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# Gender in the Making: A Pragmatic Approach to Transgender Experiences in Lowland Tropical America

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## Introduction

This article proposes a comparative study of transgender experiences in two Amerindian populations: the Guna of Panama and the Kakataibo of Peruvian Amazonia. Ethnographically grounded, we aim to base our analyses on native theories relating to the body and the person. Although transgender individuals among the autochthonous nations of North America soon drew the attention of anthropologists (e.g., Callender et al. 1983; Blackwood 1984; Williams 1986; Fulton and Anderson 1992; Epple 1998; Goulet 1996; Roscoe 1987), transgender experiences remain much less known in the Amerindian context of Central and South America, especially in the Amazon basin, where they do not even seem to constitute a specific social category. Gender experiences that evade bicategorization have, though, appeared with more frequency in recent ethnographies of the lowlands (Cova 2018), which invites us to ask about not only their nature but also the conditions that have allowed their emergence or increased visibility. The use of the term *transgender* may appear problematic, given this notion has no direct equivalent in the vernacular languages of the people studied here. Our usage is therefore generic (an “umbrella term”) and seeks to cover a variety of experiences, described through diverse terminologies: gender liminality, gender fluidity, gender dissidence, betwixt-and-between practices, third gender, genderqueer, nonbinary gender, transvestites, two-spirits, gender inversion, etc. As Laurence Hérault (2007) has pointed out, the term *transgender* allows the designation of experiences and persons who transgress gender bicategorization more broadly, so as to suspend, even if partially, the more conceptual terminologies, especially those of medical origin. Using *transgender* in this descriptive sense, as Hérault suggests, also enables us to move beyond the vernacular conceptualizations and make comparisons between different social, historical, and ethnographic contexts.

Pierre Clastres was the first to write about transgender life forms in Lowland Tropical America working among the Guayaki in the Paraguayan rainforest. Clastres (1966) argues that among this society, an individual is considered a man when he owns a bow and hunts effectively. Without providing us with sufficient detail, unfortunately, he refers to two cases of men assigned to engage in women’s tasks when they turned out to be unsuited to hunting. Deprived of their masculinity, all they had to do was replace the bow with a basket (the ultimate female tool) and cross-dress. The group’s attitude toward these “failed” men depended on completion of their transition: the individual who cross-dressed and had sex with men was, without doubt, better integrated into the village than the one who occupied an interstitial position, maintaining the appearance of a man but performing women’s tasks. Although the relationship between gender, sexuality, and identity is not exactly the same among the Guna and the Kakataibo, in our article we explore some of the insights Clastres developed, seeking to reflect on gender in conjunction with local economies and productive tasks.

We met to discuss these issues in a December 2017 workshop held as part of the Centre for Teaching and Research in Amerindian Ethnology (EREA) seminar at University Paris Nanterre. In this article, we develop a particular question raised at the meeting and that seems to us particularly salient for an approach to the transgender phenomenon among Amerindian peoples. Making use of the notions of performance and status, we analyze two ethnographic

cases to show that (trans)gender should be understood via two complementary dimensions: while manifested in a set of expressive practices, it is also inscribed in a specific system of social organization. Adopting a pragmatic approach that emphasizes the relational, aesthetic, and performative dimensions of gender, we explore the ways through which two Amerindian peoples negotiate and inhabit gender norms (Mahmood 2005). This relational approach enables us to examine gender experiences beyond the notions of female and male, and in accordance with local theories of the body and person.

The Guna speak a Chibcha language and today number more than 80,000 people in Panama. Fishing and agriculture are the main subsistence activities, and coconuts and plantains (*plátanos*) constitute the staple diet in the indigenous province of Gunayala. The abundance of coconuts allows a substantial portion to be sold to Colombian merchants, making them an important source of family income. On the mainland, *tierra firme*, the men plant maize, sugarcane, yams, and manioc. The Guna control tourist activities in the province, exploiting the growing potential of that industry in Panama's Caribbean region. In Panama City, the Guna engage in diverse kinds of salaried work; some families run stores in the craft markets where they sell their textile art (*mola*, pl. *molagana*). The transgender condition among the Guna is designated by a local term, *omeggid*, and possesses a basis in mythology. From the end of the 1980s, the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic decimated the transgender population in ruthless fashion, provoking a discontinuity in the omeggid gender practices and dynamics. Today the younger generations increasingly undertake body modification procedures and identify themselves on occasion as "trans girls" (*chicas trans*). Diego Madi Dias collected the data relating to the Guna; he lived for two years among the Guna, mainly in two villages, but also for a short period in the Panamanian capital.

The Kakataibo group, speakers of a Pano language, today have a population of 4,000 people, divided into three subgroups who speak different dialects and are located on the Aguaytía, San Alejandro, and Sungaruyacu Rivers in Peruvian Amazonia. Manioc cultivation and fishing remain important activities in the Kakataibo subsistence economy. However, the main source of income today comes from the sale of plantains in the markets of Aguaytía. Currently the Kakataibo find themselves in constant transit between the city and their native communities, and many families have built second homes in the city. Increased mobility, formal schooling, urban sociability, and mixed marriages between Amerindian women and mestizo men have prompted a series of transformations in Kakataibo social organization, affecting gender dynamics and leading to new models of femininity and masculinity. In this context alternative ways of being have appeared that escape gender binarism. Magda Helena Dziubinska gathered the data relating to the Kakataibo in two communities situated on the Aguaytía River and in the city of the same name. The author resided around two years total with the Kakataibo between 2009 and 2017.

Reflecting on these two cases together, we firstly explore the question of becoming transgender in relation to the person's social legibility. We then proceed to analyze the relational dynamics in which transgender persons are embedded so as to propose two approaches to the transgender phenomenon in indigenous lowland America, namely performance and status. Two questions thus traverse this work: How is gender made visible? And how is gender inscribed in the local economic and social dynamics?

### **Becoming Transgender: Two Ethnographic Cases**

The cases of the Guna (Panama) and Kakataibo (Peruvian Amazonia) illustrate two different local modes of conceiving transgender experience in indigenous America. In this section, we present some of the main differences, especially concerning the relation between (trans)gender and sexuality, as well as the social recognition reserved for people who evade the binary gender system. We shall see that among the Guna, persons of a dissident gender are recognized for their technical virtuosity in the execution of traditional textile art, a major symbol of identity, whereas gender-fluid experiences among the Kakataibo appear associated with dangerous spirits that cause disorder. Beyond these differences, it is interesting to note that the two ethnographic cases explored in this article share something in common. First, transgender experiences only concern people assigned male sex at birth. While it is obvious that there are women who have homoerotic relationships, these do not lead to gender transgression. Lesbians are not a separate social category and thus remain invisible most of the time in our fieldwork.<sup>1</sup>

Second, for both the Guna and the Kakataibo, noncompliant gender experience is a fundamentally relational phenomenon, one that mobilizes and is inscribed in a dynamic of exchanges involving kinship, friendships, and the space of residence. Amerindian material thus seems to be particularly appropriate for exploring the relational and performative dimensions of gender.

### *The Guna in Panama*

The arrival of a newborn is announced by the Guna as the birth of a fisherman or a (female) water collector, whose future virtuosity is sung in the form of verses improvised to calm infants and get them to sleep. As can be observed elsewhere in Amazonia, productive activities occupy a central place in local conceptions of gender (Clastres 1966; McCallum 2001).

The Guna are famous for their female art of designs on fabric (*mola*), and the best artists are deemed to be those born as men but who “seem like women” (*omeggid*). *Omeggid* persons develop from childhood a sense of belonging to the female universe that is considered authentic by their group of residence and the community in which they live. The uxorilocal economy practiced in Gunayala conditions the production of masculinity—leaving home, leaving to fish, leaving to marry (Madi Dias 2017, 2018). In the case of those people recognized as *omeggid*, the dissidence in relation to the social project of masculinity is not conceived as a question of desire or sexuality. Rather, the Guna explain the situation of the *omeggid* via a native theory of “thought as *affective capacity*.” As in many parts of Amazonia (Surrallés 1998, 2003; Belaunde 2005), thought is understood to be a process related to the heart. The *omeggid* are described as having “the heart of a woman” (*ome gwage nigga*)—that is, they *think* like a woman. Above all, the *omeggid* “do not go away”: they do not marry and, in the context of uxorilocality, they remain associated with their natal home and their consanguine family.

Women initially recognize the *omeggid* identification with the female gender, responsible for “making grow the body” of children through their lullabies and other care techniques. The women in Mammidub village resort to two criteria to determine the *omeggid* condition: the development of a *verbal gender personality*, that is, *omeggid* children “speak quickly and laugh uproariously like women”; and the child’s manifest interest in the visual and material culture related to the female gender, especially textile art (*mola*) and the manufacture of bead wristbands (*wini*).

One must emphasize that recognition of the *omeggid* condition does not take the form of a definitive appraisal of the child’s subjectivity, nor does it translate as a “decision” by the women on the way of raising a son who begins to “show” (*oyoged*) an identification with the female gender. This is a misunderstanding frequently repeated in the *waga* (outsider, “white”) reading of the family context involving *omeggid* people in Gunayala (Madi Dias 2015). This stems from Euro-American-based *waga* culture corresponding precisely to a culture of gender as a diagnostic category (Bento 2010), in which the truth about the subject can be defined by measuring bodies; their gonads and genitals; and their levels of prenatal hormones, including the realization of surgical “assignment” procedures, continually denounced as mutilations that aim to “adjust” the body of intersex children to the heteronormal “cistem” (or cisgender system). Euro-American *waga* culture corresponds above all to a tradition committed to the Platonic notion of “truth,” in which gender manifests as a fact and an obsession, like “the pre-eminence of the right-hand” (Hertz 1909): at once an organic asymmetry and an ideal.

Guna gender, by contrast, can be understood through its ethical and aesthetic dimensions—that is, as a way of “thinking” or “remembering” others (*binsaed*) and collaborating productively in the context of the coresident economy; it is a style of “showing” (*oyoged*) oneself in the context of mutual relations. Seen from this perspective, gender assumes a simultaneously collective and differentiating character, producing both “conviviality” and “autonomy” (Overing Kaplan 1989a, 1989b, 1999).

The capacity for oral expression inaugurates a decisive step in which the child begins to “demonstrate how it is thinking” (*oyoged*).<sup>2</sup> The development of speech leads to the recognition of autonomy as a personal faculty that explains infant volitions, choices, and individual taste. The verbal root of the suffix *-bied*, generally employed to express will, means to “say” or “pronounce.” In childhood, *omeggids* are recognized as those who begin to show their desire to stay at home. In adult life, they are normally involved in relations with young lads who have not yet married. They classify these lads as their “boyfriends” or “husbands.”

The relation with a boyfriend presumes sexual contact, which is understood in this context as part of male needs. After a night of intimacy, the politest young men appear the next day

bringing peppers, lemons, or tomatoes as a present. The vernacular term of reference, *sabbingwa*, acquires the sense of “boyfriend” from its use context. Its basic meaning is relatively generic: lad, young man, adolescent. The relation with a husband can be defined by the commitment to a flow of prestations, frequently linked to alimentation, but also potentially including financial support and advice when facing difficult situations. These attitudes are understood as proofs of love that correspond to the way this affect is experienced in Gunayala: distinct from an abstract feeling, love is a commitment to concrete manifestations of care. An omeggid may keep food for many people, but her husband is the one for whom she keeps food always or for whom she cannot forget to keep it.<sup>3</sup>

As for gender self-image, we find a varied situation among the omeggids. Some people identify themselves more and others less with the female gender, and body changes (administration of hormones and silicone implants) are more frequent among the younger generations, who identify themselves on occasion as “trans girls.” The older omeggids, who survived the HIV epidemic, can be seen in Gunayala wearing a scarf on their head or a discrete earring. Among the younger omeggids, many dress and present themselves as women, but this tendency far from constitutes a rule. Once again, it is worth emphasizing that the omeggid experience is expressed outside the pathologizing medical framework familiar to us in the West. Consequently, unfamiliar with instances of normalization of their gender dissidence, the omeggids present a fundamentally multiple-gender experience.

Something they present in common is the use of female names, a situation widespread among all the generations. These women’s names are normally bestowed by omeggid friends who have already adopted a feminine name. On the occasion of name bestowal, a *fiesta de tomadera* is organized, usually without the “boyfriends” and “husbands,” and great quantity of alcohol is consumed. It therefore amounts to a *noche de chicas* (a girls’ night) when it is considered good fun to offer Panamanian-brand SL sugarcane liquor, displaying the bottle with the initials SL, which is taken as an acronym for *sólo locas* (crazies/queers only) or *somos locas* (we’re crazies/queers).<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Kakataibo in Peruvian Amazonia*

In Peruvian Amazonia, transgender experiences are essentially conceived in terms of homosexuality. However, this homosexuality is not limited to homoerotic practices, being closely related to different forms of effeminization and cross-dressing, techniques of the body categorically disapproved of in indigenous villages.

The Kakataibo employ different terms to designate gender-fluid people: *tsipë uni* (penetrated man), *marica* (faggot) or *kuman*. *Kuman* is the name of a tree with a hollow trunk, empty inside. “Homosexuals are like kuman, they seem like a trunk but have a hole,” the Kakataibo explain. An allusion to homoeroticism and cross-dressing, this designation reveals another quality attributed to kuman men, that of the *trickster*, a figure who perturbs and creates trouble, including of a visual kind. This faculty to change appearance to trick others, to seduce them and have sexual relations, evokes the malevolent *nushin* spirits, in relation to which the Kakataibo recognize not only the same tendency to seduce through visual trickery but also the taste for sodomy. The term *nushin* designates an entire set of nonhuman beings, including the souls of the dead, but also figures who the Kakataibo consider abnormal, such as *maricas* or people with physical disabilities (perceived to be the result of sexual relations between a woman and spirits), drunk people, and men who have many lovers—that is, men who are incapable of controlling their sexual desires. Reference to uncontrolled sexuality is recurrent in local discourses on the cross-dressing of Kakataibo teenagers. In fact, some people perceive these young transvestites as the outcome of their mothers’ transgressive conduct. Prominent among the Kakataibo explanations for transvestism are, for example, sexual relations with other women, adultery, or simply having allowed the son to be present while making manioc beer (*masato*), a female task par excellence in indigenous Amazonia.

Cross-dressing generally begins at the age of twelve or thirteen when a boy adopts “hyperfeminine” body techniques, including in gestures and way of moving, but also through the use of makeup and figure-hugging clothes. From the outset, families express disapproval of these bodily expressions, and family pressure often forces the young men to leave the community. After migrating to the city, these youths often begin to work in bars and restaurants,<sup>5</sup> where they make other transvestite friends, joining a group that formed around the beauty contests. This relational aspect is perhaps the most salient of the Kakataibo way of being

transgender, characterized by a loosening of kinship ties (sometimes even rupture) and by an intense sociability of friendship among transvestite people. It is worth noting that friendship represents a relatively new relational mode for the Kakataibo, who until recently divided individuals into two main categories: “my others me/kin” (*ën aints*) and “outsiders/enemies” (*no*), categories in relation to which particular and opposite affects and attitudes are reserved. The figure of the friend combines these two categories. The Spanish word *amigo*, which has no equivalent in the vernacular language, forms part of the current everyday vocabulary of the Kakataibo. The valorization of the bonds of friendship, the detachment from the community and the effeminization of the young men who follow beauty standards promoted by pageants are the reason why today’s Kakataibo consider homosexuality to be a new way of life unknown to their ancestors. Homosexuality, which for them reveals a general weakening of men, became a kind of marker of contemporaneity, associated with the city and alternative sociabilities with the region’s nonindigenous population.

Whether considering homosexuality and cross-dressing to be the result of the transgressive conduct of the young men’s mothers, or a secondary effect of urban migration, the Kakataibo understanding is consistently based on a relational and processual model of the body and the person widespread in native Amazonia (Overing Kaplan and Passes 2000; Vilaça 1999; McCallum 2001). In this region the body is conceived as the outcome of the person’s interactions with others and it is continually worked on throughout the life course. The purpose of the various treatments is to make bodies not only beautiful, but also strong, fertile, productive, skilful, etc. In other words, bodies capable of acting in a certain way. In fact, the body in indigenous Amazonia is a bundle of affects, knowledge and dispositions constitutive of the *habitus* (Viveiros de Castro 1996). It is from this production of similar bodies through ritual practices, but also commensality, conviviality, and mutual care that collectives emerge. To become fully human, for instance, babies should be fed by their kin with the right kind of food. This conception of the person, which Fernando Santos-Granero (2012) designates “composite,” is particularly useful for understanding new Amerindian ways of being in the world. Living in the city, going to school, cohabiting with strangers, exchanging substances with them through food and sex, gradually make bodies and people alike to the mestizos.

The feminine names some young men who start to live as transvestites use provide a good illustration of the interstitial quality of their experience, one divided between city and community, femininity and masculinity, kinship and friendship, tradition and modernity. Here the proper name (*anë*) is directly related to the territory and to the mode of relation involved. The female names of the young transvestites, sometimes borrowed from the glamorous universe of television soap operas, replace the names of the ancestors. Use of these names occurs exclusively in the city; they are never pronounced in the village. For a young trans woman, the female proper name she chose when she moved to the town of Pucallpa served as camouflage and made her to some extent invisible. Unknown to her family, the new name prevented her from being found. In this way, the name worked to temporarily suspend kinship ties.

The frequency with which proper names are changed reveals a degree of volatility characteristic of the transgender experience. It would be difficult to understand this volatility through an identity-based approach. Transgender experiences, as lived by young Kakataibo, should not be understood as a simple inversion of the sex assigned at birth and gender identity, as is the case, for instance, among the Inuit (Saladin d’Anglure 2004). The versatility of the cross-dressing practiced by young Kakataibo, the irregularity with which they use one or other grammatical gender in their speech, their undifferentiated participation in the tasks of men and women—these experiences allow us to discern a fluid conception of gender, distant from the kind founded on a rigid binarism. The Kakataibo data stimulate a different kind of reflection on the problem of inversion. At issue here, in fact, is a questioning of the gender dichotomy and the conception of an Amerindian version of queer experience, oriented toward an attempt to invent new ways of being in the world.

### Two Analytic Perspectives: Performance and Status

The artifice, glitter, high heels, and glamor are aspects inherent to transgender experience among the Kakataibo and the mestizos of Aguaytía in Peruvian Amazonia. It is no coincidence the incipient forms of what may one day become the local LGBT movement have taken shape around the beauty contests. A kind of compulsory dramatization of these experiences provides

an insight into the importance of their aesthetic dimension. In this sense, gender in Aguaytía can be conceived primarily in terms of performance and style (Clastres 1966; Goffman 1979; Butler 1990). We have seen that aesthetic and style are also central to comprehending the omeggid experience among the Guna in Panama, where gender is equivalent to the expression or “demonstration” of a person’s thoughts.

Beauty contests have become a central element of mestizo and indigenous festivities in Latin America (Dziubinska and Deshoullière 2017). In these spaces, the Kakataibo way of being transgender is both expressed and invented. Doria, a thirty-four-year-old trans woman, responsible for organizing the beauty contest for girls in a native community, stresses the importance of this competition for her personal and professional life: “It was my gay friends who taught me all these women’s things, how to walk, dance, how to behave on stage and how to loosen up the body. It is really difficult at first, you have to work a lot to know about beauty.”

If the terms “work” and “know” appear regularly in the conversations with transvestites, this is because beauty became a desired skill in this region, one learned and transmitted to others just like any other technique. During the presentation of a beauty contest in July 2017, a group of young transvestites, responsible for putting on the event, was teaching the competing girls how to look beautiful for the public gaze. The girls, usually very shy, needed to appear relaxed and attractive on stage to seduce the men, the primary audience for this show of femininity (Dziubinska 2017). Although specialists in the performance of exuberant femininity, transgender persons do not claim a female identity nor aim to pass as female. Most of the time they self-identify by using the term “gay.” Their aim is not to imitate women or parody them; on the contrary, the transvestites appear in the beauty contests as true sources of a specific femininity.

Despite the complementarity of the male and female genders that sustains the division of labor in Kakataibo villages, femininity is systematically associated with pollution (Belaunde 2005). The term *kēras* (“dirty,” “disgusting”) is used to describe the female body during the menstrual period when various taboos need to be respected. The way of conceiving gender among the Kakataibo rests on this ideology that valorizes masculinity in detriment to femininity. By contrast, the femininity on display in the beauty contests assumes a sense of idealized exuberance. It is not the femininity women embody that fascinates the young transvestites but a freely accessible nonincarnated femininity, which is chimerical and fabulous.

The situation is quite another in Gunayala as the Guna gender regime represents a true challenge to the male life cycle. According to the tendency of uxorilocal residence, a married man should leave to live with his wife’s family. The theme of uxorilocality, especially the loss of the son, is treated in dramatic fashion in mythology, in the ritual of the abduction of the groom, and also in everyday life, as heard in the lullabies women improvise to soothe their children and get them to sleep.

In Gunayala, the uxorilocal house, conceived as a true subject of rights, constitutes the productive unit par excellence. People say married men should “work for the house” (*negarbae*). Both Guna men and women are explicit regarding the wife’s right to the goods of her husband coming from fishing and agriculture. The product of men’s work on the mainland is taken by women, who head to the beach to fetch what belongs to them. A man who decides to offer a fish to his mother or sister runs the risk of having his belongings removed from the marital home where he lives with his affinal relatives. These belongings are then taken to his natal home, which in Gunayala corresponds to a divorce (Mangiotti 2010). If this man wishes to return to live with his wife, he must beat his head on the central trunk holding up the house of his affines, thus reaffirming his commitment to work for this residential unit. As for the status of omeggid persons, it should be noted that their experience means much more than a transition from one gender to another. It is related above all to a hyperaffirmation of the bond with the natal home. Omeggid persons do not realize the male destiny of “leaving to fish, leaving to marry” (Madi Dias 2018), and thus the transformation of their body and subjectivity subverts the gender order among the Guna.

In the Kakataibo case, this gender dissidence appears related to an aesthetic exploration of being. Even though the beauty contests increase the visibility of the gay community in public space, allowing the performance of an alternative way of being that destabilizes gender binarism, it amounts above all to a profoundly subjective aesthetic experience, a corporal exploration of the beautiful. The identity claims and militant speeches, which occupy a central place in the trans beauty contests organized in Bolivia (Absi 2017), for example, rarely accompany

these events in the region of Peruvian Amazonia. The conversations with young transvestites who organize the beauty contests in Aguaytía revolve around clothing, bodies, makeup, dance, and the spectacle produced. If there exists an identity that is constructed through these performances, it is fundamentally composed by the aesthetic sense, by beauty. If there is activism, here it involves an embodied, nonverbalized activism, which takes place in the movement of the body.

In different aspects, the beauty contests organized in the most remote localities of Latin America appear like the North American voguing balls of the 1980s filmed by Jennie Livingston in *Paris is Burning*. These balls occupied an important place in the emergence of queer contemporary culture. Organized by Black and Latino communities in the United States, these eccentric performances were subversive not only of gender norms but also of those of class and race. Over the course of one night, dance and transvestism became a means of destabilizing the established and oppressive social order. In this context, as in Amazonia too, the body occupies a central place in gender performances, signifying at the same time a space of aesthetic creation and a space of transgression of social norms. It is interesting to observe, however, that this transgression frequently takes the form of a restructuring—that is, the production of a new order or a new logic. In the case of the balls documented in *Paris is Burning*, participants are organized in groups denominated “houses,” kinds of clans or lineages led by “mothers” or “queens” who aim to perpetuate their “legacy.” As we have seen, among the Guna in Panama, it is precisely the idiom of residence that allows structure and strategy to be combined, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1979) surmised in his analysis of house societies (*sociétés à maison*).

It is important to emphasize that although the Guna omeggids subvert a social project of masculinity, they rely on other rules related to gender, specifically rules of residence. In this sense, even if they do not leave their natal home (as married men do), they follow a tendency fairly widespread among the Guna of autonomization of the residential space. The recently married man, who lives under the auspices of his mother-in-law, also awaits the day when he will have children and grandchildren, but also sons-in-law who will work for the house in which he is becoming integrated. The process of a man’s integration into the marital home is gradual and follows more or less well-defined stages according to the life cycle. When they have many children, a couple usually builds a separate space to sleep with their children; when they already have grandchildren, the desire for autonomy is considerable, and so a couple will then build a separate kitchen, which marks an important rupture in relation to the residential group.<sup>6</sup> Omeggid persons adhere to this same logic.

Even if they do not marry and continue to reside with female consanguine relatives, it is common for omeggids to construct their own residential space with the help of friends, a tendency that can be verified at different levels: some construct a separate room, adjoining the matri-house and protected by the same thatch roofing; others begin to occupy a separate house in the same yard, sharing the spaces for bathing and food preparation with the family; some end up living in a larger house, on another terrain, possessing their own tanks to store water; some have their own stove where they can cook rice or fry *patacones*, even if they continue normally to be associated with the kitchen of the matri-house through the daily consumption of banana juice (*madun*) and coconut soup (*dulemasi*), fundamental products of the Guna kitchen, which old women distribute to the coresident group as a whole.

Contrary to the situation among the Kakataibo, where the transgender experience is lived as a rupture with the residence of origin, this aspect of continued coresidence with the consanguine group forms the central element of the Guna comprehension of the omeggid condition. An important point to stress is the strategic place of omeggid persons in the context of the family economy. Based on an analysis of the system of attitudes in a coresidential context, one observes that omeggid persons are key sources of resources for the extended family. Recognized for their ability with scissors, they perform day-to-day services sewing for their mothers and sisters. They are frequently involved in the realization of the *inmasuid* festival for the naming of their nieces, the most important and expensive ritual among the Guna, when the family invites the entire community to drink *chicha fuerte*<sup>7</sup> over a four-day period. The omeggids also take care of the education of their nephews, very often assuming financial responsibility for their studies. They could be said to occupy a strategic supply and service position to the benefit of consanguine women and their line of descent. This position coincides with that reserved for affinal men, captured (literally) in the marriage ritual and who must then “work



for the house” of postmarital residence. In the case of omeggid persons, even though they remain in their natal home, they assume there a place of consanguinized affinity. The fact is that the omeggid experience does not simply pose a problem of gender transition. Without betraying the uxorilocal schema, but on the contrary, as an outcome of it, omeggid subjectivity rests on a gender and kinship ambivalence, combining contradictory elements around a complex experience. Finally, the production of an omeggid subjectivity operates via two simultaneous paths or transformations: (1) because the person is a consanguine coresident, they become a woman; (2) because the person is a coresident man, they become an affine.

Treated here from two different analytic perspectives, the Guna and Kakataibo cases bring us back to a common problem regarding the relational dynamics and logics involved in the recognition and affirmation of the transgender condition. It should be emphasized that this relational gender dimension frequently appears in association with the notions of skill and work: knowing a set of techniques, produce something to the benefit of someone else. In this sense, the cases presented here can be conceived as gateways to a broader analysis of local gender philosophies, in which the gendered subject corresponds to the person who knows, someone who accumulates productive knowledge in the body (McCallum 2001). Accumulating skills, working, serving, and being useful are foundational principles in the Amerindian definition of the person. One can also note these principles among those who develop a transgender condition, mobilized by the latter precisely in the construction of an alternative gender subjectivity. Finally, the cases studied in this article show the transgression or circumvention of gender norms does not occur in a vacuum of relational structures, but generates, rather, a strategic rearrangement of these structures that produces ruptures and continuities simultaneously.

### **Final Considerations: on Amerindian Ways of Inhabiting Gender Norms**

This article is the result of intellectual exchanges between the authors over the last three years concerning Amerindian everyday life and the informal sociabilities that formed part of their long-term ethnographic research experiences. Standing out among this array of topics relating to day-to-day life was the interest in the transgender condition among the persons with whom we lived in Amazonia and Central America. Comparing the transgender phenomenon among the Guna and Kakataibo, the questions we asked ourselves—initially in casual conversations—were as follows: What is so terrible about masculinity that some young men wish to avoid and flee it? What is so seductive about femininity that they wish to become part of the feminine? Naturally, we also asked what our views revealed about our own gender positions and the ways we perceive Amerindian experiences. Finally, this joint work allowed us to combine partial understandings to propose a much more complete schema with which to approach Amerindian transgender.

The ethnographic cases examined in this article reveal two different modes of conceiving and experiencing non-cisgender ways of life. Whereas among the Guna they seem to be quite ancient and have given rise to a particular social category incarnated by the omeggid, in the case of the Kakataibo and other Amazonian peoples these experiences are relatively new and related to migration, urban sociability, the internet, and beauty contests. From the vantage point of these different social and historical contexts, we have explored how two Amerindian peoples “inhabit” gender norms (Mahmood 2005). In so doing, we have described the imaginaries in which these peoples inscribe transgender experiences and the relational dynamics they generate. The schema proposed in this article is founded on the notions of performance and status—that is, gender as style and gender as social position. However, our purpose was not to determine the prevalence of one perspective at the expense of the other but rather to show the constant tension between the two.

Our article is thus in line with Saba Mahmood’s work on normativity. In *Politics of Piety* (2005), Mahmood argues for a broader approach to the concept of agency, manifested not only through acts of resistance to norms but also through the multiple ways in which people inhabit them (2005:15). The anthropologist thus distances herself from Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1990) by criticizing the philosopher’s dualistic way of thinking about norms in terms of consolidation or subversion. As Mahmood (2005:22) rightly points out: “Norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, I would suggest, but performed,

inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways.” It is, therefore, up to anthropologists to grasp both the plural modes of inhabiting norms and the underlying conceptions of agency.

The notion of “inhabiting the norm” Mahmood proposes also seems particularly useful to shed light on the ways transgender experiences articulate space. We have shown the construction of an alternative gender subjectivity to be strongly inscribed in space through an attitude relating to origin: stay or leave the residence or community. The extent to which the groups offer a space in their social system for persons recognized as surpassing gender norms emerges as an important comparative concern. Whereas the Guna are able to negotiate these norms as a result of continued residence, the Kakataibo encounter a place for a transgender way of being primarily in the outside world. This spatial dichotomy—stay, leave—should not be understood, however, as definitive, but as the operator of a constant movement. Even though the Guna omeggids are initially recognized as those people who do not move away, we subsequently observe a tendency toward autonomization of their space of residence. Even though the young Kakataibo transvestites construct their transgender way of being in the outside world, some people return to the community and may even settle in the village space, renegotiating their social place through the local valorization of skills acquired elsewhere.

We have seen that the young transvestites represent a figure of alterity or trickster in Kakataibo society. In contrast, omeggid are part of the Guna female universe from childhood. Associated with feeding relations, they are also likely to provide material support to the household, exactly as the Guna expect from male affines coming from outside a residence group. It is, therefore, the Guna norm of uxorilocality that provides the key to understanding the ambivalence of transgender experiences in this society. Although transgender ways of life are conceived and organized differently among the Kakataibo, they also do not involve any simple transition. Transgender persons can perform the tasks of men and women in the community while becoming experts in the beauty contests through which the Kakataibo transgender way of being is created. More than reversing a gender norm, the ways of life analyzed in this article blur its limits, sometimes destabilize its binarity, and produce displacements in the way this norm is defined. This is why it seems relevant for us to qualify these experiences as queer, since they force us to think about gender norms beyond a male/female dichotomy.

In both the studied cases, we have seen that gender does not appear as an essence or personal attribute, but primarily as a way of acting, a skill expressed in the context of personal relations. In the Guna case, omeggid persons are considered the best exponents of the traditional textile art and perform a strategic function in supplying food and services to the coresident group. In the Kakataibo case, transgender persons are associated with singular forms of *techniques of self*, transformed over recent years into a recognized and solicited professional skill, central to contemporary ceremonial life. Finally, the self-construction based on the performance of productive activities allows us to comprehend the alternative experience of gender in relation to the broader framework of Amerindian socialities.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Adriana Romano Athila (2010) was the first to examine homoerotic relationships among Amerindian women of Brazilian Amazonia, showing how these relationships articulate local conceptions of the body, femininity, and community.
- <sup>2</sup> The reflection on the importance of the verb “to show” (oyoged) owes much to the perceptive observation of Clarice Cohn (2000:94): “the Xikrin explain the reason for children’s participation in the rituals from a young age, firstly, in terms of how important it is for them to show (rather than learn) their place in a given ritual in order for their *kukradjã* [knowledge] to ‘appear,’ to be ‘shown.’”
- <sup>3</sup> Margherita Margiotti (2010) provides an original analysis of the exchange of food as a mode of establishing and maintaining kinship relations among the Guna people.
- <sup>4</sup> The ritualization of this festive context in which an omeggid name is attributed reveals some interesting parallels with the *inna suid* festival, when the Guna consume fermented drink (*chicha fuerte*) over a period of four days. On the last day of the festival, a ‘true’ (*sunna*) name is given to a girl who has fully completed the phase of early childhood (around the age of six).
- <sup>5</sup> Bar work in the Ucayali region is frequently associated with prostitution.
- <sup>6</sup> Margiotti (2010) studied in detail the occupation of residential space among the Guna and presents a stimulating discussion on the potential of the kitchen to regulate the concentration or dispersal of people.
- <sup>7</sup> Traditional beer made of maize fermented in sugarcane juice.

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