understandings of difference, we tend not to stress our differences. Chijiyo has made it clear that our resistance against outwardly carrying our Western baggage has not reduced the “lightning bolt” visibility of our privileges. Whereas we always viewed these differences as obstacles, our friends’ laughter shows otherwise – even though the laughter is at us and our predicament.

I was intrigued when some of Chijiyo’s friends began to call him “Mowgli!” after the character in the Disney 1967 animated film *The Jungle Book*.¹⁸ They exclaimed “Chijiyo look just like Mowgli – exactly the same!” For years his friends in both the UK and US also occasionally refer to him as Mowgli; not so much because of his appearance but as Chijiyo explains, “It must be because I come from the city and live in the jungle.” As for understanding why his Ese Eja friends make the same association he says “they know where I come from and they know that I want to stay.” Yet Chijiyo has never liked *The Jungle Book* even now that his friends in the communities have watched it repeatedly ever since they have sporadically begun to acquire DVD players.¹⁹ When Dimitri was a toddler, I had thought that the film would at least minimally hold his attention since he had experienced rainforests, yet it is specifically because of his familiarity that he did not care for the film. Today he tries to explain why he so dislikes *The Jungle Book*;

It’s hard to describe why I don’t like it. It’s a bit silly because if Mowgli were there ‘for real’ he would have to have more skills than he does. How can he survive? He would have to hunt but since he doesn’t know how, it makes no sense! And why doesn’t he get eaten? And he likes all the animals at the same time, if it were just one animal he was friends with then it would make more sense. If he was raised in a wolf family – how can he know how to speak English – it just makes no sense!

Reminiscent of perspectival ontology (Viveiros de Castro 1996, 2004), and with knowledge of Mowgli’s two worlds, Chijiyo views the *Jungle Book* as a mockery of what for him is a normal encounter. These children’s different points of views come together to encapsulate ideas of how the feral/civilized human/animal boundaries can be transgressed and what these boundaries mean to different children. They also poignantly refer to the implicit colonial encounter that precedes any actual encounter between individuals from these distinct backgrounds (Rubenstein 2002), an encounter that is embedded in many of Kipling’s novels, as well as the popular imagination. For Chijiyo’s British and American friends, Dimitri represents someone who has crossed the limits of what is “normal” or “civilized,” a word that remains unchecked in laymen or “layboys” vocabularies. His friends watch him go and return in good health without hearing any of the sensationalized accounts of his life in the tropics that Chijiyo fabricates of the west for his indigenous friends. The normalcy he exudes is far more alarming than any tales he can tell. In contrast, his Ese Eja friends see him as someone who prefers to be with them, as someone whose very personhood has been shaped by his relationships with them, their families, and the multinational environments in which cross-realities take place.

Like with many Amazonian creation stories (de Civrieux, 1980), Ese Eja narratives make sense of and incorporate the origin of western peoples and western goods into their stories, for them Mowgli can be animal and human and from the west.²⁰ Chijiyo has a unique vantage point; through his own perspectivist outlook, he recognizes that alliances are rarely established with all animals, that languages are learned through participation with other speakers and beings are molded by other beings. He sees Mowgli as a western construct, and

his dissatisfaction is an indirect critique of colonialism whereby Mowlgi epitomizes what happens when cultural values and interpretations formed elsewhere are forced upon others. It is one thing to cross boundaries and another to ignore what they might consist of.

In Ese Eja communities, children traverse most boundaries freely. They walk in and out of households as they wish and since they are not cordoned off from much of adult life, they occupy a unique position to collect and traffic information between themselves, adults, and households. In fact, adults often encourage children to gather sensitive information about others such as how much fish someone *really* caught, what people say behind each other's backs, and for confirming who is having an affair with whom. Children are often instructed to fetch information and are carefully questioned and listened to upon their return. Given the value placed on this type of information, it is not surprising that children eagerly gather and report cherished information to their family members, in some cases even fabricating stories in order to please them. In this sense, my child and Ese Eja children also act as "research participants," sometimes presenting or gathering information or sometimes throwing light upon more serious and understated exchanges.



Figure 3. Children race canoes on the Heath River, Peru. (photo by author)

This ability of children to push the limits of social rules, while they can, is reminiscent of Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss incisively revealing that children use each other within a system that intrinsically sanctions such relations, an observation that anthropology has ethical concerns with.²¹ Derrida's (1974) critique rests upon Lévi-Strauss' provocation of children in violating the prohibition of uttering taboo names, a practice which the children already practiced and which benefitted his collection of genealogies.²² When Lévi-Strauss (1973) makes claims that the Nambiquara did not have writing but instead only "squiggly lines," he redefines writing as a system of power rooted in trickery (294-304). In turn, Derrida deems that the Nambiquara indeed have writing and always have since they, like the anthropologist, use language violently to hurt and deceive one another.²³ As such, regardless of where one stands on the debate of what constitutes writing, Derrida's point is relevant in terms of the intrinsic entanglement of language, power, and exploitation that precedes the presence of an ethnographer and of which the ethnographer makes use.

Ese Eja Children are also often cajoled into elaborating rumors and vocalizing resentments. For instance, a woman was annoyed at her twelve-year-old daughter for wasting time with a fourteen-year-old boy, allegedly engaged in excessive sexual activity with many other young girls. She complained about how his parents ought to reprimand him. One afternoon, I listened to her sweet-talk her eight year old son into insulting the boy while he was playing soccer so that on-lookers could hear. He amused everyone by shouting out "Look at Yeje! He has

a projected waist!” – an obvious reference to the boy’s excessive sexual appetite, since too much sex leads to having a large arch in the back.²⁴ He also humiliated Yeje and those responsible for his upbringing. Children’s relationships with adults are often interdependent and shape relevant broader power relations within the community.

Unlike Overing and Passes’ (2000) emphasis of the general importance to strive toward conviviality in Amazonia, children are free to fully explore its underbelly, the world of confrontation and mischief as well as inequality, without dramatic consequences. Children, like drunks, are not held responsible for what they say and are thus able to vocalize sensitive issues and conflicts otherwise indiscreet for adults. In viewing discretion as the respect for knowledge and secrecy that is not expressly revealed, Simmel (1950) implies that “what is concealed may be known” (321). Thus, children’s indiscretion can be seen as open statements about what is already known, a revelation of what Taussig (1999:5) characterizes as, the public secret: “that which is generally known but cannot be articulated.” And indeed, as in the fabled *Emperor’s New Clothes*, children are given the benefit of the doubt and excused for their indiscretions despite the upheavals they may cause (268-9). However, unlike adults, they are privileged as expenders of the secret, in the Bataillian sense, since they are generally aware of the rules against telling (269). By actively participating in the dynamic that transforms private knowledge into the “public secret,” children are key in the workings of social power.

My son’s exchanges with other children underscore how political children actually are: a politics to which secrecy gives voice through others. The politics of these actions lies in the verity that all of these children are in variable positions of what they can *see* and what they can *say*. Apart from children being able to articulate and act upon many things that we cannot and, in turn, mostly being excused for their acts and words, they additionally, in doing so lift a veil of secrecy. Like the boy who exclaims; “the Emperor is wearing no clothes!” the children reveal the secret of our complicity. Children know that adults play games and pretend about things and this, their unveiling, is precisely what so often turns their laughter into our anguish.

There are also many times when the secret is a lie strategically designed to place blame on or protect another; this mostly happens when a theft and other misdoings are involved or when their group’s collective self-interest is at stake. At such times, it is nearly impossible to get a sense of what the ‘truth’ may be. In some cases, with time, however, the secret is revealed, first to those in their own circle of confidence and eventually to others, as these occasions are reason for shared excitement. My friend Pasha once gave me a partial glimpse into one of the contexts in which information is diffused outside a circle of friends; “Ese Eja can lie very well – from when we are very little. An *esboi* (child) will tell his *epeji* (friend) the truth and they will help each other but one day they will fight and that is how we will know the truth. Because when they are mad at each other they will tell the truth about the other’s secrets. That is when we can see.” Yet children are sometimes encouraged to lie, as it is not considered an immoral act but rather a fundamental part of social life. Although some Ese Eja may feel more comfortable about lying about things that I may be uncomfortable lying about, I think that we often lie to ourselves about how much lying is actually part of our own social worlds.

An old European saying affirms, “secrets make good friends.” By the same token, revealing the secret when friendships are broken is an act of hostility. In small communities, the possibility for secrecy is made difficult due to everyone’s proximity and awareness of others’ actions. In other words, secrets may have a short life span but while they last they solidify friendships while simultaneously placing a barrier between those who know and those who do not. Children transgress this barrier by perpetuating the public secret and eventually revealing it. Whereas Simmel (1950) points toward this aspect of secrecy as a crucial weakness, in the case of children this potential transgression is one of its strengths. Children’s ability to forsake secrets creates instances where their power and control over information is openly acknowledged.

Children also deliver secrets to one another so that the other can instrumentally tell the secret. This often happens when the exposure of their secrets is self-serving or embarrassing. Shawe will whisper to Chijiyo and then Chijiyo will tell me; “Shawe’s parents have left him alone. They lied. They said they would be gone only a short while. He hasn’t eaten today – cook for him Mama.” And there are other forms of complicity that address broader political concerns. The eco-tourists will arrive and the children will push Chijiyo out from the woods

covered in *huito* skin dye (*Genipa Americana*) - looking *Ese Eja nei* (very Ese Eja) to be photographed so that they can avoid being photographed by strangers or Chijiyo will bargain with a visiting merchant using his friend's papayas. As Simmel warns, "secrecy modifies relationships" (330), yet such forms of agency can serve to strengthen commitments between children and forge new ground as these young friendships mature. After listening to a monologue from the local school teacher, Chijiyo self-assuredly corrected him by asserting that Peru is not a bilingual country but a multi-lingual one and that Ese Eja is not a dialect but a language. This last incident had positive repercussions that led to his being cited in Bolivia among Ese Eja leaders "We need to be like Chijiyo and say what we know is true!" And yet, Chijiyo states, "it is my *epeejjis* who have taught me *how* to fight for something I want" – although he also means this literally.

With the ideological possibility of people making children and the practical possibility of children making people, by sharing Chijiyo with others, I have endorsed the opportunity for individuals to partake in the shaping of his person and in his own crafting of potential relations. Herein lies the back-and-forth notion of "the gift" that moves between givers, recipients, and the gift itself. Among Amazonian societies, where prestigious goods make only limited contributions toward producing social relations and it is instead daily exchanges that serve in producing persons (Fausto 1999, Erikson 1996; Seeger et al. 1979), children are both agents and gifts that can work toward making people. In this sense, more broadly, fieldwork might also be seen as a process of gift exchange (Faussig 2008).²⁵

Raising Chijiyo in Ese Eja communities is interpreted by villagers as 'a gift', one which like all gifts is part of ongoing sets of reciprocal relations. In sharing this gift, I unleash further opportunities for exchange and for the processual makings of personhood, parenting and relatedness to take various forms. Living gifts are among the many possibilities for positive exchanges and commitments – for wonderful and meaningful ways to make use of each other – that occur between individuals and communities *because* of fieldwork and *despite* fieldwork.

In describing and analyzing children's instrumentality and agency in Amazonia, I have shown how reflecting upon intimacy in fieldwork can contribute toward the transparent production of anthropological knowledge and allow for significant consideration to be given to the power relations and other epistemological frameworks that underlie our methods, theories and practices. In doing so I also recognize children as active agents in social life and forefront their roles, strategies and narratives, acknowledging their overdue importance as critical interlocutors for anthropological research. With this in mind, the vulnerability of having my relationships in the field mediated by someone who is now ten years old comes with an acknowledgement that his instrumentality is like those of his friends – although each is able to bring different things into a process of exchange, it revels in revealing the inconsistencies and contradictions of power relations in fieldwork, anthropology, and life.

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Notes

¹ Ese Eja are lowland Amazonian peoples comprising about 2,500 individuals living in several communities along the rivers Beni, Madre de Dios, Heath, Orton, and Tambopata, in the border regions of Bolivia and Peru. The Ese Eja language belongs to the Takana language family, itself related to other Macro-Panoan languages of Western Amazonia. Most Ese Eja plant swidden horticultural fields, hunt, fish, and gather, and extract and process forest resources for their own consumption and for commercial trade; they also periodically and variably engage in forms of labor with townsfolk. Ese Eja, who live in communities spread over 500 km, are situated at varying distances from urban centers spanning across Peru and Bolivia; increasingly, they move between these and other urban centers (Peluso and Alexiades 2005).

² These contributors may also pose obstacles (see Brightman 2004).

³ This refers to Steve Rubenstein's unpublished 'call for papers' for 'Fieldwork and Committed Relationships' an American Anthropological Association (AAA) panel he organized in 2007.

⁴ When I first began my fieldwork in Bolivia I was adopted by a large family. Nine months later my boyfriend, Miguel Alexiades, joined me and was incorporated into my family as a son-in-law. By our second year of fieldwork we had our own home. Although many anthropologists discuss the struggle they experienced suppressing western gender ideals or accommodating to local gender role expectations, this had not presented itself as a major problem. I lived as Eja Eja women generally do as best as I could, and that is how I wanted it. It goes without saying that I was not strictly bound to Ese Eja gender roles but I wanted to experience these much as I could, a desire which emerged quite effortlessly. Although in New York City, it was Miguel who did the laundry, I would now spend hours by the river washing his clothes by hand. Whereas I had always had close male friends, my male friendships were now secondary and contingent on the presence of their female partners or relatives. When something was expected of me because of my gender, I viewed it as a challenge and as an opportunity to understand different points of view as well as a way of revealing insights about my own background and world. Notwithstanding, I was less tolerant toward gender expectations different from my own in the more regional broader society.

⁵ Ethnographic work documenting children's knowledge is 'extremely rare' (Van der Geest 1996:339).

⁶ My boyfriend was considered my husband, particularly since marriage is signaled by cohabitation, among other activities.

⁷ Ese Eja expectancy that it was important for me to practice the *couvade* adds to the literature that argues that it is processual nurturance rather than biological kinship that creates and sustains children as people (Rival 1998).

⁸ As Cesareo suggested to me (pers. comm.) there is an unwritten tradition of female anthropologists forming close bonds with children. The most prominent examples I know of would be Margaret Mead and Cora de Bois, who were known for both their focus on and connections to children. See Montgomery (2008) for an extensive review on the history of anthropological studies and the use of children as informants.

⁹ Ese Eja individuals have often phrased these thoughts in various ways. Similarly, Flinn, Marshall and Armstrong (1998) in their edited volume about fieldwork and families highlight how in general anthropologists tend to embrace diversity and be tolerant and thus might welcome the opportunity, as parents, to have their own children experience societies different from their own despite any potential hardships.

¹⁰ This resonates with adoptive filiation, which is part of an extensive Ese Eja kinship reckoning system that includes frequent adoption. This could also be seen as a process of familiarization as part of a moral or "generalized economy centered on the appropriation of subjectivities from the exterior into the *socius*" (Fausto 1999: 938).

¹¹ As discussed elsewhere (Alexiades 1999, Peluso 2003) the expression of extreme emotions is restrained and often marked as aggression, instability or vulnerability.

- ¹² *Tiiani* means to mature or to become old; “*tii*” implies “old” when used as a suffix with nouns referring to people, e.g. *eponatii* (“old woman”), *etii* (“old person”).
- ¹³ The infix *mee* subsequently renders all verbs transitive.
- ¹⁴ *Wojeani* is also used to substitute *timeeani* as a reference to raising an adopted child.
- ¹⁵ As Yanagisako (1979) pointed out in arguing against functionalism, families are diversely constructed and as such cannot define them *a priori* in formation, functions or otherwise.
- ¹⁶ I realize now how reminiscent this is of how Ese Eja children have mediated my relationships with their parents.
- ¹⁷ Cesareo, Claire in presenting on her fieldwork in Bahia (unpublished), uses Bakhtin’s notion of “sympathetic co-experiencing” (Bakhtin 1990, 81) to describe how it is through co-experience and co-participation that actual empathy is can take place.
- ¹⁸ The film is based on Rudyard Kipling’s, *The Jungle Book*.
- ¹⁹ In recent years, solar energy is being used to power the sporadic flurry of DVD players and televisions that appear and disappear shortly after the lucrative Brazil nut season.
- ²⁰ It also opens the possibility for further examination of Wagner’s (1981:31) “reverse anthropology” as a site for “literalizing the metaphors of modern” western peoples from the viewpoint of indigenous peoples, a site which he suspected, and I can confirm, already exists.
- ²¹ See Derrida’s critique of Lévi Strauss in “The Violence of the Letter” in *Grammatology* (1974[1967]). He addresses two chapters of *Tristes Tropiques*, “On the Line” and “A Writing Lesson,” that are crucial to a theory of names, speech, power and history.
- ²² Individuals overtly disclose taboo names in order to shame and mock a person among other Amazonian peoples as well (Campbell 1995, Fiorini 2000). Napoleon Chagnon (1968) did the same and has been publically castigated for it (Borofsky 2005) whereas Lévi-Strauss has not.
- ²³ For Lévi-Strauss, writing everywhere is about power and not a matter of “squiggly lines.” Yet, as Derrida so aptly points out, Lévi-Strauss judges the Nambikwara as not having writing precisely for their very lack of “squiggly lines.” He stresses that Lévi-Strauss is unable to see this because of his own western biases.
- ²⁴ On another occasion this physical condition was explained to me more specifically as follows: “Ese Eja have sex with the men on top. The woman wraps her legs around them and pulls his back down toward her. This is why a man who has too much sex as an *esboi* (young boy) has an arched waist as an adult.”
- ²⁵ Taussig (2008 interview) refers to the delicate relationship of fieldworkers and their hosts as one of gift-giving and gift-receiving.

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