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To Open a Clearing:
Cultivating Spaces of Endurance in the Upper Amazon

Brunno de Melo Meirelles Douat

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of the School of Architecture in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of: **Master of Environmental Design.**

May 2023

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Abstract

To effectively challenge the policies of extraction and depletion implemented by late liberal regimes, the Waorani communities residing in the Ecuadorian Amazon have devised spatial strategies to preserve their traditional territory. By reexamining Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the *contact zone* and delving into the juxtaposition between settler and Indigenous literature, spatialities, and worldviews, this thesis suggests the concept of forest Clearings as a means to explore spatial forms of endurance.

Numerous Clearings emerge within the Amazon, where encounters between divergent worldviews have engendered otherwise modes of existence. Through a series of fieldwork reflections drawing upon Elizabeth Povinelli's notion of *quasi-events*, Clearings are perceived as spaces where ontological negotiations are more likely to occur, strategies of enduring exhaustion are nurtured, potentiality is sheltered, and forms of dominance—even if for a moment—rattle.

At the core of the thesis narrative lies the ambition of a particular Waorani community to establish a *Museo Vivo*, or a living museum, on the outskirts of the city of Coca. While scrutinizing the history of museums as hegemonic infrastructures that facilitate colonial projects in the region, this work recognizes Waorani's appropriation of the museum as a "trap" to redirect one's attention towards a more pressing matter: the defense of their territory. Serving as a spatial strategy to withstand the exhaustion caused by extractive practices in the Amazon, the living museum can be viewed as the creation of a Clearing—an emancipation from prevailing forms of dominance through the subversion of hegemonic ontologies. Within the Clearing, dominant self-identities "get mixed up," inviting individuals to transcend their existing roles and fostering alternative life forms capable of sustaining a stubborn refusal to collapse.

In essence, this work serves as an invitation to acknowledge our own agency as researchers, academics, architects, and artists when navigating the ambivalent movements of establishing and suppressing Clearings during interactions with local communities like the Waorani. The work proposes that assuming responsibility as active agents within the social ecology of Clearings—embracing the condition of being "seen seen" by one another—gives rise to new collaborative practices and ontological exchanges.

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Dear Readers,

A much longer acknowledgment of the love and support from colleagues and friends, as well as the "failures," challenges, and accomplishments that I came across during this work, was much needed. After drafting many versions of this story, I couldn't develop one that respectfully and fully acknowledges the encounters and discounters lived during these past two years. With the hopes that, with time, I will fully understand and be able to place myself within the Clearing here opened, I couldn't pass by without briefly acknowledging a few names without whom this work would not exist.

I heartily acknowledge the importance of my Waorani colleagues Manuel Baihua, Manuela Omari Ima, and her family for this work. In all the complexities and ambivalences of being a white person writing a thesis about the struggles lived by an Amazonian Nationality as part of a Master's degree at Yale, this thesis is nonetheless for them and with them. Waponi Gobonpa!

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I am often surprised when I suddenly arrive in some places hinted by Keller's words a long time ago when I felt utterly lost. I truly hope she feels at least a little bit the same; it was a long and slippery journey.

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My mother and brother, for all the love and incommensurable support.

Introduction

When Martín Baihua, a member of the Amazonian Waorani Nationality, visited the MACCO—the Archaeological Museum and Cultural Center of Orellana, in the city of Coca, Ecuador—in August 2021, his reaction exemplified the ambivalent feelings of love and hatred expressed by Indigenous communities towards museological institutions that “safeguard” objects originally belonging to their ancestors. “What are so many sacred objects doing here? They should be in the river,” questioned Martín as he carefully observed clay pots, baskets, stone sculptures, and other Waorani objects locked inside glass displays. Walking past paintings and photographs depicting Waorani bodies—recognizing some as living and deceased relatives—Martín began to question who held the resources to narrate and accumulate his people’s history and for what purpose. “When I entered the museum for the first time,” he later recounted, “it hurt, because these stones, clays [pottery], canoes were from our grandparents. [...] Why don’t the original peoples have this type of museum? And why do people [settlers] have these things here? It hurts.”¹ After visiting the museum, Martín decided that his people should have the right to establish a place in which their tangible and intangible culture could be shared and communicated to the *cowori* (non-waorani, outsiders, or white people) on their own terms, through their own voices, to the community’s benefit, and in accordance to the group’s cosmovision. Martín now refers to that place as the Museo Vivo Waorani, or the Waorani Living Museum, idealized to be established in a plot of primary forest on the outskirts of Coca—Waorani traditional territory.

1 Martín Baihua in conversation with Ana Maria Duran Calisto, 2022.

Encountering Martín's desire for the *Museo Vivo*—and this work is all about encounters—can be seen as one starting point, among many, of the tangle that this thesis represents. This work is not, however, about Martín's museum, but rather about the reflections and possibilities that his proposition of a living museum instigates. The fact that the study that follows is not a complete account of a successful partnership between myself and Martín to establish what he envisions as a living museum is less a choice than a consequence of the limitations in which this work has been developed, and of a series of—fruitful, which must be said—(des)encounters throughout this process. It is also worth noting that, even though written by an architect (myself) and developed within an architecture school, this work does not imply the design of a building to house a museum in the forest. Simply hearing Martín mention his desire to build a living museum in the Amazon would make most architects start sketching conceptual drawings and structural systems surrounded by architectural buzzwords—or even motivate architectural travel studios in Ecuador full of students tasked with “solving” Martín's “problem.” In other words, there will be no plans, wall sections, or sustainable ecological diagrams on the following pages. Very few elements that compose the imaginary explored in this work could be defined as built.

Nevertheless, the imaginary here proposed, which originates from Martín's invitation to think of a living museum, is no less spatial and creative. So what is this study about? Let's say, for now, and with the risk of being too vague, that this work is a preparation for a more extended dialogue; it is my response—based on encounters with Waorani friends during my 2022 visit to their territory, critical reflections on museums as “contact zones,” and the stubborn will to sustain a collapsing world—to Martín's idea of the *Museo Vivo*.

As the following chapters suggest, the living museum is a call to move from the modern museum to the forest, considering all the struggles over territorial sovereignty, right to self-representation, recognition, and endurance that permeate contemporary occupations of Waorani's ancestral land. In many ways, this is the movement that this thesis attempts to follow: a movement from the *collection* to the *clearing*—from sites of imperial accumulation to sites of imperial intervention and refusal. This while reflecting about all the ontological negotiations, ambivalences, exhaustions, contradictions, and potentialities that such a movement entails. These two movements, Martín's and mine, trek in parallel. The chapters, even though with questions on their own, are highly connected and guide this narrative; a trekking and a conversation as each one of the chapters represents a response to aspects of Martín's project through a specific point of view.

Chapter 1 will contextualize Martín's reflections and discomfort when witnessing his ancestor's objects displayed at MACCO within a broader movement led by Indigenous activists and scholars during the past decades, calling for a critical reading that addresses the colonial backbone of museological history and practices.² Works developed by such scholars lay bare the perpetuation of colonial forms of violence towards Indigenous communities that persist in how contemporary institutions continue to collect, address, and display Native American histories, objects, and bodies. As such, academics and practitioners from the fields of Indigenous and museum studies call for a paradigm shift that would be capable of empowering the so-called source communities towards the control of their existential narrative portrayed in museums and the subversion of these spaces to support the healing of

² Alison K. Brown, and Laura Peers, *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, (Routledge, 2005.)

“historical trauma and unresolved grief.”³ Even though the looting of sacred and traditional objects from South American Indigenous communities can be traced back to the shipment of the Manto Tupinambá to Europe in the early 1500s, the appetite of twenty-first-century museums to collect the Indigenous population’s tangible and intangible culture did not cease.⁴ As will be seen, the displacement of Indigenous culture and bodies, such as from Martín’s community to North American institutions that took place as recently as the past four decades, is a vivid and alarming example of the ongoingness of such a condition.

The recent development of methodologies and theoretical frameworks for collaborations between museums and so-called source communities has been fundamental for the drastic shift in curatorial practices dealing with collections originating from Indigenous communities. In this scenario, collaboration becomes the bottom line. In addition to the ongoing work of Indigenous activists, the contribution of James Clifford’s essay “The Museum as a Contact Zone” for the development of a more collaborative and inclusive approach to Indigenous collections curatorship can’t be overestimated; since its publication in 1997, museums became a synonym for contact zones, where “collections become an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship.”⁵ However, without denying Clifford’s contribution to a more ethical approach to museum practices, this work adds to the critique and concerns raised by museum anthropologist Robin Boast, who argues that museums perpetuate only a partial reading of the concept of “contact zone,” hence reinforcing their

3 Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2012.

4 Amy Buono, “Tupi Featherwork and the Dynamics of Intercultural Exchange in Early Modern Brazil.” *Art Faculty Books and Book Chapters*, January 1, 2009. https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/art_books/18.

5 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192.

neocolonial anatomy.⁶ Here, collaboration is *merely* the bottom line, the beginning of a long process aiming to heal historical trauma generated, held, and perpetuated by museums. It is not meant to be used as a “safety card” to validate the use of specific collections or as a strategy to fatten even more museum storage facilities with “decolonial work” by contemporary Indigenous communities and artists.

Thus, this work is an invitation, to a certain degree, to unlearn the museum as a “contact zone,” the theme of chapter 2. It does so by revisiting Mary Louise Pratt’s original definition of the term and the intrinsic asymmetry that takes place in these “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”⁷ The asymmetry inherent to the relationships in Pratt’s contact zones will then be read concerning a call towards decentralization of the museum, a displacement capable of flipping the asymmetric relationship between the community (to be reclaimed as one of many centers) and the museum (to be the source). As will be seen, such a movement implies the reassertion of place-based imaginaries, in all their polyphonic diversity, as a form of reconceiving and reconstructing possible worlds, in opposition to the uprooting displacement of tangible and intangible culture at the origins of the museum’s accumulative practices.⁸

6 Robin Boast, “NEOCOLONIAL COLLABORATION: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited.” *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2011): 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01107.x>.

7 Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.

8 See Arturo Escobar. “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization.” *Political Geography* 20, no. 2 (February 1, 2001): 139–74. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298\(00\)00064-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(00)00064-0).

By returning to Pratt's original concept and adding to recent debates that ask for a more critical analysis of the power relations implied in the originating processes of archives—such as museum's ethnographic collections—this work suggests that “decolonizing the museum” means, at times, repositioning the contact zone from the museum to its actual site of action, collection, and accumulation. Chapter 3 demonstrates that in the case of the Waorani—and following Pratt's definition—these sites take the form of Clearings that invokes the “spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” where ontological entanglements and interlockings emphasize how “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other.”⁹ In these Clearings—whether created for community settlements, crop cultivation, or the establishment of extractive capitalist operations—strategies of refusal and resistance take place against dominant modes of being. Once in the forest, the concurrence of Martín's idea for a living museum and the need to defend a territory becomes crystal clear. The *Museo Vivo* is then seen as one of many radical spatial strategies undertaken by the Waorani to endure the exhaustion inflicted by Ecuador's neoliberal extractive policies. Relying on Elizabeth Povinelli's concept of *quasi-events*, these radical spatialities—living museums, ecolodges, art stores, former and to-become-clearings, etc.—are then considered as strategies part of a stubborn refusal to collapse; as ways of providing emotional and material means to just “keep going” within the “belly of the monster.”

Indigenous objects held at museum collections are living entities originating from, and vehicles for, socioecological encounters between human and other-than-human, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible beings. As this work attempts to demonstrate, the masks,

⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Profession*, 1991, 33–40.

vests, baskets, hammocks, sculptures, and other forms of “material culture” stored in museum facilities embody not only ways of understanding and representing the cosmos but also communicating with a multitude of forms of being, and, by doing so, defending and making worlds (chapter 4). What does it mean to reduce such vehicles for alternative world-making projects to a mannequin in a vitrine, interpreted in just three hundred characters? Following Eduardo Kohn’s work on cross-species communication and his “ecologies of selves,” and Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena’s “political ontology” framework, as well as works and practices by Indigenous philosophers and artists, this work sees the clearing as a contact zone where many worlds fit and “come about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions.”¹⁰

To see the Clearing as the contact zone gives another other-than-human dimension to the relations that occur in Clifford’s definition of the collection as a political, historical, and moral relationship. It is a place where different forms of being stand in relation, co-producing tangible and intangible cultural manifestations while enabling the decolonizing assertion of “voices and perspectives that remained absent from the archives”¹¹ since “exposing the ontological violence authorized by Eurocentric epistemologies both in scholarship and everyday life”¹² and of which the museum, anthropologists and researchers, historically, played no minor role. After all, Martín’s museum’s living character refers to the museum’s multispecies quality with the presence of all human and other-than-human forms

10 Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena. “Introduction: Pluriverse Proposals for a World of Many Worlds.” In *A World of Many Worlds*, edited by Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, O. Duke University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478004318-001>.

11 Helen F. Wilson, “Contact Zones: Multispecies Scholarship through Imperial Eyes.” *Environment & Planning E: Nature & Space* 2, no. 4 (December 2019): 712–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619862191>. 714

12 Juanita Sundberg, “Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies.” *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013486067>. 34

of life that permeate the Waorani territory. Still, it is ultimately a statement of sovereignty to call our responsibility and to narrate his people's history: *We, the ones whom you portray and display, are here.*

PART I: COLLECTING

Chapter 1

The (Living) Museum and the Salvage Mind

“Dodani nengaico wente nani mañomo” –

Martín’s Bahiua definition of museum in wao tededo

The history of the modern museum is one of colonialism and imperialism, in that the museological institution is used to recontextualize colonial violence through an image of education and universal knowledge, the latter represented by collections. Foundational to the development of the European system of cultural values and modes of thought, compulsive collecting aids and reflects Western “belief in the power of human reason to *comprehend the world* and the need for *material evidence* in this process of comprehension.”¹ With the “conquest” of the American continent in the sixteenth century, the need to make sense of this unknown land and all of its “wonders” stimulated the production of fantastic accounts by explorers and adventurers.² In addition to textual and graphic accounts, the intense flow of *objects* acquired in the so-called New World supported

1 María Mercedes Andrade, *Collecting from the Margins: Material Culture in a Latin American Context*. (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 2.

2 We can mention in this genealogy of early American exoticism accounts Columbus's Carta a Luis de Santángel (1493), Pero Vaz de Caminha's Carta a Dom Manuel (1500), Oviedo's *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535); Hans Staden's *True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil* (1557), Jean de Léry's *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* (1578), among others.

the creation of an imaginary by European society, who started to see them as “marvels” and “curiosities.” Acquiring and *accumulating* these marvels in collections became a statement of power, of materially attesting European domains overseas, of not only “making the world one’s own”³—comprehensible—but making its ultimate reproduction fit in one single room: the *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities.

Cabinets of curiosities grew in popularity across Europe simultaneously with the increased flow of objects from recently established colonies to the continent’s metropolitan centers. These spaces are widely regarded as modern museums’ precursors—if not direct originators. Owned by merchants and royalty, *Wunderkammer* were characterized by the excessive display of objects with no apparent logic besides representing a lavish and heterogeneous accumulation of non-European “wonders,” a space that “jumbled everything together, with each individual object standing metonymically for a whole region or population.”⁴ Taxidermized animals, rare minerals, paintings, highly crafted equipment representing new technologies used in colonial enterprises, vegetal specimens, maps, scientific tools, bones, and objects that attest to a connection and domination of a distant land would fill the space floor-to-ceiling. In an illuminating analysis of the origin of museums and their relation to knowledge, Eileen Hooper Greenhill suggests how one’s position in the center of these spaces, crafted to represent the world—such as the *Wunderkammer* or an alleged predecessor, the *studiolo* of Prince Francesco I—constituted a “specific subject position, a position that reserved to the prince not only the knowledge of the world

3 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988)

4 *Ibid.*, 227.

constituting his supremacy, but the possibility of knowing itself.”⁵ Thus, such a space of accumulation, as argued by James Clifford, “brings collecting and display sharply into view as crucial processes of Western identity formation.”⁶ They yield an identity that does not only see its “ideal self” through the accumulation of property and goods, but that sees in this possession—which directly implies a dis-possession somewhere else—the endowment of political and economic power, as well as an epistemological superiority on a global scale. The latter indicates the role objects would play in the modern museum as the ultimate source of knowledge and meaning, which Steven Conn calls an “object-based epistemology.”⁷ As María Mercedes Andrade suggested in the thoughtful introduction to *Collecting from the Margins*, the dynamics of collector and collected imply an “epistemological divide between the European knower and a non-European object to be known, and it uncovers the colonial underpinnings of First World narratives of collecting.”⁸

Accumulation through dispossession becomes the course of action of spaces such as the cabinet of curiosities, sometimes even referred to as “world cabinets,” and later the modern museum. Consider that, as previously argued by Clifford, the collection, or the process of collecting itself, becomes a crucial component of creating the Western identity as the possessor of universal knowledge. In this act of dispossession, of bringing an object from one place (the “New World”) to another (Europe), to whose identity does this object refer? To which subjectivity does this object respond? As argued by Jean Baudrillard, through the act of collecting, objects become “no longer simply material bodies offering a certain

5 Eileen Hooper Greenhill *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1992), 106.

6 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 220.

7 Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4.

8 Mercedes Andrade, *Collecting from the Margins*, 7.

resistance, they become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they *become things of which I am the meaning*.”⁹ In this process of accumulation through dispossession, the object tells more about the collector than the original human-nonhuman environment from which it was extracted. As Andrade points out, “These objects are no longer artifacts but *things*, the meaning of which is provided no longer by their human environment but by the subject who is able to bring them together.”¹⁰ Similarly, Walter Benjamin states in his famous reflection on collecting, “I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is *its* rebirth.”¹¹ In Benjamin’s library, the rebirth is of the book, the object collected, not his, the subject collector. Thus, in the act of collecting, the object loses its place-based meaning, and it becomes something *else*; in many cases, an *else* directly reflecting a *self*, colonial and European.

As suggested by Susan Stewart, in the collector’s space, “each sign is placed in relation to a chain of signifiers whose ultimate referent is not the interior of the room—in itself an empty essence—but the interior of the self [the collector].”¹² In her book *On Longing*, Stewart includes an illuminating reflection on collections and the experiences such a form of desire encodes, advancing the polemics between objects and context inherent to the act of collecting. She remarks that to construct the narrative of interiority—the interior of the “self” referred to in the collection—it becomes “necessary to obliterate the object’s context of

9 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (United Kingdom: Verso, 1996), 85. [emphasizes by the author].

10 Mercedes Andrade, *Collecting from the Margins*, 3. [emphasizes by the author].

11 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (United States: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 61. [emphasizes by the author]

12 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Italy: Duke University Press, 1993), 158.

origin.”¹³ In its goal of presenting a hermetic world, the collection “creates a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life.”¹⁴ In the case of the cabinet of curiosities and later the museum—such as the one visited by Martín and dedicated to narrating the “history” of his people—this means a hermetic world that attests to questions of power through decontextualization and ascribing “to some cultures the role of endowing objects with meaning through a process of selection and classification, while others are assigned the task of furnishing the “raw materials,” the objects to be collected.”¹⁵ Such reflection seems crucial to fully understand the implications of Martín’s defying questioning of “why don’t the original peoples [the Waorani] have this type of museum? And why do people [settlers] have these things here?”¹⁶

In an insightful parallel, Stewart defines Noah’s Ark as the archetypal collection, “a world which is representative yet which erases its context of origin. The world of the ark is a world not of nostalgia but of anticipation. While the earth and its redundancies are destroyed, the collection maintains its integrity and boundary.”¹⁷ When contrasting with the souvenir—whose point would be the invention of memory—Stewart defines the point of the collection as forgetting, “starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie. Whose labor made the ark is not the question: the question is what is inside.”¹⁸ In other words, forgetting through recontextualizing the object

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 152.

15 Mercedes Andrade, *Collecting from the Margins*, 3.

16 Martín Baihua in conversation with Ana María Duran Calisto, 2022.

17 Stewart, *On Longing*, 152.

18 Ibid.

under a new meaning that, in turn, erases the original context of its creation; the new meaning becomes the collection, the collector, and its system of classification. Thus, collecting and erasure become sides of the same coin in favor of creating an illusion of remembrance, of a contained and comprehensible reproduction of the world. It is a process in which worlds and their ecologies of human and other-than-human beings *become* Noah's Ark, the Hall of South American Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, or the Archaeological Museum and Cultural Center of Orellana.

Such an "infinite reverie" does not imply that each of these objects, transplanted from one culture to be stored and displayed in the collections and museums of another, is devoid of specific meanings; in this process, what happens is a *recontextualization*, when arbitrary systems of value and meaning take the place of the previous, "original" ones. In turn, the "reborn" objects, to use Benjamin's term, compose the totality of a fictional coherent representational universe built on the image of the collector. Invariably, such a system of values represents a scheme of *classification* "elaborated for storing or displaying the object so that the reality of the collection itself, its coherent order, *overrides specific histories* of the object's production and appropriation."¹⁹ To classify becomes the rationalizing methodology of natural history, which "extracts all things of the world and redeploys them in a new knowledge formation whose values lies precisely in its difference from the chaotic original."²⁰ In this *ordering*, the museum of natural history, according to Stewart, "allows nature to exist 'all at once' in a way in which it could not otherwise exist. Because of the fiction of such a museum, it is the Linnaean system which articulates the identities of plants, for example, and

19 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 220 [Emphasizes by the author].

20 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (N.p.: Taylor & Francis, 2003.), 33.

not the other way around.”²¹ The museum—alongside the herbariums, the gardens, and other collections—becomes the *locus* of such new knowledge formation; in the words of Foucault, “a non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces visible, grouped according to their common features, and thus already virtually analyzed, and *bearers of nothing but their own individual name.*”²² The “non-temporal” character of such spaces could be said to be also derived from the relocation of objects originating from different cultures into a nonhistorical time, where history is airbrushed out; a common coding undertaken by museums when placing Indigenous communities, “represented” in their halls, as inhabiting an always mythic time, characterized by a vanishing past or an ahistorical, conceptual present.²³ In classifying, categorizing, and labeling these objects, Clifford points out, the “historical contacts and impurities that are part of ethnographic work—and that may signal the life, not the death, of societies—are systematically excluded.”²⁴

A project developed recently by the Instituto Moreira Salles with Indigenous communities from the Xingu National Park in Brazil brings to the surface the erasure inherent to the act of collecting and the ahistorical character of Indigenous subjects within museological collections. The project, part of the institute’s 2022 exhibition *Xingu: Contacts*, sought to “recapture” the memory present in photographs from IMS’s archives taken in the early contacts between photographers, such as Henri Ballot, and native communities, such

21 Stewart, *On Longing*, 162.

22 Michel Foucault, *The order of things An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994), 131 [Emphasizes by the author].

23 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 202.

24 *Ibid.*, 201

as the Xavante and Kamaiurá. These images were initially decontextualized and placed in a non-historical time and “bearer of nothing by their own individual name”; for example, a portrait of a figure, apparently dressed in traditional garments in front of what looks like a longhouse structure, was labeled for decades as *Xingu Indigenous Park, no date*. After closely working with local communities, the image’s original context was re-established and the systematic ordering previously applied subverted; the label now reads *Amauri Kamaiurá, father of Kakatsa Kamaiurá, in the Jawari ritual, 1955*. Even though the new description does not fully unpack the image’s context of extraction (why was Henri Ballot at the Kamaiurá community? Why was he taking this photograph?), it rescues the original context through the memory of the group by remembering who was portrayed, essential family connections, and which meaningful event—for the community—was taking place at that moment.

Clifford’s words and the initial labeling described in *Xingu: Contacts* demonstrate how the new “knowledge formation” suggested by Foucault, housed in collections and having as its end “undertaking a meticulous examination of *things themselves* for the first time, and then of transcribing what it has gathered in *smooth, neutralized and faithful words*,”²⁵ is ultimately a knowledge based on silencing and erasure through classification. Under this knowledge, there is no need for a Waorani to be alongside their objects for their culture to be *comprehended*; a ceramic is excavated, classified based on comparison with other ceramics and textual records, labeled according to a determined ordering system, and displayed inside a vitrine. The ceramic, then, is not from—for example—Martín’s “grandparents” but from an ancient culture that inhabited that land within an estimated period ranging from hundreds to thousands of years. To see these ceramics *one beside*

25 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 131. [emphasizes by the author].

another would supposedly render it possible to understand human history linearly and, thus, the world. As will be seen in the following sections—and as suggested by Martín’s reaction in front of the ceramics vitrine at MACCO—the criticism of such knowledge formation has been a central argument in the work of Indigenous activists during the past few decades calling for the decolonization of these spaces.

Another byproduct of collecting, decontextualizing, and classifying—and just as crucial to understanding the relationship between Indigenous communities and the modern museum—is the creation of an idea of *otherness*, marking “the colonized through a divisive cut of difference, which in turn justified theft of territory and persons.”²⁶ Stewart observes that “to group objects in a series because they are ‘the same’ is to simultaneously signify their difference.”²⁷ However, in the context of objects systematically extracted from the “New World” to fill European cabinets and museums, such a *difference* stands in relation to what? As we have seen, since the conquest of the American continent in the sixteenth century, collections were established to attest to domination over distant territories and other cultures by obliterating the object’s original context and reinserting it into a new system of classification that represents, as the ultimate referential, the European self. Again, the “rebirth” is of the book, not the collector—the Linnaean system redefines the identities of collected plants and not the other way around. However, to be decontextualized and placed within a European frame does not make such objects European. By inhabiting the *non-place* of the cabinets and museums, what brings these objects together is precisely their character as non-Europeans, resulting in a shared *difference* in relation to the European self, which is

26 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes Or None* (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 20.

27 Stewart, *On Longing*, 155.

positioned in the center of this fictional world representation. Such a process of collecting, decontextualizing, and classifying results in the *creation* of an “us” in relation to “them.” As P. T. Barnum stated about his American Museum in New York: “Curiosities are *made*.”²⁸

Consequently, the production of an “other,” a non-European, lays in the underbelly of the popularization of the cabinet of curiosities and the early museum, all sharing the same interest in the “anomalous character” of residual otherness while lacking interest in both ethnographic and geographic precision.²⁹ Comprised of a wonderland of signs uprooted from their original meaning, territory, and ownership, the museum represents the spatial materialization of the non-place. In this elsewhere, the sign of otherness is constantly produced and projected in relation to the European self.³⁰

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28 Christoph Irmscher, *The Poetics of Natural History* (United States: Rutgers University Press 2019), 113.

29 Peter Mason. “On Producing the (American) Exotic.” *Anthropos* 91, no. 1/3 (1996): 139–51.

30 One must only look at the well-known appropriation of the Tupinambá feather-work as a generic sign of exoticism, applied to the most varied geographical representations of “otherness” since the sixteenth century, to fully understand the erasure implied in this process. After a number of Tupinambá objects arrived in Europe shortly after the conquest of America, the representation of the feather-work from this specific indigenous group in Brazil was systematically applied on the top of drawings representing the most geographically varied indigenous individuals, from North America to Africa. Reduced to a sign to be systematically applied on images of non-Western figures —like wood blocks or clichés of ready-made exoticism— the “Tupinambization” of American indigenous and others coincides with the genocide of the group while placing its image in a generic non-place, shared by an infinitude of decontextualized and appropriated signs applied to whatever existence is understood as non Western. To be exotic, in this context, is not to be European; and the Tupinambá feather-work guarantees the rendering of this condition quickly recognizable.

The salvage mind

The eighteenth century introduced a more serious concern for classification as a way of knowledge production. Objects held in collections and cabinets of curiosities that later became public museums were believed to hold—at least as much as texts—meaning and knowledge, yielding what Steven Conn calls an “object-based epistemology.” In this epistemology, Conn says, “objects are not precisely transparent, but neither are they hopelessly opaque. The meaning held within objects would yield themselves up to anyone who studied and observed objects carefully enough.”³¹ In other words, objects were endowed with intellectual value through the museum’s system of collecting, classifying, and displaying arrangements. This, in turn, suggests how the collector and museum start to see themselves as *producers* rather than *consumers* of those objects through arrangement and manipulation.³²

Thus, it is no coincidence that during this moment—when museums were adapting to the “new museum” formulation of a tripartite goal of preservation, research, and education—curators started to organize their materials in mobile cases. It was what took place at the Smithsonian National Museum, led by George Brown Goode, in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The strategy sought to make the display more flexible to ethnographers like Otis Mason—who was coming to grips with theoretical questions of cultural evolution, parallel development, and culture transfer—making it possible for the exhibition space to be rearranged according to geographical region or alternative typologies,

31 Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*, 4.

32 Stewart, *On Longing*, 158.

reinforcing Goode's belief that objects are "thoughts in things."³³ As will be later seen when addressing the criticism by Indigenous communities and museum scholars of this museological heritage, the question becomes: whose thought and for what purpose? As one can readily imagine, a blowgun extracted from a Waorani community in the depths of the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest, decontextualized, classified, and displayed following a specific arrangement in the AMNH-NY, would embody distinct thoughts for Waorani members, such as Martín, an anthropologist, a biologist, or a visitor.

Just as crucial for our further reflections on the relationship between the Waorani and the museum is the fact that, at this exact moment in museum history, evolutionism started to dominate arrangements of objects, representing an anthropology of otherness. Thus, the 'curator as producer' was able to rearrange the museum's collections according to specific geographies, typologies, and display formats, seeking to, ultimately, tell a story of human development. As argued by Clifford, "The object had ceased to be primarily an exotic 'curiosity' and was now a source of information entirely integrated into the universe of Western man. The value of exotic objects was their ability to testify to the concrete reality of an earlier stage of human Culture, a common past confirming Europe's triumphant present."³⁴ The display of objects—with emphasis on ethnographic materials from Indigenous communities—started to be widely understood as 'a window into the past,' attesting to the progress of Western society and the supposed primitiveness of Indigenous communities. Again, through collecting and classifying, otherness is measured against the ideal of a self, the possessor of a supposed universal representation and comprehension—that is, the collection.

33 Sally Gregory Kohlstedt. "Thoughts in Things": Modernity, History, and North American Museums." *Isis* 96, no. 4 (2005): 586–601.

34 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 228.

At this time, however, this is a self that is not only present in the center of the room, like Francesco I in his *studiolo*, but at the other extremity of a linear evolutionary timeline.

Simultaneously, the development of anthropology as a science in the nineteenth century bolstered the procedures of collecting cultural objects for museums, archives, and libraries. Object-based disciplines focusing on the study of non-Euro-American otherness began professionalizing. Consequently, the narrative of Indigenous “primitivity” influenced not only forms of museum display but also parameters and methods for collecting these objects in their original context. Classifying became not only a cabinet procedure but also a field methodology painstakingly undertaken by anthropologists aiming at organizing and categorizing human culture. In this regard, Günther Tessmann’s (1884–1969) work in South America during the 1920s seems apropos. Between 1921 and 1926, the German ethnologist undertook several trips to the Northwestern Amazonia region in Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. The wide-range study, financed by Pennsylvanian geologist Harvey Bassler (1883–1950), covered fifty different Indigenous groups and was published in German in 1930 under the name *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus* (The Indians of Northeast Peru). In his travel, Tessmann is believed to have been one of the first ethnologists to have contacted Waorani-speaking communities, to whom he identified as *Sabelas*.

To develop a deep analysis of Tessmann’s work, however, would be outside the scope of this study. Even though fellow anthropologists already questioned Tessmann’s methodologies—described as “a blend of something akin to mysticism with concrete research”³⁵—and prejudice toward Amerindian populations during his lifetime, the extension

35 See 1931 review of Tessmann’s *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus* by anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber—who happens to be the father of author Ursula K Le Guin’s and the first anthropologist awarded a PhD degree at Columbia University under Franz Boas: Kroeber, A. L. Review of Review of *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus: Grundlegende Forschungen für eine Systematische Kulturkunde*, by Günther

of his field documentation was nevertheless considered “outstanding” and hard to ignore.³⁶ More important to my study is to recognize Tessmann’s work as an example of the fundamental role that early anthropological fieldwork played in the racialized scientific construction of a narrative of primitiveness among Amazonian groups. As the following chapters seek to demonstrate, this narrative continues to affect these populations—certainly among them the Waorani—to the present day.

In the preface of *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus*, Tessmann foregrounds, as one of the primary concerns of his study, the need to “investigate” and “register” the culture of tribes on the “route of extinction.”³⁷ Numerous cultures, according to him, “almost completely lost their material culture (at least in terms of superficially spectacular ‘curiosities’), and from them, perhaps, a priori, very few attractive museum pieces could be expected.”³⁸ Nevertheless, documenting the cultural, linguistic, and physical constitution of these groups—which “an expert will never visit”—would be crucial for ethnology’s imperative task of “recording the cultures of all primitive peoples in order to present them as documents of the history of humanity.”³⁹ The German ethnologist’s interest in Indigenous communities on the

Tessman. *American Anthropologist* 33, no. 1 (1931): 120–21.

36 In a letter to North American anthropologist Robert H. Lowie, dated October 20th 1937, German anthropologist Curt Nimuendajú writes that “In his book *Menschen ohne Gott* [People without God], Tessmann makes no effort to conceal his rage at the Indians. But such an attitude must influence his results. In any case, they don’t satisfy me, and obviously not you either. What he observed externally is (to the extent it is not placed in a bad light by his aversion to this race) undoubtedly clear and well documented, and his collections must be outstanding. Personally he’s a bastard, not to mince words.” In a following letter written to Lowie dated November 4th 1940, Nimuendajú asks Lowie to send him a copy of *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus* while emphasizing that: “Here it is not to be found; I had it in my hands only once, 6 years ago in Gothenburg. Despite Tessmann’s prejudice against the Indian race and his not exactly irreproachable working methods, I don’t think one can simply ignore him, because he is the only ethnologist who has worked with the Indians in this region, with the exception of Preuss, whose research on the Witóto I have never seen.” See Nimuendajú, Curt. “Curt Nimuendajú’s Correspondence with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Robert H. Lowie, 1936–1940.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10, no. 2 (November 12, 2020): 681–705. <https://doi.org/10.1086/710043>.”

37 All the translations of Tessmann’s texts were done by the author based on an existing Spanish translation of the original.

38 Günter Tessmann, *Los indígenas del Perú nororiental: investigaciones fundamentales para un estudio sistemático de la cultura*. (Ecuador: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1999.) IX

39 Ibid.

“route of extinction” exemplifies the movement known as “salvage anthropology,” intended to collect the so-called last vestiges of a supposed “vanishing” race.

Thought to be in a race against time, anthropologists at the turn of the twentieth century aggressively collected the tangible and intangible culture of American Indigenous communities whose “extinction” or assimilation was deemed inevitable. In doing so, however, such procedures resulted in an accelerated loss of material culture for these communities who navigated assimilationist policies—and the work by early anthropologists—with survival strategies and ways of preserving an encroached existence. As Douglas Cole shows in his book *Capture Heritage*, after the fierce collecting of objects from Northwest Coast Indigenous communities, “there was more Kwakiutl material in Milwaukee than in Mamalillikulla; more Salsish pieces in Cambridge than in Comox. The City of Washington contained more Northwest Coast material than the state of Washington, and New York City probably housed more British Columbia material than British Columbia herself.”⁴⁰ Many communities where these objects were extracted survived, but not without losing a significant part of their tangible and intangible culture, not to say their ancestral bodies, since the period was also characterized by increased looting of human remains from Indigenous grave sites.

In the search for the last vestiges of “primitive societies” on the verge of extinction—among living cultures struggling to navigate and survive assimilationist periods—those working on salvage anthropology were, as suggested by historian Samuel J. Redman in his book *Prophets and Ghosts*, “just as often chasing ghosts as they were seeking living, breathing humans.”⁴¹ Indigenous societies would often be put in the position of an “impossible object,”

40 Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 286, as quoted in Lonetree, *Decolonizing the Museum*, 11.

41 Samuel J. Redman *Prophets and Ghosts: The Story of Salvage Anthropology*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021.), 11.

“ghosts” suffering a double erasure: their material culture would often be collected, decontextualized, and displayed in museums as vestiges of a dying, primitive race belonging to a prehistorical past, while community members struggling with assimilationist policies would often be seen as not genuine representatives of their own culture. As pointed out by Elizabeth Povinelli—when describing late-nineteenth-century ethnographers' search for an “ancient order” in Aboriginal societies—in the pursuit for a supposed “immutable form that predated and survived the ravage of civil society,” the proper, idealized, “ethnological thing” would “always be elusive and would always be somewhere one is not.”⁴² I suggest that through collecting, decontextualization, and classification, the museum becomes the space where such an “immutable form” is to be created and then pursued by the *salvage* mind.

In the “rebirth” of the object in the hands of the collector, the “ethnological thing” is born to their image. Alienated from its original context, a specially ornamented bowl by a Jebero group bought or traded by Tessmann during his salvage fieldwork—later donated to Museu Paranaense in Brazil—embodies the “ethnological thing” present in the collector’s gaze when looking for “ghosts.” Compared with other examples from different groups, “one beside another,” the Jebero bowl, following Tessmann’s ideas, would supposedly attest more to the superior development of this group’s material culture to the detriment of other “less ornamented” objects than to its meaning in its original context.

A more distressing example of Indigenous communities' circumstances during salvage anthropology can be drawn from Tessmann’s use of full-body, cranial, and facial

42 Elizabeth A. Povinelli *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. (Duke University Press, 2002), 36.

anthropological photographs. For him, creating such portraits would be a fundamental form of “systematic positioning of the tribe concerning race” and “evolutionary history.”⁴³ As scholars have demonstrated, this particular use of “racial” photography is “one more tool for disciplining knowledge, for ‘scientifically’ justifying domination in racial terms; and for crafting and disseminating racial ideas.”⁴⁴ Based on specific physiological features, specific groups would supposedly be more primitive than others, in an evident example of scientific racism. Tessmann’s account of the process of taking such photographs exemplifies the “impossible” position between assimilation and recognition that Indigenous populations faced at the time and, as this work further demonstrates, persist to this day. When describing the methods undertaken during fieldwork to collect these images, Tessmann states:

As for anthropology, I had to limit myself to the general impression and, if possible, to the photography of the full naked body, which is also quite difficult since the indigenous people, even though they are somewhat civilized, have a great fear of being recognized as “Indians” in any way and take nudity as a punishment—this term was in fact used by one of them—that is, for degradation to “savages.” It must be added that primitive men, guided by particular practical and understandable reason, should see in the photograph of their naked body a kind of sexual or semi-sexual interest and that this interest is extremely unpleasant for the members of tribes sexually oriented only towards the woman. Among the semi-civilized tribes of the Putumayo, located at the mouth of the Nanay, it was reported that I took nude photographs. Consequently, these indigenous people came to me only when they

43 Tessmann, *Los indígenas del Perú nororiental*, 2.

44 Gabriela Zamorano, “Traitorous Physiognomy: Photography and the Racialization of Bolivian Indians by the Créqui-Montfort Expedition (1903).” *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2011): 425–55, 427.

had difficulties and only because I assured them that not even in a dream would I think of doing that. So, I was very careful about it and took pictures only where I could not be harmed by such slander.

[...]

The best way to take nude photographs is to treat the photo as something special—even if the Indian, who only understands material points of view: “Here I have 50 Centavos or so-and-so. If you want to have it, I have to take a nude photograph. If not, fine, I’ll take the money.” (Tessman, 1930, p. 2)

Tessmann’s account is an appalling example of the impossible strive Indigenous communities face between the perverse “civilizational” imposition to assimilate and the scientific desire to, literally, uncover a supposedly hidden and threatened “primitiveness.” Obsessed with systematically collecting, documenting, and classifying *every* otherness produced to the image of a European white self, Tessmann argued for a new ethnological methodology capable of quickly and globally documenting and classifying all the so-called primitive cultures.

According to Tessmann, the history of research on South American Indigenous populations could be divided—until that moment—into two distinct phases. The first was characterized by disseminating knowledge about natives, their costumes, and languages to a European population that “did not have the slightest notion of the inhabitants of the New World.” In that case, only issues that seemed remarkably “interesting” in that context and for the research authors were addressed. The second phase was characterized by casualty

and the lack of established order: “each worked individually according to his own methods as he saw fit.” With the publishing of *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus*, Tessmann hoped that a third phase dedicated to *systematic research* in ethnology would begin, one that would be characterized by a “global vision of all the tribes of the earth, of their physical constitution, their cultures, their languages, to compare them with each other and classify them into different groups.”⁴⁵

In his effort to propose a new systematic working method that would fulfill anthropology’s “final goal” of recording and comparing “the cultures of all primitive peoples to present them as documents of the history of humanity,” and hence the “evolutionary history of man,” Tessmann proposed rigorously interrogating the greatest number of communities with a preestablished, fixed set of seventy-six numbered “complexes” such as: physical aspect (complex number 6); canoes, rafts, and rowing (19); hunting (23); use of salt or pepper (33); wiring and weaving (40); infant games (47); belief in God (49); belief in souls (50); cause of death (51); the practice of “witchcraft” (53); forms of settlement (61); onanism, homosexual acts, authentic homosexuals (64); marriage and adultery (67); civilization and tribe’s future (74); number and value (qualitative description) of the informant (75); linguistic aspects: list of thirty-three comparable words and extended list (76). By systematically addressing these complexes, using the same numbering, to “all tribes on earth,” Tessmann argued that it would be possible to establish a solid classification and comparison between distinct groups, ultimately following “the migratory movement of each cultural element up to its last ramifications and, in the end, *investigate the evolutionary history of man and culture using the appropriate material.*”⁴⁶

45 Tessmann, *Los indígenas del Perú nororiental*, 3

46 Ibid.

If the first half of *Die Indianer Nordost-Perus* is dedicated to describing the “cultural picture” of the fifty groups visited by Tessmann, and based on the chosen seventy-six “cultural complexes,” the second half seeks to develop a comparative analysis to trace the cultural, linguistic, and spiritual kinship among these groups. The ethnologist then identifies distinct “cultural societies” among the groups documented: the “primitive,” the “Amazonian,” the “subandina” and the “septentrional” cultural families, each of them supposedly holding specific values and characteristics—degrees of “primitive otherness” measured against the image of a white European self. By analyzing how each Indigenous group scored in relation to each cultural family characteristic, Tessmann believed it was possible to position them concerning one another and in a global evolutionary timeline. In the eternal search for the “ethnological thing,” sleeping in hammocks, the absence of front dress or loincloth for men, or the absence of internal partitions at home would place a group—such as the one Tessmann calls Sabela—as more representative of the so-called primitive cultural family than groups that used a squared wood shield, powder tobacco pipe with tubes, or large horizontal loom for cotton (Figure 2). This was a radical adaptation of the reductionist, objectifying, decontextualizing, and classificatory approaches of early collecting practices to racialized and discriminatory anthropological fieldwork.

Even though one could argue that such highly questionable and arbitrary methodology is merely representative of the mind of one white German anthropologist mapping an average of one Amazonian community per month in the 1920s, it nonetheless exemplifies the process in which the association between collecting practices and anthropological fieldwork constructed racialized narratives of “primitiveness” that would follow Amazonian groups to this day. This narrative underpins, for example, the persistent

usage of “Auca,” a derogatory term meaning savages in Kichwa, to designate the Waorani in museum collections such as the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History and Harvard’s Peabody Museum, as well as in early literary works on the Waorani, such as Rolf Blomberg’s 1957 *The Naked Auca*, in which the inhabitants of the region between the Napo and Curaray river are constantly referred to as “the savages.”⁴⁷ Still, the legacy of such a discourse of primitiveness is what prompts the fetishization of the search for such an “ethnological thing” in videos and documentary features published as recently as 2022—several shot in Martín’s community and watched by millions of viewers—that pitifully characterize the Waorani as “a tribe from another century,” hunters who seem “perhaps unchanged since the dawn of humanity” and who, while “not wearing clothes,” use “very ancient fishing techniques” in a forest “which already existed in the age of dinosaurs.”⁴⁸

Building on the legacy of early anthropologists’ classification of Amazonian communities according to “evolutionary levels,” media vehicles as large as the *New York Times* would still—six decades after Tessmann’s work—describe the Waorani as “one of the world’s most primitive tribes” and a “Window on Stone Age” when announcing medical experiments undertaken by scientists in Martín’s community, alongside the Cononaco river, in 1983.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the construction of the image of the Waorani as “living fossils of the stone age” would continuously prompt expeditions to—legally and illegally—study their

47 Rolf Blomberg, *The Naked Aucas: An Account of the Indians of Ecuador*. Allen & Unwin, 1956.

48 See *The Huaorani: a tribe from another century* by Slice, an extract of the documentary *People of the World - Huaorani people* directed by Jean François Bordier and produced by MC4 & TV Rennes 35. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHbreljs0GQ>.

49 Richard D. Lyons, “A DOCTOR IN THE AMAZON PROBES FOR GENETIC LINKS TO DISEASE.” *The New York Times*, November 8, 1983, sec. Science. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/08/science/a-doctor-in-the-amazon-probes-for-genetic-links-to-disease.html>.

supposed “genetic uniqueness,”⁵⁰ document their living practices and collect their material culture.

This was the case of the 1983 expedition to the Waorani territory led by Wall Street investment banker Grant Behrman and anthropologist James Yost, sponsored by the Explorer's Club and the Stanford University Medical Center, and in collaboration with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and ABC-TV. The latter would film the expedition's visit to Martín's community and produce the 1984 film *Nomads of the Rainforest*. In a series of columns published in the *New York Times* in 1983, the aim of the expedition is described as to study an Indigenous community that “has been isolated from other tribes for thousands of years” by “performing cultural, biomedical and genetic studies [while] an accompanying team of photographers [would] attempt to preserve aspects of the culture on film.”⁵¹

As will be further seen in chapter 4, both colonists and the Ecuadorian state have weaponized a similar false narrative of isolation to deny early colonial frictions that have ravaged Waorani communities since the late nineteenth century. To see the Waorani as “living uncontacted fossils of the stone age” is to ignore how early colonial and extractive practices such as rubber, chinchona bark, and later oil have been affecting these communities for much longer than assumed and, most importantly, that many cultural and sociopolitical aspects—such as the intense warfare present in Waorani societies extensively and

50 See World, Upside Down. “God, Oil, and the Theft of Waorani DNA: A Tale of Biopiracy in Ecuador.” Upside Down World (blog), November 8, 2012. <https://upside-downworld.org/archives/ecuador/god-oil-and-the-theft-of-waorani-dna-a-tale-of-biopiracy-from-ecuador/>. And also Cardoso, S, M A Alfonso-Sánchez, L Valverde, D Sánchez, M T Zarrabeitia, A Odriozola, B Martínez-Jarreta, and M M de Pancorbo. “Genetic Uniqueness of the Waorani Tribe from the Ecuadorian Amazon.” *Heredity* 108, no. 6 (June 2012): 609–15. <https://doi.org/10.1038/hdy.2011.131>.

51 Glenn Collins, “TRIBE WHERE HARMONY RULES.” *The New York Times*, September 19, 1983, sec. Style. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/19/style/tribe-where-harmony-rules.html>.

sensationalist explored by anthropologist, journalists, and adventurers—can be, in fact, understood as postcolonial phenomena.⁵² To depict the Waorani as “primitive” is a denial of their long-term struggles with coloniality and continuous endurance in a collapsing world.

In a recent conversation with one of the expedition and documentary feature producers, I was told that the 1983 incursion into the Waorani territory was motivated by a desire to contact “the most unacculturated tribe in the Amazon.” This desire began to coalesce into a project when Behrman reached out to Robert Carneiro, then curator of South American Ethnology at the AMNH-NY and a devoted proponent of theories of cultural evolution, and James Yost, a North American anthropologist working with the Waorani since the 1970s. When choosing the Indigenous group to be contacted, the team was struck by the “primitive nature of the Waorani,” their linguistic isolation, the fact that they had among the “highest incidence of death by warfare and snakebites,” and their “use of stone elements.” Soon, an *anti-conquest* expedition was formed by a Wall Street banker’s wish to search for an “ethnological thing,” the AMNH’s interest in documenting and collecting stone artifacts to trace the cultural evolution of humanity and improve their Hall of South American Peoples display, and an Ivy League “curiosity” about Waorani immunology and *genoma*, due to the group’s resistance to snakebites. Mary Louise Pratt defines the concept of anti-conquest as “the mechanisms by which travelers and travel writers preserve their kind of innocence about their travel [...] unlike previous travelers in the 15th and 16th century, they didn’t present themselves as *conquistadores*, as there to dominate and to conquest and to dispossess. They adopted a posture of a kind of innocence. Mainly they

52 Robert Wasserstrom, “Waorani Warfare on the Ecuadorian Frontier, 1885–2013.” *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2016): 497–516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12217>.

were there as naturalists and just there to see the country, and the kind of colonial and Imperial infrastructure that was underwriting their activities stayed out of sight.”⁵³ In the 1983 expedition’s case, this is an “innocence” that attempts to obscure the colonial and civilizational project inherent to the craving for primitiveness embodied in these agents’ gazing and manipulation of Waorani culture and bodies.

The documentary resulting from the expedition, *Nomads of the Rainforest*—which introduces the Waorani as “an ancient tribe having no form of writing or any clearly defined history, and yet their stone-age lifestyle has been revealed to us for the first time”—was aired on November 6, 1984, as part of the NOVA TV series, and today has accumulated more than 22 million views on YouTube. And while scientific papers published at the time inquired how the immunity system of such a “primitive tropical population” works, the financial outcomes and ethical implications of the medical tests, samples collected, and immunological discoveries simultaneously held in Martín’s community are still unclear.⁵⁴ In another paradox of anti-conquest whiteness, the Explorers Club flag brought by the team to the Amazon was “obviously returned” to the New York club—as the producer emphasized during our conversation—while more than three hundred objects were taken from Waorani communities to become part of the AMNH collection, where they were stored and tagged as being donated by Behrman and Yost—reborn to their image and filling the museum’s Hall

53 “The End of Tourism Podcast - S1 #11 - The Anti-Conquest, Travel Writing, and Planetary Consciousness | Mary-Louise Pratt.” Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.theendoftourism.com/episodes/the-anti-conquest-travel-writing-and-planetary-consciousness-mary-louise-pratt>.

54 Larrick, James W., C. Edward Buckley, Carolyn E. Machamer, Gregory D. Schlagel, James A. Yost, J. Blessing-Moore, and David Levy. “Does Hyperimmunoglobulinemia-E Protect Tropical Populations from Allergic Disease?” *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 71, no. 2 (February 1, 1983): 184–88. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0091-6749\(83\)90097-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0091-6749(83)90097-0).

of South American People to this day, accompanied by a perennial screening of *Nomads of the Rainforest*.

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Counterwitnessing

Martin’s call for a living museum finds echoes in movements calling for the dismantling and restructuring of colonial institutions—such as museums—that started to take place in the twentieth century. Through the early work of activists such as Vernon Bellecourt—founder of the American Indian Movement in 1968 and pioneer of museum actions demanding the non-display of Indigenous human remains in the 1970s—communities began to question and be involved in museum practices, recognizing the occupation of such spaces as a way of reclaiming the representation of their cultures and supporting larger movements of self-determination and sovereignty. As argued by Amy Lonetree, who has extensively reflected on the complex relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums, “museums can serve as sites of decolonization through honoring Indigenous knowledge and worldview, and by discussing the hard truths of colonization in exhibitions in an effort to move toward healing and understanding.”⁵⁵ That sites so umbilically connected with histories of colonialism might be where the harrowing stories of erasure, dispossession, and trauma must be forcefully told don’t go without its dose of irony and mistrust. But for scholars such as Lonetree, precisely because of the need to acknowledge the painful aspects of Indigenous history, these spaces hold the potential to provide the

55 Sascha T. Scott and Amy Lonetree, “The Past and the Future Are Now.” *Arts* 9, no. 3 (2020): 77. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts9030077>.

means to heal from historical trauma—the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences”—and unresolved grief—the “impaired or delayed mourning.”⁵⁶

Many are the grass-roots and institutional responses to the movement of occupying sites of colonial accumulation where traditional worldviews are erased or subjugated. Source communities began to be seen as stakeholders in collections, while museums started to have the moral, ethical, and political obligation to involve objects' original owners in displaying and conservation matters.⁵⁷ Museums started to be seen as potential sites for self-determination and sovereignty claims through calls for the repatriation of lands reverberating in demands for the return of sacred objects and human remains. As a form of countering the deformed, decontextualized, and degrading image imposed on Indigenous communities—i.e. museum depictions of the Waorani as “windows to a primitive past”—several communities decided, similarly to Martin, for the establishment of their own museums and cultural centers. Striving for a “recapture of the image,” as a Wapichana friend defines it, these communities saw on the creation of such spaces the opportunity to ensure their worldview as the narrator of their existential and survival history—what I will further define as the opening of Clearings. More than just spaces where material culture can be safeguarded and displayed, community museums represent also ways of ensuring the group’s control over scientific researches and anthropological studies developed *about* them. As Patricia Pierce Erikson work with the Makah Cultural & Research Center demonstrates, “tribal museums” can represent institutions that control *if* and *how* studies can be developed within their

⁵⁶ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 9.

⁵⁷ Peers, et al, *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*.

physical and cultural domains respecting specific traditions and worldviews and with the guarantee of significant outcomes for the community itself.

In other cases, such as through the “artivism” of contemporary Indigenous art, communities become “parasites” within the capitalist cultural industry, simultaneously countering and dialoguing with its system.⁵⁸ A powerful example of such a form of occupation is the Escola Panapaná (Panapaná School) project, built by artist Denilson Baniwa in the heart of *Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo* at the moment this thesis is being concluded. The structure is designed and built to house projects, visits, workshops, ceremonies, and further occupations by members of local Indigenous communities.⁵⁹ While seeing museums as “monuments to colonialism, landmarks that function to naturalize capitalist and colonial relations to the world,” other initiatives such as the Red Natural History Museum proposes exploring museums as an *infrastructure* for community-led movements, “training grounds for seeing from an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist perspective.”⁶⁰ Operating *within* colonial institutions—seeing them as the site of struggle—these practices aim at breaking with their dominant imperial tradition while nurturing otherwise forms of being and ways of seeing within a museum.

Tracing the history that culminated in the transplantation of hundreds of objects from Martin’s community to a museum in New York is to propose to *counterwitness* processes of

58 Paulo Thadeu Franco das Neves and Elemar Kleber Favreto. “A ARTE INDÍGENA CONTEMPORÂNEA DE JAIDER ESBELL E O SEU CONTRAPONTO À INDÚSTRIA CULTURAL.” *Ambiente* 13, no. 1 (May 1, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.24979/179>.

59 See Arte Que Acontece. “Denilson Baniwa Na Pinacoteca Luz.” Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://www.artequacontece.com.br/en/evento/denilson-baniwa-na-pinacoteca-luz/>. And “Denilson Baniwa Desafia Mercado Da Arte Com Nova Mostra - 17/03/2023 - Ilustrada - Folha.” Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2023/03/obra-de-artista-indigena-emula-escola-para-educar-e-fugir-do-mercado-da-arte.shtml>.

60 Lyons, Not An Alternative; Steve. “Red Natural History: An Introduction.” *The Natural History Museum* (blog). Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/learn-teach/writing/red-natural-history-an-introduction/>.

material accumulation and cultural decontextualization embedded in their display. Matthew Rarey defines counterwitnessing as “a willingly rebellious act of spectatorship that actively undermines the ways in which one has been trained to look.”⁶¹ Rarey refers to the rebellious spectatorship of public slave-whippings—a “code of looking” of Brazilian imperial visuality—by enslaved and free Africans and their descendants as an unexpected political strategy. The rebellious presence of large crowds of slaves and former slaves in such perverse demonstrations came to be feared by the dominant elites as important instigators of slave rebellions. Rarey suggests that, in the case of the Brazilian public slave whippings, the power embedded in the rebellious act of counterwitnessing culminated in the removal from the center of the city of Salvador of one of the most central symbols of such imperial code of looking: the *pelourinho* (whipping post).⁶² In sum, to counterwitness can be understood as a form of spectatorship that exhausts and dismantles the dominant codes of looking present in imperial visualities. Here, the latter is represented by the Natural History colonial display of Waorani objects, models, hammocks, blow guns, and photographed bodies ordered and classified one beside the other behind a glass vitrine in a museum in New York City.

In the case of the artifacts collected in Waorani communities, counterwitness means perceiving beyond and below the objects displayed. It means undertaking a rebellious spectatorship capable of exhausting the object’s imperial code of classification and visuality, exposing the underbelly of its accumulation, decontextualization, and display processes. By counterwitnessing the objects present behind the glass display at the AMNH-NY, one can perhaps recognize the plane borrowed from an oil company to film a clearing in Martin’s

61 Matthew Francis Rarey, “Counterwitnessing the Visual Culture of Brazilian Slavery,” *African Heritage and Memories of Slavery in Brazil and the South Atlantic World*. Ed. Ana Lucia Araujo. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015. 71-108, 72

62 Ibid., 73.

community during the shooting of *Nomads of the Rainforest*; the lifelong political struggle faced by Kemperi Baihua—constantly portrayed as a sort of “perfect Waorani specimen” throughout the museum hallways, newspaper articles and YouTube videos—against oil developments; the behavior of foreign doctors passively sensitizing the skin of recently contacted Waorani members to see how their bodies reacted to allergens; hear Tessmann arbitrarily dumping informants with his set of questions as a ‘primitiveness ruler;’ feel—when looking at the weaving of a hammock—an encroached territory, a persistently threatened existence deadly entangled with the tenacity of oil. The most considerable effort in counterwitnessing lies within us, *cowori*, who must perform an embodied commitment of *unlearning* how to see these objects. For Martin, whose people's history is being told and manipulated by someone else, simply witnessing such objects in a haunted museum setting brings to the surface the intergenerational trauma caused by being “transformed from the *human subject* of his own culture into the *inhuman object* of the European culture.”⁶³ Hence, the reasons behind Martin's unsettling feelings and immediate reactions when facing MACCO's collection are crystal clear. In a way, the *Living Museum* can be understood not only as a radical spatiality but, equally important, as a *way of seeing*, a method to cultivate an alternative code of looking capable of dismantling dominant strategies of visuality and display.

63 Sylvia Wynter, n.d., 10, (emphasis original) as quoted in Kathryn Yusoff. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. U of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Chapter 2

Unlearning the Museum as Contact Zone

The 1990s witnessed a shift in the relationship between museums and Native American communities. Consolidating a “post-colonial condition,” so-called “source communities” started to be seen as “stakeholders,” reflecting new approaches to promote inclusionist, collaborative, and more “egalitarian” practices that sought to empower these groups on matters related to their traditional objects within museum environments. In the United States, the passing of the National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAIA) in 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 were crucial to the Indigenous repatriation of material heritage and human remains that were to follow and, consequently, the engagement between Indigenous communities and museums. NAGPRA became the centerpiece for repatriation practices in the United States, addressing the trauma created by centuries of indiscriminate collecting practices and Indigenous grave looting—a perverse common practice undertaken by anthropology's most prestigious figures, such as Franz Boas, and highly encouraged by institutions such as the Smithsonian in late 19th century, which insisted that grave robbing should be done “without offense to the living.”¹ Countering the 1906 Antiquities Act, which reified anthropologists' authority over Indigenous material culture, NAGPRA provided Native American

1 Erikson, Patricia Pierce. *Voices of a Thousand People: The Makah Cultural and Research Center*. U of Nebraska Press, 2005, p.45.

communities with greater control over the remains of their ancestors and related cultural objects.²

The 1990 Act legally underpinned Indigenous communities' claims towards sovereignty over “culturally affiliated” human remains and sacred objects while promoting an emergent awareness of the historical procedures of Indigenous erasure and cultural theft, of which museums played no minor role, as covered in the previous chapter. NAGBRA dictates that human remains and associated funerary objects must be repatriated to direct descendants, culturally affiliated Native American tribes, or Native Hawaiian organizations while also making it possible for Native American communities to request the repatriation of objects considered sacred to the community at large.³ The advancements promoted by the Act are often framed positively, signaling how it brought Indigenous groups into a dialogue with institutions—in many cases for the first time—while giving them tools and the ability to assert their right to self-determination through the increased control over their cultural property held by museums. Native American groups could now claim back human remains and sacred objects held by such institutions. More optimistic views towards NAGPRA immediate legacy point out the positive outcomes not only to Indigenous peoples but to the “general public.” Since the repatriation mandate requires institutions to create an inventory of the Native American remains and cultural property in their collections, mechanisms for partnership with federally recognized tribes were produced while bringing to the surface outdated preservation practices.⁴ Under this view, NAGPRA positive results are seen as not

2 Daehnke, Jon, and Amy Lonetree. “Repatriation in the United States: The Current State of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 1 (March 28, 2011): 87–97.

3 *Ibid.*, 92.

4 Eynon, Alexandra. “The Public Values of Repatriation in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 229–64.

exclusive to the tribes who undertake processes of healing of inter-generational trauma and grief through the repatriation of objects and human remains; they generate a return as well, as legal scholar Alexandra Eynon notes, for the “American public [...] by making it more likely that museums will identify and care for implicated objects in their collections and by creating broader access to those collections.”⁵ In other words, according to this view, NAGPRA would stimulate museums to “do their jobs better.”⁶ What does “better” mean in this case or, more precisely, what is considered “enough” regarding museum reparation practices towards Indigenous “stakeholders” is one of the key questions posed by this chapter.

The repatriation process to International communities is undertaken through distinct paths, most prominently through the 1970 *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*. The convention defines and urges countries to take measures to prohibit and prevent illegal traffic of cultural property while providing frameworks for their eventual return and restitution.⁷ International repatriation procedures have been increasingly coming to the public attention through widely broadcasted examples such as the series of 29 Benin Bronzes that the Smithsonian Institution returned to Nigeria and the Edo State; the terra cotta figures *Orpheus and the Sirens* returned to Italy by the J. P. Getty Museum in Los Angeles; and the talks between the British Museum and the Greek government to return the

5 Ibid. 231

6 Ibid

7 See UNESCO, Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, No. 11806, 823 U.N.T.S. 231 (Nov. 14, 1970). Available at <https://en.unesco.org/fightrafficking/1970>

Parthenon Marbles—examples announced or taking place just in the second half of 2022.⁸ One could also mention as another remarkable case Yale’s Peabody Museum’s 2011 return of nearly 5,000 objects looted from Machu Picchu in a series of infamous expeditions undertaken by Yale University between 1911 and 1915.⁹ Ultimately, communication and agreements between international communities and Euro-North American museums happen under distinct spheres of complex bureaucracies and highly specific case-by-case community engagements when compared to repatriation acts within the United States, guided by the NAGPRA. For instance, what would be the case if the Bameno community decided to claim the more than 300 objects taken from the community during the recording of *Nomads of the Rainforest* and later donated to the American Museum of Natural History in New York (AMNH-NY)? More on that later. But the unbalance resulting from such a condition is evident when analyzing the data provided by museums, such as the AMNH-NY, regarding repatriation. After more than 30 years since the passing of NAGPRA, 47 repatriation procedures were completed by the museum for Native American communities, totaling a return of 970 human remains and 2,280 cultural objects; while the number of completed international repatriations totals only 5, representing the return of 200 human remains to Indigenous communities in Canada, Greenland, and Mexico. The issue at stake becomes even more evident when considering that the quantity of archaeological artifacts

8 For the Benin Bronze repatriation see Institution, Smithsonian. “Smithsonian Returns 29 Benin Bronzes to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria.” Smithsonian Institution. Accessed February 16, 2023. <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-returns-29-benin-bronzes-national-commission-museums-and-monuments>; for the return of Orpheus and the Sirens see “Getty Museum to Return Objects to Italy | Getty News.” Accessed February 16, 2023. <https://www.getty.edu/news/getty-museum-to-return-objects-to-italy/>; for the negotiations between the British Museum and the Greek government regarding the Parthenon Marbles see Solomon, Tessa. “The British Museum Has Been in Secret Talks with Greece Over the Return of the Parthenon Marbles.” ARTnews.Com (blog), December 5, 2022. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/british-museum-and-greece-secretly-discuss-return-of-parthenon-marbles-1234649187/>.

9 For the context of the Machu Picchu expeditions see Amy Cox Hall, “Collecting a ‘Lost City’ for Science: Huaquero Vision and the Yale Peruvian Expeditions to Machu Picchu, 1911, 1912, and 1914-15Links to an external site.” *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 293–321. For the repatriation procedures see Am, Sarah Nutman 1:39, Feb 14, and 2011. “Returning to Machu Picchu.” Yale Daily News, February 14, 2011. <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2011/02/14/returning-to-machu-picchu/>.

from international sites in the AMNH Division of Anthropology collection is two times larger than the ones collected from the United States territories, while ethnological artifacts from international communities are more than six times more present in the museum's collection than those in United States today, exposing a clear discrepancy between national and international repatriation.

Other views are more cautious about considering NAGPRA under a progressive narrative or as a synonym for decolonization. Critics focus on the distinction between identified cultural remains that can return to their respective descendants and culturally unidentifiable human remains (CUHRs), the latter representing the majority of human remains held by museums. Without ignoring the advancements that NAGPRA allowed for the cultural and material sovereignty of Native American communities, Indigenous scholars, such as Amy Lonetree, bring to the foreground the problems of museums and anthropological communities regarding the repatriation of CUHRs, and Indigenous calls for ending the use of CUHR use in scientific studies. Quoting Clayton Dumont, Daehnke and Lonetree question the underbelly of NAGPRA, fearing it as a “strategy for maintaining the upper hand in the emerging fight for nearly 120,000 ancestors and millions of stolen objects that they have declared ‘culturally unidentifiable.’”¹⁰ In time, to whom belongs the right of “cultural identification?” Could NAGPRA be used as a tool to govern ‘difference’ in late liberal and multicultural States politics of recognition? A “truly decolonized” approach to repatriation, the authors argue, should provide Native American communities with *full control* over Indigenous human remains, including CUHRs. Under this view, repatriation is *the* collaboration. Without considering the importance of the debate over CUHRs, any other

¹⁰ Daehnke and Lonetree, 95.

collaboration between Native American communities and anthropologist, archaeologists, and museums become “much less relevant,” putting any assumptions of an actual “postcolonial” world under question.¹¹

Much has yet to be said and argued, not only about NAGPRA’s efficiency as a “decolonial tool,” but about repatriation in an international context. However, such a debate is outside of this work’s scope. What is important to highlight is the increased level of collaboration and negotiation between Indigenous communities and museums since the 1990s. Despite the fair critiques towards NAGPRA, the fact is that during this period, Native American communities started to have more access and increased control over museum collections and displays. Today, it would be hard to imagine an exhibition being developed or a museum renovated in which the display of Indigenous objects is not discussed with their respective communities. Collaboration, consultation, and shared curatorship became the bottom line.

At the same time, as Daehnke and Lonetree point out, *repatriation* is the most important aspect of collaboration. But what happens when the return of objects held by museums is not a community’s priority? When asking objects back, become, to a certain extent, irrelevant? Would it free museums from their—borrowing Marie Louise Pratt terminology— “guilty acts of conquest”?¹² To counter such an illusion is, at length, the motivation of this work. That is, to instigate alternative paths of collaboration and negotiation between museums and communities that go beyond the (necessary) repatriation efforts,

11 Ibid

12 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

indoor collaborations, and the creation of tribal museums. The latter is a remarkable achievement for many Native American communities but a process that demands economic and political circumstances that are sometimes still distant from the reality of many Indigenous groups worldwide. Martín's living museum might point us to "something else."

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Unordering of natures

When talking with Martín about the objects collected from his community in 1983, during the filming of *Nomads of the Rainforest* and donated to the AMNH-NY, I asked if he would like to see these objects returned. It is important to remember how *Nomads of the Rainforest* was filmed and narrated as an urgent task to register and “preserve” the traditional life of a group in a supposed eminence of disappearing due to the expansion of oil extraction in the Yasuní region; an anti-conquest salvage mission undertaken by a Wall Street adventurer (see Chapter 1). After a brief pause, he said:

I don't know how we could do for this to return, but as I said to Ana Maria about the hammocks, we can do them here now, work and produce them as we as Waorani have always done, weave them big, small, medium, bigger... also spears... small, regular and bigger than regular... 50cm, 1 meter, 1 meter and a half and so on.”¹³

Martín's response suggests that a choice for the *process* instead of the *product* is at play. He 'doesn't need' the hammocks, blowguns, dart cases, or spears held at AMNH, as he can make others, “as the Waorani have always done.” Martín's effort is to show that, ‘against

13 Martin Bahiua in conversation with the author. January 2023.

all expectations,' the Waorani are still there, fighting for their territory. What is remarkable is that instead of stating, "we are still here, and we demand our objects back"—the fair cry of most Indigenous communities that undertake repatriation processes—Martin seems to be saying, "we *don't* need our objects back *because* we are still here." Sovereignty—in this case—is not about repatriation but about the right to be in motion, to create, as it was always done. And in a way that the process—the object's movement—is to be shared with future generations. Martin's living museum operates in an intergenerational *motion*, not in rest.

To preserve an archive, venerating finished, carefully preserved objects—while central to totemic culture—is incompatible with a worldview that praises the *cyclic abundance* of beauty, happiness, and the forest—often represented by the expression *waaponi*, which describes an abundance of trees to be used to craft spears and blowguns, animals to hunt, fruits to collect.¹⁴ Ultimately, tropical climates endorse such an "aesthetic disposition" by providing both an abundance of materials to fabricate objects and effective agencies of dissolution, such as humidity, and organisms, such as termites. In the case of the Waorani, this generative ephemerality is considered to be foundational for their "world-making" process, the expression here meaning—borrowing Marie Louise Pratt's definition again—"the actions, practices, and creations by which people craft meaningful realities and stories for themselves out of their engagements with what is around them, even as they contend with hostile circumstances."¹⁵ As Laura Rival argues, in a passage that deserves to be quoted in its length:

14 In conversations with Manuela Omari Ima, October 2022.

15 Pratt, Mary Louise. *Planetary Longings. Dissident Acts*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. p.8

[...] Huaorani relational epistemology, rooted in the recognition of the shared physicality and biological unity of beings that grow, mature, and decay, connects persons across species' boundaries—including the supernatural entities that control the release of game and those that prey on humans. The life force or vital energy that causes plants and other organisms to be born, to grow, and to mature is central to Huaorani social life and knowledge of the world. Vigorous growth irradiates the lived world with its aesthetic qualities to the point of saturation. What no longer grows, decays. The power to (re)generate vitality is associated with spontaneous plant growth. Processes of maturation and growth are key biological phenomena through which the socionatural world is ordered. Reproduction and continuity do not depend on the acquisition of, nor can they be appropriated by, external political or religious powers. The forest's natural bounty is understood to result from the interlocking of animal, plant, and human life cycles. The world gets made as it is through ongoing interactions between people and other forms of life. It is the relationship between living people, the forest, and past generations that makes forest resources bountiful. The longhouse sharing economy links present and past generations with the forest islands where people have dwelled, married, and died (Rival 2016,15).

Rival's reading of the entangled relationship between Waorani's world-making practices and the ecology of human and other-than-human beings' life cycles is illuminating. The interlocking of such cycles is what, ultimately, results in the forest's natural bounty. Whatever lives within such abundant environments matures, thrives, and *consequently* decays, allowing the process to repeat itself.

In the context of the present work, it is crucial to highlight Rival's conclusion that "processes of maturation and growth are key biological phenomena through which the [Waorani] socrionatural world is ordered." As suggested in the previous chapter, since the launching of Carl Linnaeus's *System of Nature* in 1735, the ordering of the world, according to Euro-American epistememes, has been a practical endeavor, one of unprecedented scale and scope. Through *System of Nature*, Linnaeus proposed a descriptive system capable of classifying *all* the plants on the earth, known and unknown, through a simplified set of characteristics of their reproductive parts. By collecting, preserving, and analyzing a set of twenty-four (later twenty-six) basic configurations of stamens, pistils, and so forth, scientists, adventurers, and travelers could identify and lay out these specimens according to the letters of the alphabet.¹⁶ The *One*, used by the Waorani to produce the fibers that will be weaved in their traditional *yoo* (hammocks), thus becomes *Astrocaryum chambira*; the *Tewe*, a palm that holds a deep inter-generational meaning for the Waorani, provides an abundance of fruits and whose *tiwetapa* (stem) can be used to produce spears becomes, under this ordering of nature, *Bactris Gasipaes*. Placed together, one beside another, the genus *Bactris* brings similar species closer together, even though geographically spread across the Americas. Linnaeus's scheme of systematizing nature thus makes "order out of chaos," a totalizing order of nature that results in what Pratt calls a European "planetary consciousness."¹⁷ Waorani ordering of the world, as pointed out by Rival, happens under a completely distinct ontology. Rather than isolating, dissecting, objectifying, comparing, and collecting, it is the interlocking of beings within a local socio-ecological system—which implies processes of life and death,

16 Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992, p.25.

17 *Ibid*, 29.

maturity and decay—that order a socio-natural world. To order the world, in this ontology, is to be part of such a dynamics of abundance and decay, to produce, reproduce, consume, share, perform, and by doing so, keep “intergenerational relationships alive, reproduce social memory, and promote the growth of plant populations on the landscape,”¹⁸ so the process can happen all over again in the future, “as we as Waorani have always done.” Hence the little importance that Martín gave to the idea of claiming Waorani objects back from AMNH-NY.

Traditionally, Waorani *yoo* (hammocks) are weaved every four months anew, providing fresh *One* fibers to rest the body.¹⁹ In its production process, as will be seen in further chapters, long walks are made to collect fruits, barks, leaves, and seeds used in the *One*'s coloring processes, a work that can take months to be completed. These traditional trekking through the forest (*ömere gomoniipa*) are ways of reestablishing intergenerational and multispecies bonds, of weaving a sense of belonging with one's territory and the socio-ecology of human and other-than-human selves that lives on and through it. To weave the hammock is to weave a world, and the decay of the hammock is not only acceptable but *needed* for such a bond to be weaved anew, fresh as the new bright-green *One* collected. A 188.5x90 cm hammock preserved inside AMNH's Anthropology Division collection, donated in 1969 by someone with the surname Cotlow, cataloged under the number 40.1/3057, indicating its culture as Waorani (Auca), its material as plant fiber (chambira palm), its technique as spranged [sic], knotless netting, and its category as 'furnishings'

18 Benavides, María, Pablo Jarrín, and Montserrat Rios. “Oral History Reveals Landscape Ecology in Ecuadorian Amazonia: Time Categories and Ethnobotany among Waorani People.” *Economic Botany* 70 (December 30, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12231-015-9330-y>. p.2

19 In conversation with Manuela Omari Ima. October 2022.

represents, ultimately, something else. Just as my colorful hammock, bought from the hands of Manuela Omari Ima for \$200 dollars in her lodge in the city of Puyo, brought to New Haven, and placed on a large wood table inside a luxurious interior in the Yale School of Architecture—in my attempt of pursuing a Master of Environmental Design degree—becomes, at its best, a decontextualized caricature. Like Benjamin’s books, both hammocks are reborn under the image of the collector and archived. There, in the Tepapade—Omari’s family community where I engaged in the process of trekking, gathering, and weaving the *yoo*—as in Martin’s living museum, the archive is absent, simply because the objects are a manifestation of living entities with complex socio-ecological relationships amidst their processes of maturation and decay. To “order the world” is just to see oneself as a living and dying part of it.

However, such incommensurability that causes some groups not to be interested in having their objects back shouldn’t diminish the museum’s potential for reparation but rather call for other possibilities. If the present work is crafted as a response to Martín’s idea of a *Museo Vivo*, the complementary question—a genuine uncertainty—is how museums can engage their resources and negotiate with such spaces—in whatever form they take—as a means of reparation and to the advantage of the community. Tracing the history and legacy of James Clifford’s “museum as a contact zone” idea will be helpful in this sense; from the original concept of “contact zone” by Mary Louise Pratt, its appropriation by Clifford in the museum context, and its further critics and unexplored possibilities.

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Unlearning the museum as a contact zone

Amidst the contemporary shift in the relationship between museums and Native American communities, James Clifford's 1997 essay "Museums as Contact Zones" contributed significantly to the criticism—and emerging possibilities—of museum practices; its influence on the field can't be overstated. Since the essay's appearance in his work *Routes: Travel and Translation In Late Twentieth Century*, the term contact zone has become—for good or for worst—a synonym for museum and museum-like strategies aiming at inclusionist and collaborative programs with source communities. It became increasingly common within museum environments to name spaces, strategies, and practices as "Contact Zones" or "Contact Work," with collections of essays and conferences organized to debate and revisit the term and its application within cultural institutions.²⁰ Within museum studies scholarships, the term became an assured presence in works debating the relationship between museums and Indigenous stakeholders.²¹ More recently, a member of the ICOM (International Council of Museums) claimed museums to be the *ultimate* contact zones in an effort to support a more activist positioning and politically engaged definition of "museum" by the Council. While working as an architect at a museum of natural history in Brazil between 2019 and 2021, I would quite often hear references to that museum as a contact zone (or a supposedly positive variation "contamination zones") as a way of justifying the increased 'interdisciplinarity' and 'transversal narratives' advocated by the museum direction. But what does it even mean to call a museum a "contact zone"? How does the concept address the violence and colonial context that nurtured the backbone of such institutions? How are Indigenous communities and their contemporary struggles understood

20 See Peers, Laura Lynn, and Alison Kay Brown. *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*. Routledge, 2003.

21 See Schorch, Philipp, and Conal McCarthy. *Curatopia: Museums and the Future of Curatorship*. Manchester University Press, 2019.
Erikson, Patricia Pierce. *Voices of a Thousand People: The Makah Cultural and Research Center*. U of Nebraska Press, 2005.

in relation to museum responsibilities under such a “contact perspective”? And more specifically, how can the use or criticism of the concept add to our conversations about Martín’s living museum? To shed light on these questions, the following lines will seek to analyze the contributions of seeing museums as contact zones as well as the shortcomings of doing so.

Clifford’s essay starts in the Portland Museum of Art’s basement, where he was invited to participate, as a consultant, in a series of discussions with elders and young members of Northwest Coast Tlingit communities regarding the renovation of the display of Tlingit art. At the time of the conversations, in 1989, shortly before the approval of NAGPRA, collaborations between museums and source communities happened sporadically, and the procedure was still considered unusual. With traditional and sacred masks, headdresses, and rattles placed over a table, the museum staff and invited consultants had prepared to discuss their histories, meanings, and possible ways of displaying. For the organizers, the museum and its exhibition strategies were central topics. Clifford’s account, however, demonstrates that the Tlingit group “had their own agenda for the meeting.”²² Shortly after its beginning, two distinct dialogical spheres happened simultaneously. The first represented active reciprocity between Tlingit members from different clans through traditional and protocolar performances, opaque to non-tribe members. The second sphere was characterized by an entanglement of traditional histories and contemporary struggles framed as political requests to the white people present. At times, both spheres intertwined, delivering a message which was performed through objects, records, and histories within an ongoing colonial history.

22 Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard University Press, 1997. p. 189

Clifford points out that, while addressing the “regalia with appreciation and respect,” the Tlingit elders seemed to use them only as “aides-mémoires,” as means for the performance of stories and songs delivered to distinct clan members.²³ More recent accounts of Tlingit repatriation, happening more than three decades after Clifford's experience, add another ontological depth to such a dialogue between tribe members within the museum space. They ultimately show that these “things,” such as the “regalia,” are not merely a note for reconning and stimulating the performance of songs but could be more closely referred to—I suggest—a thread and a needle in the process of weaving particular worlds.

Following the years of Clifford's account, the Tlingit became among the most successful groups in repatriating sacred objects. Aldona Jonaitis's account of recent Tlingit repatriation processes illuminates the complexities involved in the dialogues between clan members *through* objects witnessed by Clifford, showing the ceremonial aspects brought into the museum when engaging with such collections. According to her:

“Tlingit repatriation ceremonies at museums reinforce two crucial components of identity and values: the cultural centrality of *at.óow*, which anthropologist Sergei Kan explains as “sacred objects representing the lineage crests” (1986: 196), and the balance achieved by moiety opposites. Acquired in the past by an ancestor and inherited by the clan of his descendants, many “things” can be *at.óow*: objects, geographic sites, celestial bodies, supernaturals, personal names, histories, ancestors, images. The most important occasion for the display of *at.óow* in the form of objects is the *ku.éex'* or memorial potlatch culminating a succession of funeral

23 Ibid.

ceremonies. This event must include the presence and active reciprocities of clans from the two exogamous moieties of Ravens and Eagles or Wolves. An object that depicts *at.óow* cannot be considered itself *at.óow* until it is presented at these consequential events to its clan's moiety opposites, whom they pay to witness and validate the display. As *at.óow* are introduced and displayed, the ancestors are made manifest, the clan's history reified, and future generations honored (Aldona 2017,49).

Jonaitis reflections on the ceremonial importance of sacred objects, negotiated between members of exogamous moieties, demonstrate the agency of such *things* in a particular world-making process that implies an intergenerational activation. The indispensable presence of members of distinct clans—Ravens and Eagles or Wolves—and their respective *at.óow*, demonstrates the transiency needed when engaging and activating such objects. To a certain degree, these collections also operate more in motion than in rest; *at.óow's*—such as raven masks and headdresses—have agency and “do something,” even though they are left on the table, supposedly, as mere *aides-mémoires*. Such ceremonial procedures, Jonaitis show, are brought into the museum during repatriation processes. All efforts are made, for example, for members of both moieties to be present—the ones of which the repatriated *at.óow* belongs and their opposite. Additionally, an *at.óow* belonging to the opposite clan is requested as a way of balancing the forces of such a negotiation. In many cases, *at.óow* from other museums, belonging to communities and, in some cases, recently repatriated, are requested to participate in the ceremony.²⁴

24 Aldona Jonaitis, “Tlingit Repatriation in Museums: Ceremonies of Sovereignty.” *Museum Worlds* 5 (January 1, 2017): 48–60: p.49.

At times, the ceremonial performances between Tlingit clans—opaque to Clifford and the staff involved—metamorphosed into narratives of contemporary political struggle. The meaning of such messages became relational, not only between Tlingit clan members but also in relation to white interlocutors; as one of the elders resumes: “This is what the objects inspire us to say in response to our shared history, the goals of ongoing responsibility and reciprocity we differently embrace.”²⁵ A Glacier Bay story sung by a member evokes a sense of great loss with the view of a village covered with ice, the loss of territory. Suddenly, the vision gains another dimension when the loss is connected to current regulatory policies by the Forest Service restricting the use of the Tlingit’s traditional land. When an *at.óow* in the form of a headdress representing an octopus is brought, a story of how an enormous monster prevented access to salmon by blocking the bay with its tentacles is performed. Clifford points out how, by the end, the octopus had shapeshifted into state and federal agencies restricting the Tlingit salmon consumption according to their traditions. In another story, a raven gets trapped inside a whale after flying through its blowhole, unable to get out, all that remains is for the bird to pray. An elder goes on and says: “To our white brothers here, our prayers are like the Raven’s. Who will cut open the whale, so we can come out? We’re in need of all our ancestors, our land is being taken. Our children... Who will look after them? Maybe you can help us, help cut open the whale.”²⁶

These accounts demonstrate the ontological negotiations at play when objects held in museum collections become threads to weave a particular world-making project. More importantly, they show the complexities involved when they are put in relation with the white

25 Clifford, *Routes*, 194.

26 *Ibid.*, 190.

interlocutors' world, connected by the "shared history, the goals of ongoing responsibility and reciprocity we differently embrace," and which are, ultimately, the offspring of a violent colonial history. Nevertheless—and against all expectations—museum staff are constantly seen as potential allies by Indigenous communities, as figures that can operate in the colonial threshold, listen to the raven cry, and *possibly* hold the knife to "cut open the whale." In turn, this unexpected position is exemplified by the fact that, during repatriation processes, museum staff are sometimes even adopted as community members.²⁷ Indeed, one might say such a move is more guided by politics than affection, but it nevertheless demonstrates the cunning involved in the complex—and far from obvious—relationships between Indigenous communities and museum practices. As shown by Clifford, in the Portland Art Museum basement:

A message was delivered, performed, within an ongoing contact history. [...] Tlingit history did not primarily illuminate or contextualize the objects of the Rasmussen Collection. Rather, the objects provoked (called forth, brought to voice) ongoing stories of struggle. From the position of the collecting museum and the consulting curator, this was a disruptive history which could not be confined to providing past tribal *context* for the objects. The museum was called to a sense of its responsibility, its stewardship of the clan objects. [...] The museum was asked to be accountable in a way that went beyond mere preservation. It was urged to act on behalf of Tlingit communities, not simply to represent the history of tribal objects completely or accurately. A kind of reciprocity was claimed, but not a give-and-take that could lead to a final meeting of minds, a coming together that would erase the discrepancies, the ongoing power imbalances of contact relations (Clifford 1997, 193).

27 Jonaitis, 2017

This continuous historical, political, and moral *relationship*—originated from the collection and “power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull—” motivates the author’s definition of the museum as a *contact zone*.²⁸

Clifford borrows the concept from Mary Louise Pratt, who developed it originally in the 1990 essay “Arts of the Contact Zone,” in order to refer to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”²⁹ As Pratt further developed in her work *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation*, such spaces are characterized by “highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination,” overdetermining the history of imperial meaning-making and the “production” of the “rest of the world” through the encounter and intersections of “subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures.”³⁰ These spaces are far from being ideal, optimistic and purely collaborative ones, being simultaneously defined by the establishment of continuous relations that, usually, involve “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”³¹ Pratt’s definition of the concept makes one question if Clifford’s definition of “contact zone” as the Portland Art Museum meeting could be better exemplified by the view of the Glacier Bay story’s village covered with ice and its relation with the Forest Service, the bay blocked by the monstrous octopus preventing the access to salmon and state and federal agencies, or the belly of the whale in which the raven gets trapped. Expanding the “contact zone” to encompass more than the museum’s

28 Clifford, *Routes*, 192.

29 Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Profession*, 1991: 33–40.

30 Pratt, 1992: p.4-6

31 *Ibid*, 6

basement where the group gathered. This cross-ontological dialogue proposed by the Tlingit is a powerful threshold for accessing these contact zones: to visit the village, the bay, the whale's belly, and—among collectors, monsters, and federal agencies—look back at the museum. But Clifford's analysis seems to miss this opportunity by persistently seeing the *museum* as the place of encounter and collaboration, not the community's territory. It is essential not to be misguided that the encounter in the museum equates to the encounter in the territory, the former the site of colonial accumulation, the latter the site of colonial intervention.

In 2020, while working with Indigenous communities in Paraná, Brazil, I often saw myself in situations that could be unpacked through the lenses of this “contact perspective.” In a couple of these moments, I was participating on a project to counter-analyze architectural elements depicted in photographs of local Indigenous communities—such as the Kaingáng, Xetá, and Guarani—part of Museu Paranaense's collections through meetings with members of these groups. During one of these encounters, a leader began the meeting by asking for help combating the dissemination of a viral video linking his community to a deadly truck accident followed by cargo lootings, portraying his group as violent degenerates. “That's absolutely not who we are.” In another meeting, while discussing photographs and maps of their traditional territory, a Xetá leadership brought to the discussion their historical struggle for the demarcation of the group's traditional territory, today owned by a series of multinational companies. I would never portray these meetings as moments of encounters—and overcoming—of difference, cooperation, and harmony. The feelings that best describe what occurred in those rooms and online video calls were, to a certain extent, frustration and impotence. How could the museum actively engage with what seemed to me at the time

more urgent struggles than the correct labeling and displaying of archives? How could our rewriting of the archive's history represent any contribution to these matters? Due to the scope of the project and my institutional role at the time, such questions remained unanswered. This is not to diminish or undermine necessary collaborative work that has, in the past decades, flourished between Indigenous communities and museums, if not to broaden their limits and signal caution. As Robin Boast questioned in his illuminating critique of the contact zone's reference within museum neocolonial practices, why do such institutions perpetuate only "a partial and rosy portrait of the contact zone"?³² As if such encounters were already enough? And, I add, a contact perspective persistently rooted in Euro and American imperial centers of accumulation rather than on sites of imperial intervention?

A case of contact relations given particular attention by Clifford exemplifies this condition and can be easily mirrored in more contemporary engagements between Indigenous communities and museums. In 1994, a dozen of sculptors from Highland New Guinea were invited to perform their traditional work at Stanford campus as part of an initiative led by an anthropology student. Tree trunks were brought from New Guinea and transformed into "human figures entwined with animals" and fantastic designs.³³ During the summer, the community joined the artists—who were not "displayed," but "presented" as "artists," not as "natives"—in festivities, barbecues, face painting, drumming, and dancing. Clifford's account is filled with a sense of optimism, describing an Edenic place. The carvers

32 Boast, Robin. "NEOCOLONIAL COLLABORATION: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited." *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2011): 56–70.

33 Clifford, 1997: p. 195

“pursued their adventures, collecting prestige, information, and fun [...] they made friends from various communities around Stanford [...] were taken to Disneyland” and so forth.³⁴ He remarks how one regular visitor stated, “It is like a miracle dropping here from outer space, in a very lily-white, upper-class community,” while a carver said, “All the people who come are good. People are happy to see us, and they bring us food.”³⁵ Certainly, the experiences born from the creation of the New Guinea Sculpture Garden were, in many instances and possibly for all agents involved, positive, welcoming, and respectful. Following Clifford’s accounts, the students’ intention was not to exploit the New Guinea artists, who were received with great hospitality.

Establishing relationships between Indigenous groups and historically exploitative academic environments, such as American universities, is not only acceptable but even desired by communities—it is the case of powwows organized in spaces like Yale University. For Mashantucket Pequot leaders, such as Michael Thomas, these events represent a form of sharing care with a larger community comprised of not only Native Americans. Ultimately, they say, this “changes things emotionally, which is the only way to lead towards changing things practically.”³⁶ However, there is an innocence in the account of Stanford’s New Guinea Sculpture garden that is hard to contend with in relation to the imperial critic of Pratt’s contact perspective. An innocence that, to this day, seems to support the idea that bringing an Indigenous artist to exhibit and collaborate in a museum space, and evoking the contact

34 Ibid, 196

35 [(Koh, 1994: 2B) quoted by Clifford, 1997: p.196]

36 Michael Thomas, talk at Yale Art Gallery February, 23, 2023.

zone, is enough. As if these types of engagements offer a solution for the questions posed by the Tlingi or Xetá leaders.

In a recent revisit to the concept of contact zone, Pratt points out that, among all the idea's innumerable appropriations and afterlives, to see the contact zone as a "solution" is particularly misguided. In these cases, contact zones are "articulated not as a device for imagining situations of heterogeneity, inequality, and conflict but as the name of a solution for these challenges. It becomes an ideal to be aspired to—an Edenic, harmonious place where people separated by deep historical differences successfully collaborate, cooperate, and resolve their differences, each side responsive to the other's needs and interests."³⁷ Stanford's New Guinea Sculpture garden is narrated as such an "Edenic, harmonious place." Certainly, raising awareness of the raven prayer is a necessary endeavor, but one that can't suppress the question of 'who holds the knife to cut the whale open?' Or, as asked by Tony Bennet in his classic Foucauldian critique of the museum as an instrument of governmentality and control, are "museums not still concerned to beam their improving messages of cultural tolerance and diversity into civil society *as far as they can reach?*"³⁸

Even though Clifford's following examples attempted to present a more nuanced and complex image of the contact zone—bringing to the foreground insightful conflicts between "source-communities" and museums organizing exhibitions on their culture—the site of analysis, of action, is always the Euro-American museum; i.e., the Mall in Washington, D.C., Venice Biennale, the Center for African Art in New York, London's Royal Academy of Arts,

³⁷ Pratt, Mary Louise. *Planetary Longings*. Dissident Acts. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, p.130

³⁸ [(Bennet, 1998:213] quoted in Boast, 2011: 59]

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Royal Ontario Museum, Glenbow Museum, etc. In those cases, what seems to be missing is a move inherent to the concept of the contact zone, a movement of “reimagining” that aims, according to Pratt, to “move the study of empire from the European imperial center and *recenter* it at the sites of imperial intervention, in effect to decenter Europe [...] to the places where exploration, invasion, and colonization were unfolding, which I named the *contact zone*.”³⁹ Once again, the Portland Art Museum basement is not the “belly of the whale,” if not a possible means to access it; just as the Stanford New Guinea Sculpture Garden clearly is not the Highlands of New Guinea.

What did the Papuan community, who did not travel to Palo Alto but stood in their traditional territory, while some members crossed the globe, expect from this partnership? What was the political, social, and economic context of traditional carving in New Guinea following German and British colonization? How did such a “miraculous” experience at Stanford affect the artists/ “aliens” when they arrived back home/ “in outer space?” What did the collaboration and fraternity between the artists bring back to their community in the Highlands of New Guinea? What connections and routes of solidarity were maintained between the garden and the “source community”? All these questions remain not answered. However, a decade later, when visiting the garden with Boast, Clifford mentions that “he thought that the Papuan artists expected something more, more long term, out of the exchange.”⁴⁰ For Boast, however, the failure of the experience to live up to Papuan artist’s expectations demonstrates the garden’s character as an “asymmetric space of appropriation,” ultimately representing “the conflict between two fundamentally different sets of assumptions

³⁹ Pratt, 2022: 126

⁴⁰ Boast, 2011: 63.

about what the engagements were for.”⁴¹ Boast found that, for the Papuan artists, the expectations included sets of reciprocal obligations for the gifts of their time, effort, and works that never materialized. One could suggest that such collaborations appear, at times, to be instances of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “uncontrolled equivocations,” that is, a “type of communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and do not know this.”⁴² Such disjuncture results in museums or white interlocutors not fully accessing and engaging with Indigenous demands and expectations in moments of collaboration; It results in misleading Papuan territory (the site of colonial struggle) with outer space (the site of the unknown). It makes one miss the point of the “raven prays,” mistaking the object label by the territory.

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The Parody

Martin’s intentions with a “living museum” point primarily towards protecting his group’s territory and Waorani life from neocolonial and neoliberal encroaching. Any collaboration involving his project will have the territory as the site of action, as the site of expectations; for him, the *Waorani territory* is the “ultimate contact zone.” Can museums live up to such expectations? To say the contrary would be ignoring the achievements of Indigenous artists, activists, and curators who see such institutions as their battlegrounds.

Indigenous curators have been able to blur the lines between the museum and the community by several means. As curator of Native American Art at the Yale Art Gallery and

41 Ibid

42 Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation*. *Tipiti Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* (2)1(2004) :3–22.

Collection Coordinator at Yale Peabody Museum, Royce Young Wolf (Hiraacá, Nu'eta, and Sosore, ancestral Apsáalooke and Numanaa) has significantly increased the connection between the museums and Native American communities by working under traditional forms of reciprocity and solidarity with Indigenous groups. Through traditional forms of engagement, exchange, and listening guided toward emotional healing, communication disjuncture between the museum and “source communities” is—to some extent—overcome amid a commitment to representation on Native terms. Patricia Marroquin Norby (Purépecha) work as the curator of Native American Art at the MET, and Naine Terena's curatorial work in Brazil are examples of community engagement through the radical blurring of the artist/craftsperson divide—created by the white system of art—by promoting exhibitions in major institutions fully curated and organized by Indigenous communities, who can communicate their culture and claims under their own terms. As stated by the Macuxí artist Jaider Esbell—a main proponent of the movement Arte Indígena Contemporânea (AIC) in Brazil—one of the goals of AIC is to share the “idea that we live, in fact, in a continuous state of the art, in which anyone can be an artist [...] And not get locked in this limitation that, in the white world, the artist is one or two people in a society of 100.000. In the Indigenous society, all are artists.”⁴³ Strategies of occupation, subversion, and parody of the art system are then undertaken as a form of “artctivism,” as mentioned by Esbell when discussing the role of mediatization in the AIC movement: “And all of this work, and these repercussions pass by this necessity, or opportunity, that we have of a mediatization, making use of social media, of all of these “things” of artctivism, that is to

43 Esbell, Jaider, Anderson Areas, Paula Berbert, Pedro Cesarino, Clarissa Diniz, Livia Flores, Ronald Duarte, and Daiara Tukano. “NA SOCIEDADE INDÍGENA, TODOS SÃO ARTISTAS / In indigenous society everyone is an artist.” *Arte & Ensaios* 27, no. 41 (July 24, 2021): 14–49: p.42

position oneself as artist, activist and to use all of these languages to do politics, to mark presence and demarcate territories. So AIC is creating all these ambiances traversing in one way or another.”⁴⁴ These are just a few examples of how Indigenous activists, artists, curators, and leaders are using museum language and strategies to “do politics,” to “demarcate territories.” In other words, appropriating the tools to answer the question, themselves if such institutions can “help cut open the whale.” In this case, not only repatriation but representation becomes the best collaboration.

The appropriation of the language used by imperial dominant forces to construct an oppositional representation of the imperial project is, in fact, one of the central “arts” of the contact zone for Pratt. An example per excellence of such a parody would be the *First New Chronicle and Good Government* by Guaman Poma, written between 1600 and 1615. Poma appropriates the literary genre of Chronicle—the main writing apparatus through which the Spanish self-represented the New World conquest—to write a twelve hundred pages letter directed both to the Quechua-speaking people of Peru and the King of Spain. Even though Quechua was originally a non-written language, the letter is bilingual and permeated by hundreds of line drawings illustrating the accounts, written as an appeal to the “Spanish Crown and the Quechua for the recognition of their cultural and historical significance as a people” while denouncing cases of abuse and violence against his people undertaken by the conquerors. Pratt demonstrates that, even though the style of line drawings is essentially European, Poma executes them and thus deploys “Andean systems of spatial symbolism that express Andean values and aspirations.”⁴⁵ In that sense, these images have an opacity that

44 Ibid

45 Pratt, 1991: 36.

sometimes puts Quechua figures in positions of dominance over Spanish ones but through a system of proportions that only Andean communities can access.

For Pratt, Guaman Poma work is an example of what she defines as an “autoethnography.” Different from a common definition of the term as “an autochthonous form of expression or self-representation,” Pratt considers autoethnography to be “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts.”⁴⁶ In this way, curatorial work developed by Indigenous curators within museums who traditionally developed practices of salvage ethnography, contemporary Indigenous artists developing “artctivism” from within the systems of contemporary art, Indigenous communities developing tribal museums after decades of suffering abuses by Euro-American museums, exemplify different degrees of Pratt's definition of “autoethnography.” As summarized by her, “autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression—these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone. Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone.”⁴⁷ What if we consider the museum not as the “ultimate contact zone” but as a product originated by it, as one of its “arts”?

46 Ibid, 37

47 Ibid.

I argue that here perhaps lays one of the great contributions of Indigenous representation, occupation, and appropriation of museums; that is, the decentralization of the contact zone from the museum to the territory, from the colonial centers of accumulation and decontextualization to the sites of colonial intervention—the “autoethnographical” transformation of the museum into a parody of itself. Museums then become the means to access the territory, a space where the dominant language—such as ordering, classifying, and displaying—is “merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with Indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, such interventions in “metropolitan modes of understanding” seek an ontological intervention, or as Michael Thomas stated, to change “things emotionally, which is the only way to lead towards changing things practically.” The museum thus becomes a “safe house,” an often forgotten but meaningful concept of Pratt’s *Art of the Contact Zone*. The term refers to “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression [...] Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, *claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone.*”⁴⁹

Amuseum, Antimuseum, Post-ethnographic museum, ~~Museum~~, could all be the names of this parody. Here, its name is *Museo Vivo*, Martín’s living museum. If autoethnography and, similarly, the parody represents the appropriation of the language of

48 Ibid, 35

49 Ibid,40 [Emphasizes by the author]

dominance to create an emancipatory oppositional self-representation, what the living museum appropriates is the language of “ordering” and displaying the natural world. Unlike Natural History ordering through isolating, dissecting, objectifying, comparing, and collecting, it is the interlocking of beings within a local social-ecological system—which implies processes of life and death, maturity and decay—that order Waorani world-forest. Considered a parody, the living museum originates as a radical spatiality—alongside other arts and perils—of Waorani territory’s contact zones, understood in the following chapters as a set Clearings. Thus, to visit the living museum is to access such zones in a way that intervenes in dominant modes of understanding. In a way that histories of colonial violence, silencing, and erasure are written under an ‘otherwise’ perspective, where appropriations of language are used to heal from intergenerational trauma. Interventions that, ultimately, may be capable of cutting the whale’s belly open to free the raven, as sung by the Tlingit elder or, at least, provide the means to inhabit the belly of the monster.

PART II: CLEARING

Chapter 3

Inhabiting the Belly of the Monster

"[...] The ways the Amerindians had to inhabit the belly of the monster and form unlikely alliances, and become somebody that they had no intention in becoming. These sorts of re-worldings and re-workings need to be engaged in other dramaturges then that of war precisely because we are in the belly of the monster."
— Donna Haraway in conversation with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski

"It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. [...] She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it." —Toni Morrison, *Beloved*.

In a video developed in collaboration with architect Ana Maria Duran Calisto, Martín asks for funds to build his *Museo Vivo* on a plot of land on the outskirts of the city of Coca, where the MACCO museum is located. However, before introducing his unsettling visit to

the MACCO, his feelings towards the historical appropriation of Waorani material culture, or plans for the creation of the living museum, he addresses the quintessential concern that sparks the thought of a *Museo Vivo* and that permeates Waorani existence to the point of exhaustion: the defense of their territory against the encroachments continuously promoted by colonization and extraction policies in the Yasuní. The settlement where Martín and his brother-in-law speak from was, during their youth, covered by the rainforest and part of a much larger traditional territory than the one demarcated for the Waorani today. What is left of the forest, Martín asserts, must be defended. The struggle for the territory and forest preservation is a perennial topic in any conversation I had with the Waorani I've met and continue to communicate in the Yasuní. Concerns about the territory are raised through accounts of new oil roads cutting the forest within Waorani land, issues with oil platforms and companies, news of Indigenous leaderships that advocate against extraction in the region murdered, killings of isolated communities promoted by the tenacious forces of oil, diseased relatives, violence, hunger, and poverty.¹ Thus, the concept of the museum—just as the Tlingit objects lying on the table of a basement in Portland—becomes a *means* through which territorial and life struggles can be accessed and the sovereignty over a particular world defended. The “museum” in the *Museo Vivo* imaginary is more than a display space. It is an addition to a survival toolkit aiming at “cutting open the whale” or, at least, providing the means to endure an existence within the belly of the monster.

The previous chapter aimed to demonstrate how a shift from the archives to the territory is needed when considering the relationship between museums and so-called source

1 In the five months following my visit to a Waorani Community in the margins of the Nushiño river in Ecuadorian Amazon, a concern over an oil road planned to cut the Southwestern portion of the Waorani Ethnic Reserve was raised, two close relatives of a Waorani friend passed away due to unknown diseases to the community (one of them I had met just weeks before) and a well-known Cofán leadership that fought against oil extraction in his nation's territory was murdered.

communities if new possibilities of radical reparation (more than mere collaborations) are to be faced. In other words, I called for a decentralizing movement from the centers of imperial accumulation to the sites of imperial intervention. This implied a process of unlearning the museum as the ultimate contact zone. Following Mary Louise Pratt's original concept—and highlighting the need for Indigenous representation within these institutions—I approach museums instead as a means of accessing unresolved historical grief, reflections on healing strategies, and a space for exposing hidden and silenced stories of active and passive colonial violence and suffering embodied in their collections. Namely—and borrowing Pratt's concept—as “safe houses” in which strategies and encounters could take place, shared understandings, knowledge, and claims on the world(s) could be constructed with the ultimate goal of *bringing* them into the contact zone. The latter is not a place to be found within museum galleries, collections, or storage spaces but in the original site of extraction and decontextualization, the site of ongoing imperial intervention and exploitation. Places that, even though imagined as “outer space,” are as terrene as the North American Northwest Coast, the Papuan New Guinea Highlands, and the Yasuní rainforest that stretches right next to the MACCO boundaries.

The *Museo Vivo*, then, operates by placing the museum's conceptual and practical site of interest into the territory to be defended. As such, the living museum is a by-product of the contact zone in the form of an autoethnography, a parody that appropriates the language of dominance—the ordering of natural history—to create an emancipatory oppositional self-representation: a forest in motion, rather than an archive in rest. If, following Pratt's definition, translation, parody, transculturation, and appropriation are the “literate arts of the contact zone,” Martin's *Museo Vivo* is one of the contact zones' offspring:

a project that originated from the clash, entanglements, and frictions between worlds previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures. In that sense, it is important to highlight that the *Museo Vivo* shouldn't be seen as a venue for displaying Waorani objects and a site of experiential exchanges originating from a multicultural encounter. It is not a sculpture garden as much as the whale's guts. This is the contact zone's repositioning that Martín's project—and the Tlingit elder songs and the claims by the Xetá and Kaingang leaders—not only suggest but call for.

Following the initial reflections around Martín's discomfort when visiting MACCO for the first time and in relation to museum practices' colonial backbone (chapter 1) and the further displacement of the contact zone from the museum to the territory (chapter 2), part two seeks to unpack Martín's *will* to establish a living museum in the Ecuadorian Amazon. What is the context and genealogy of such a proposition when positioning ourselves in the actual territory? It does so by seeing the *Museo Vivo* as a social project to support existential endurance under a hostile context—more than a clear attempt to create a space easily recognized as what we, white people and settlers, would understand as a museum or cultural center. In other words, as we move from the basement to the forest, from the archive to the ecology, from the collection to the Clearing, Martín's *Museo Vivo* becomes a survival strategy, a means of, as Donna Haraway's epigraph suggests, forming unlikely alliances and inhabiting the belly of the monster. In Martín's case, this is a place characterized by the ongoing debris and dilapidated corpse originating from the Waorani world's collapse after colonial and, more recently, neoliberal politics of extraction, extermination, and exhaustion. Even though contemporary neo-extractive and neoliberal politics of governance in the region certainly provide a toxically fertile ground for creating such radical spaces of resistance and

endurance, the following chapters seek to demonstrate how the formation of unlikely alliances to persevere an always-threatened existence is a continuum since early contact, a steady crossing of a desert created after a worlding collapse. In other words, by contextualizing Martín's project within a history of survival strategies and unlikely alliances developed by the Waorani, I focus on the underbelly of Martín's desire to create a living museum and all the potentialities and perseverance sheltered there.

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Enduring exhaustion

Within the exhaustion caused by an existential arch—which goes from isolation, in the depths of the Amazon, to territorial defense in the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in the span of only two to three generations—whatever comes from the Waorani territory's contact zone is not just a product of contact and transculturation as much as an attempt to hold worlds from collapsing, to dramatically *persevere* one's existence. That is, the struggle to keep the forest and their existence from dismantling after an ontological collision with settlers, missionaries, and extractive practices—such as oil and its toxic tenacity. Martín's museum is thought within a lexicon of encounter and friction just as much as dispossession and loss. In this sense, it can be seen in the face of what Elizabeth Povinelli calls 'economies of abandonment,' that is, the social projects, or otherwise forms of life that—voluntarily or not—originated from the space of potentiality in between “striving to persevere and any actual idea or action that emerges from this striving.”² In other words, the *Museo Vivo* appears as

² Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 9

a social project developed amidst dispersed suffering to endure an existence continuously threatened and choked by late liberal politics of exhaustion—of wearing your world off to the point of collapse.

In her reflections on collaborating with Australian Aboriginal groups, Povinelli suggests that the act of persevering—of enduring an existence in which even recognition is at stake—results in what she defines as *quasi-events*. They represent situations or projects which are neither defeated nor successful, spectacular nor catastrophic, but that nonetheless shelter the potentiality of radical forms of life. To a certain extent, we could say that if an ‘event’ is the cutting open of the whale—a revolutionary, spectacular event of emancipation—the quasi-event would be the minor and stubborn ways of inhabiting the belly of the monster, of enduring. In *Economies of Abandonment*, Povinelli narrates the development of an augmented reality project in which she collaborated with decades-long Indigenous colleagues from the Northern Territory of Australia. The “mobile phone project,” as they defined it, aimed to embed traditional, historical, and contemporary knowledge “into the landscape” through mixed-reality technology. By inserting hyperlinks and downloadable information, geo-referenced and geo-activated data could be accessed by tourists and future generations of Native communities alike. Avoiding the installation of physical communication and touristic infrastructure, the “mobile phone project” would make the land narrate its history and culture while guaranteeing that such information would only be accessible from where it originated.³ For the group:

³ *Ibid.*, 111

The mobile phone project might help reanimate—rather than reproduce—a local understanding of the relationship among place, people, and knowledge that is oriented to the production of mutual obligation rather than detached truth, even while it might provide the basis for a new media tourist enterprise. For my Indigenous colleagues to know is to practice an embodied commitment to place that over time becomes an embodied obligation. [...] these exercises of the self must be supported materially. Thus, we all hoped that this form of knowing might produce a dual form of value—epistemological and capital. In the meantime, my Indigenous colleagues must find a way of enduring—of capacitating the will to endure—until these material supports are in place. Their bodies must be able to endure the transition. The equipment in which their bodies are embedded must be able to endure the transition (Povinelli 2011, 112).

The equipment in which Povinelli friends' bodies are embedded, and that share the need to endure, is a reference to the precarious boat with holes, unreliable engine, and without any security measurements—such as paddles or life vests—in which the group traveled from place to place to attempt to execute the mobile phone project; an object/vehicle as exhausted as the bodies within it. The precariousness draws the conclusion that the “actual lives supporting this ethical practice hardly seem sufficient to achieve its goals.”⁴ The group in the boat is so small and living conditions are so miserable that it is clear that the will to swim against the tide, of being *otherwise*, is not far from miraculous. But amid such precariousness, amid the will between *getting anywhere* and *getting nowhere*, the group perseveres. There is an atypical will, a strive for existence, in the mere refusal to collapse or

⁴ Ibid., 115

in the act of continuing to “do something as long as [one] refuses to do nothing.” For Povinelli, the underbelly of *quasi-events*, such as the journey in the boat to develop an augmented reality project or, I suggest here, Martín’s desire for a living museum, provides the “preconditions in which some new social content might be nurtured.”⁵ A positivity is present in these acts even though the actual “new form of life” is still opaque and messy. What seems remarkable here is the potentiality sheltered within these forms of endurance that ultimately doesn’t seem to be responding to a need to succeed or a fear of defeat as much as to “keep going.” And here is why the “museum” as the garden where diversity meets, cultures are exchanged, preconditions are left behind, and solidarity thrives is not the best image for Martín’s *Museo Vivo* when understood as a project for territorial defense and enduring exhaustion. A narrative that seems more suitable is that of Tucanambá José Paraná, who, after the extermination of his group in Southern Brazil, the Xetá, continued to speak alone in front of a mirror for forty-five years in order not to forget his mother tongue—an embodied form of radical endurance.⁶

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Martín’s *Museo Vivo* is far from being the only social project envisioned by a Waorani in their territory. It shares a “quasi-eventfulness” with other initiatives that—in turn, or consequentially—overlap and coexist. It is the case with tourism projects developed in several communities. A quick search over the internet results in several webpages advertising grassroots touristic ecolodges in the Waorani territory. In some cases, the community manages these small traditional ecolodges; in others, they are enterprises of specific members

5 Ibid., 191

6 Claudemir da Silva during a testimony part of Museu Paranaense exhibition Exposição "Nosso estado: Vento e/em Movimento, Section "A língua das pontas." Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJKRKWNlyko>. 38:00.

and, sometimes, are co-managed by white collaborators and international NGOs. In one of the communities I visited in 2022, the touristic lodge was still a desire, nurtured by a Kichwa member who wanted to build it as a tree house in a nearby majestic ceibo tree, a sacred tree for the Waorani. Ultimately, it would create an alternative source of capital that could keep the financial need of opening the community for oil extraction out of sight. The money paid by a few tourists that would occasionally visit the community throughout the year could be used to buy food, medication, drinkable water, and fuel for the boats. In the late liberal governance of Indigenous lives by the Ecuadorian state, piped water, access to health, and communication infrastructures accompany a contract with an oil company and an oil well. What invariably follows is violence, prostitution, alcohol, low-income jobs, diseases, and ecological devastation. Within this environment, tourism initiatives represent—more than attempts to thrive—projects of endurance. They are strategies to persevere one’s culture and keep oil away while guaranteeing the basic material support to continue existing. Coincidentally or not, during my conversations with Martin and other colleagues involved in his initiative, the *Museo Vivo* would often coexist or shapeshifts into a tourism project. Martin himself splits his time between his family community and Coca—twelve hours apart by boat—while studying to be a touristic guide through a program supported by the Ecuadorian government.

For instance, such quasi-events—the desires for the living museum or the ecolodges—could also be considered “arts of the contact zone,” or at least its offspring. They are all parodies of Western projects, appropriations aiming at translating the language of dominance into a means for survival in an environment of exhaustion. Guaman Poman's *New Chronicles* intention was not as much to report the New World's wonders—the chronicle genre's goal at

the time—as much as to provide Poman with the means to endure. The account—written in 1613, never delivered to the Spanish Crown, and found three centuries later in a library in Copenhagen—raised awareness of the miserable conditions in which Spanish colonization left his people while simultaneously offering his managerial and diplomatic expertise to the crown in return for financial compensation—another method of deriving material support to continue, at least individually, enduring.

What is surprising and meaningful is the discomfort caused by some of these forms of endurance when seen from the “outside” of the striving site. At times, Martin’s idea for a museum in the forest is received with feelings that range from curiosity and excitement to estrangement. Depending on the interpretation of the project’s possibilities, it was even defined as “cheesy” within academic settings. In other instances, I have crossed with foreign environmental activists and lawyers who judge the Waorani members that are living in cities and establishing local businesses, such as art stores, as ‘less Waorani’ due to their lifestyle in comparison to the semi-isolated and isolated Waorani who still live in the depths of the forest. More often than not, however, these semi-isolated Waorani communities—portrayed in the white imaginary as ‘more Waorani’—also must balance their isolation, as an argument for recognition, with the development of local touristic initiatives, as an endurance strategy that simultaneously inserts these communities into an intense global media network. This condition as impossible subjects is nonetheless imposed by neoliberal and neoextractive policies of exhaustion and originate quasi-events in the form of desires, such as establishing a museum, an ecolodge, or an art store. All of these cases are strategies of persevering as one is—as a Waorani—through translation processes, but one that needs to be carefully measured against the risk of crossing a boundary of recognition within the process, making oneself

portrayed as “less Indigenous.” In that sense, these desires can be developed, but only to the extent that they don’t threaten the dominant state while simultaneously not risking the foreigner’s recognition of one’s self as more or less Indigenous, hence their “quasi-eventfulness.” It is important to remember that, as Pratt warns, these misconceptions, incomprehension, and absolute heterogeneity of meaning are some of the perils of operating in the contact zone.

To better understand the “heterogeneity of meaning” embedded in Martín’s idea of a Living Museum, I propose contextualizing Waorani’s endurance strategies under an ongoing contact history with white settlers and extractive practices. In other words, to analyze how the Waorani have been historically building unlikely alliances, translating concepts, and developing parodies to endure an always threatened existence.

Before moving on, a few remarks are needed. A complex contradiction of unlikely relationships will become apparent throughout the following analysis sections, leaving no straightforward interpretation—as Pratt warns. As will be illustrated, extractive practices and Indigenous endurance sometimes form “alliances.” This is not to relativize the devastating consequences of extraction to Amazonian forms of life but to bring an uncanny question—already hinted previously—to the foreground: Are Indigenous members who live alongside oil roads and work for extractive companies less Indigenous than those living in the forest? The following chapter will discuss Indigenous communities that occupy clearings formed by oil platforms, whose members often work for them and sometimes name their kids after the companies. Other case studies will address the use of traditional Waorani gardens to cultivate economic trees, such as balsa and cacao, that will later become chocolate commercialized nationwide. They will also tell the story of a group of women weaving traditional hammocks,

baskets, and craftwork inspired by contemporary international designs to be sold globally. Are these Waorani less Indigenous than the Waorani living traditional lives in the depths of the forest? Such questioning is often brought up in discussions about Waorani culture and politics to diminish specific communities in relation to others; debating which community has the right to defend Waorani traditional territory and how. A short account exemplifies this condition.

During a previous iteration of the present thesis, I attempted to collaborate with Waorani communities on a radical cartography and participatory mapping project. The aim was to bring resources and mapping technologies to communities for these to be appropriated by Waorani members so that “countermaps” could be developed according to the group’s current political needs and traditional worldviews. Most importantly, these maps sought to respect geographic and ontological opacity levels—what could and could not be mapped, represented, documented, and shared—and how to work these boundaries in a moment of collaboration and reciprocity. For several months I failed consecutively to establish successful partnerships, not because of a lack of interest from Waorani communities—who were always welcoming and receptive to the idea—but due to factors that ranged from local bureaucracies that made evident the entanglement of the oil economy, academic interests, and community needs; the controlling and paternalistic behavior of foreign intermediaries who control access to communities while ultimately fostering internal and inter-communities conflicts; my own overestimated plans within a master’s degree; and more.

However, among many moments where it became clear the complex role that intermediaries play in the region’s ontological entanglements—of lawyers, anthropologists,

educators, scientists, environmentalists, activists, Indigenous leaderships, Universities, and so forth—one moment seems quite revealing to the point I try to make. At a certain point, I was talking with white foreign intermediaries responsible for mediating the contact between a community of semi-isolated Waorani and exterior agents, such as me, a white foreign researcher. When discouraging me from moving my study to another community in a portion of the Waorani territory heavily affected by oil activities, they mentioned that “the people there are not like the one’s from here. The people from [name of the semi-isolated community they engaged with] are *gente muy amable* [very kind and lovely people], whether the people from [the community alongside the oilroad] are bad, dangerous, and ask you money just for riding around their territory.” This is an example of internal ruptures and conflicts in the Waorani territory promoted and nurtured by external agents (since this is hardly the opinion of the Waorani members I crossed with), and that creates the narrative of communities that are more or better Indigenous than others and thus, more or less capable of claiming territories, rights, and recognition. Putting the *noble savage* complex of the *gente muy amable* assertion aside, what struck me at that moment, and persists in guiding the following reflections, is the issue of defining a line that fractures communities by differentiating endurance strategies as if they were not originated from the exact same context of exhaustion and existential collapse. Who draws the ethical line between developing a living museum, ecolodges, and art stores in urban centers as endurance strategies distinct from living alongside oil platforms, working for oil companies, and charging tolls from outsiders to cross their traditional territory? The Ecuadorian State? International NGOs? An appointed anthropologist? A North-American lawyer? A group of researchers? What is at stake here is the perception of these unlikely relationships as genuine forms of stubborn endurance originating from the same existential exhaustion imposed by colonial, neoliberal,

and neoextractive policies. In other words, distinct and valid ways of cultivating the capacity to respond and persevere, embracing the “courage of being radically alive,” even through unlikely alliances, and “crossing the desert,” as Ailton Krenak puts it—after ongoing world-endings.⁷

The goal of this study is not to address white measurements of Indigeneity—of who is more or less Indigenous than who or which groups are more acculturated than others. The following stories aim to show how the Waorani “inhabit the belly of the monster,” as they have always been, through creating and occupying radical spatialities and performing quasi-events in the Amazonian forest. In a certain way, to reflect on the *will* that sparks Martín’s idea for his living museum in relation to other strategies of resilience and resistance in Yasuni’s contact zone is to witness a fragile but possible network of solidarity among communities that, at times, are portrayed—by white intermediaries—too distinct from each other due to levels of “acculturation” and “isolation.” However, they invariably perform persevering strategies to keep their exhausted existence from collapsing. Through this lens, Martín’s *Museo Vivo* becomes one thread, one route, in this tangle of potentiality and endurance that permeates the Ecuadorian Amazon. How, then, to identify these multiple strings, routes, that form such a tangle? As a way of training our eyes to see such moments where forms of dominance and exhaustion are challenged through stubborn perseverance—these *quasi-events*—I propose to follow clearings.

Crossing clearings

⁷ Krenak, Ailton. *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo*. Companhia das Letras, 2021.

Cambridge Dictionary defines a clearing as “an area in a wood or forest from which trees and bushes have been removed.”⁸ Such a laconic definition might be the one that most readily comes to mind when someone refers to a forest clearing. It is undoubtedly the case of the swath of forest cut down for the installation of oil wells in the vicinities of the Waorani community of Garenó—a few kilometers ahead of Sumak Sacha platform and already within the Waorani Ethnic Reserve—on the way to the community alongside the Nushiño river that I visited. Or in the case of the gas flaring sites—with their dead soil surrounding the iconographic gas-burning towers—that illustrated innumerable reports of oil extraction in the Yasuni before their banning in 2021. Still, the image of a patch of primary or old-growth forest cleaned of vegetation also seems quite similar to the clearings I visited and that were opened by some Waorani friends to produce subsistence crops—such as manioc, plantains, papaya, and sweet potatoes—alongside cocoa and economic trees for commercial purposes. Or even the *supaychakras* clearing—sacred spaces for the Kichwa—originated from a mutualistic relationship between *Duroia hirsuta* (Rubiaceae) trees and *Myrmelachista schumanni* ants, who inhabit within *Duroia hirsuta*’s stem and kill any vegetation other than their host if growing in its vicinities.

However, more than naming and identifying clearings by their spatial manifestation—this “present absence” of vegetation coverage amid the rainforest—what interests me is understanding the ontological negotiations, entanglements, and conflicts in their formation and occupation. For example, what social-ecological arrangements make it possible for the Waorani to cultivate cocoa in their traditional gardens (*quehuencoris*) to be sold in oil-road

⁸ Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), s.v. “Clearing.”
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/clearing>

communities, processed in a chocolate factory in Quito, and commercialized nationwide? And, perhaps even more importantly, how does this form of crop and land-management adaption produce alternative material means to survive, to endure exhaustion? In other words, to see these clearings as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power,” not to say coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. That is, to see the Clearing as a contact zone, where the language used by dominant forces is appropriated to construct an oppositional representation, an otherwise form of life that stubbornly refuses to collapse.

The Clearing is the place where the points of contact, conflict, silencing, and alliance between the distinct world projects that compose the Yasuní social ecology—that of oil, the Waorani’s, the State’s, the scientific, and that of the myriad of human and other than human beings that dwell in the forest—becomes more apparent, graspable. Clearings are where the Waorani make home adjacent to oil platforms forming unlikely alliances to endure a bullied existence while claiming a connection to a particular landscape and threatening extractive operations through protests, roadblocks, and sabotages. It is where ecolodges are built to receive tourists and provide a community with material means to “keep going,” even if barely. Where *quehuencoris* are open to harvest crops and economic trees sold in nearby towns and markets. Clearings are the sign remotely mapped and surveilled by State, international NGOs, researchers, and oil companies to track the movement of Indigenous groups in voluntary isolation, dictating oil operations, government policies, Indigenous organizations’ claims, and legal cases of human rights violation. In essence, a Clearing is a radical spatiality where daily acts of endurance—neither catastrophic nor spectacular—take place, but that nonetheless reinforce a will to survive.

The Clearing can be defined as spaces where strategies of enduring exhaustion are nurtured, potentiality is sheltered, and forms of dominance—even if for a moment—rattle. Thus, expanding the concept beyond the (physical) boundaries of the forest becomes possible, seeing, for example, Manuela Omari Ima’s art store in the city of Shell as one of such Clearings. There, Omari sells hammocks, baskets, and other objects produced by Waorani communities settled alongside oil activities, fostering an alternative economy to counter the dependency on oil wages. As an initiative started within the Association of Waorani Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon (AMWAE), the production and commercialization of objects using traditional techniques also represents an economic emancipation for Waorani women who rely heavily on the income provided by the male figures within the household and mainly originated from their work for oil companies. This economic dependency, at times, represents a fragile and smothering one for the Waorani women, as it is not uncommon for men to spend their wages on alcohol abuse in local markets resulting in cases of domestic violence. As will be further discussed in the next chapter, the spatial performances and social-ecological entanglements involved in the production of such objects—such as the trekking through the territory and managing ecologies when gathering seeds, barks, leaves, and fruits to color natural chambira fibers—can be seen as processes of opening, or cultivating, such Clearing. The bond and entanglement with the forest—and the worlds that inhabit it—can be seen as the potentialities for an otherwise form of life sheltered in Omari’s Clearing or in the performative act of weaving a hammock. A potentiality that, ultimately, reaffirms the will to survive as one is, to endure amidst the hostility of living within oil activities, of dwelling in the “belly of the monster.”

A “to-become” space or a place that holds strong intergenerational connections that tie a group to a place also holds the potential to be a Clearing. It is the case of anthropogenic forest patches that, for the Waorani, indicate a previous occupation of a place by their direct forebears. For the Waorani, "the forest exists because of the lives and deaths of ordinary people."⁹ The food consumed, fruits gathered, and trees found and managed directly result from their ancestor's labor, as the engagement with the forest today will provide future generations with the same environmental abundance. As argued by anthropologist Laura Rival, the Waorani traditional action of "walking the forest" (*ömere gomoniipa*) is, thus, like "walking through a living history book in which natural history and human history seamlessly merge."¹⁰ In other words, by trekking through the forest, the Waorani can identify plant species that attest to the previous occupation of a specific place, that is, previous clearings opened by their forebears to settle a community on and that now are covered with secondary forest and groves of domesticated plants. The space represents a temporal and spatial intertwining made possible by indicator species that ultimately represent anthropogenic and intergenerational exchange routes, enabled by the cultural landscape and its infrastructures, promoting a continuum between the past, the present with particular conditions, and the future. It is the case of the chonta palm trees (peach palm, *Bactris gasipaes*, *daguenkaue* in Waorani), which are found scattered through the forest but are cultivated in a more dense setting around communities. When moving to another location, the group continues to visit the previous gardens as a source of food. When encountering previously unknown gardens throughout their territory, they see them as signs of a previous settlement by their ancestors.

9 Laura Rival. *Trekking Through History: The Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador*. Columbia University Press, 2002. p.49

10 Laura Rival. *Huaorani Transformations in Twenty-First-Century Ecuador: Treks into the Future of Time*. University of Arizona Press, 2016. p.15

As such, they are understood as signs that the community could resettle in this location, a return to an area previously inhabited—and managed—by their kin. Consequently, one could see such palm groves as to-become Clearings, and places of intergenerational and human-other-than-human exchanges.

As shown by Maria Gabriela Zuritas-Benavides, Pablo Jarrín, and Montserrat Rios—who studied the convergence of Waorani oral narratives and the anthropogenic floristic compositions in the group’s territory—if “reliability of past events is weakened when narrators assess past from present [...] remembering their ancestors' actions in a place collectively builds the social memory of landscape in accordance to their contemporary strategies.”¹¹ By analyzing both managed and unmanaged sites, the team provided evidence of the relationship between the timing of human management as documented in oral histories and the ecological stage of vegetation succession. In other words, remarks by Waorani members that specific patches and groves represented sites of ancestral settlements converged with the documentation of the distinct and elevated presence of biotic indicators of past human presence and management. Such biotic indicators represent ‘family landmarks’ that “enable Waorani to navigate the forest and discern their forbears' actions.”¹² More than providing evidence of the anthropogenic character of Waorani's *monito ömë*, the group demonstrated how the correspondence between historical sites—places of memory— and plant compositions showed that plant richness and diversity increased with Waorani management.¹³ As a strategy of territorial occupation that aims at renewing a tie to a territory

11 Benavides, María, Pablo Jarrín, and Montserrat Rios. “Oral History Reveals Landscape Ecology in Ecuadorian Amazonia: Time Categories and Ethnobotany among Waorani People.” *Economic Botany* 70 (December 30, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12231-015-9330-y>. p.2

12 Ibid., 11.

13 Ibid.

and its social ecologies amidst a scenario of colonial encroaching and disenchantment, engaging with such groves—and through it maintaining intergenerational communications—could be understood as performing Clearings; radical spatialities of endurance.

Radical spatial ideas, nurtured in the minds of the exhausted body to stubbornly defend a territory, keeping an existence from collapsing, can also be understood as Clearings. It is the case of Martín's living museum when understood as a *way of seeing*, an alternative worldview (chapter 1), or a subversive parody of the space of imperial accumulation (chapter 2). The living museum lays in the crossing of the *exhaustion* caused by oil operations—its environmental and ontological ravaging and insignificant return for the affected communities—, the *discomfort* with the unsettling, decontextualized, and accumulative space of the modern museum, and the *will* to persevere sheltered in a living forest, a particular world that stubbornly refuses to collapse. As an “autoethnographic space,” it aims to appropriate the language of dominance—that has neglected Waorani's right, space, and resources for self-representation while depicting them as primitive, ahistorical, violent people—to “intervene in dominant modes of understanding” towards his own people and the Waorani particular world. In a way, the *Museo Vivo* becomes a site for not only epistemological negotiations—of ways of knowing—but ontological ones—ways of making and inhabiting possible worlds. In this sense, Martín's project hints at another quality of the Clearing: a space where different worlds produced by distinct subjectivities meet and, through this encounter, *change*. It demonstrates the potentiality for otherwise life forms sheltered within these spaces of endurance threatening dominant modes of being in the world. Two brief examples might be helpful to illustrate such affirmation.

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Degrees of becoming

While trekking through the forests of a Waorani community along the Nushiño river to collect barks of Wepeta—used to produce a reddish pigment to color chambira fibers used in weaving the *yoo*, the Waorani traditional hammock—we crossed a clearing with a single tree standing in its center. Soon, a Waorani friend explained that these clearings—found throughout the region—were produced by ants that lived inside the lonely tree—of which she peeled the stem to show me the edible dwellers. The *supay-chakras* clearings (as they are called in Kichwa) are created by a mutualistic relationship between *Myrmelachista schumanni* ants and *Duroia hirsuta* (Rubiaceae) trees. *Duroia Hirsuta* is a myrmecophyte tree plant, that is, a plant that lives in a mutualistic association with a colony of ants.¹⁴ The *Myrmelachista Schumanni* dwells within *D. Hirsuta* hollow stem swellings or leaf pouches in adapted cavities known as *domatia*. The workers patrol the *supay-chakras*, and when they come across plants different from their host, they kill them. The *M. Schumanni* workers bite a small hole in a leaf or a stem and insert droplets of formic acid in them. Shortly after, the plant begins to turn brown near the wound sites, and the necrosis gradually spreads, the plant wilts, sheds its leaves, and dies.¹⁵ Ants mainly use formic acid to communicate and as an alarm sign within a colony. Remarkably, this is the first case observed where an ant colony uses formic acid to attack plant species to protect their host tree.¹⁶ The result is an open area

14 Edwards, David P., Megan E. Frederickson, Glenn H. Shepard, and Douglas W. Yu. "A Plant Needs Ants like a Dog Needs Fleas: Myrmelachista Schumanni Ants Gall Many Tree Species to Create Housing." *The American Naturalist* 174, no. 5 (November 2009): 734–40. <https://doi.org/10.1086/606022>.

15 Frederickson, Megan E., Michael J. Greene, and Deborah M. Gordon. "Devil's Gardens' Bedevilled by Ants." *Nature* 437, no. 7058 (September 22, 2005): 495–96. <https://doi.org/10.1038/437495a>.

16 Shwartz, Mark. "Ants, Not Evil Spirits, Create Poisonous Devil's Gardens in the Amazon Rainforest." Stanford University, September 26, 2005. <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/september28/devil-092805.html>.

amidst the hyper-diverse Amazonian rainforest with a clear ground, except for *D. Hirsuta* trees. *Supay-chakras* can have up to six hundred *D. Hirsuta* trees with clearings having an estimated life span of up to eight hundred years—based on the age of the ant colonies analyzed.¹⁷

Nevertheless, how doesn't the *supay-chakra* expands indefinitely? What prevents them from taking control over the forest with the colony of ants, protected by the house built inside their host tree, attacking and clearing more and more ground around the existing clearing? Studies have shown how the high concentration and isolated presence of *Duroia Hirsuta* in the *supay-chakras* result in more predatory activity on their leaves. The *Duroia Hirsuta* predators feel more comfortable in an environment where the trees are isolated, hence decreasing the chance of them becoming the prey of other animals. Such predators, then, control the expansion of the clearing and, in a certain way, give its form.¹⁸

However, *M. Schumanni*, *D. Hirsuta*, and its predators are not the only entities who inhabit the clearing. *Supay-chakra* in Kichwa means garden of the Chullachaki, also translated as devil's garden. The Chullachaki is a forest spirit that inhabits the clearing at night when they gather animals and other spirits—such as the shapshicos or sacharunas—to read a decree on the care of forest life. All entities perform a ritual, “a feast to which all wild animals are invited so they together with their masters will entertain all the rest, setting up a circus show with dances, music with euphoric rhythm, and entrancing singing.”¹⁹ The Kichwa

17 Báez, Selene, David A. Donoso, Simon A. Queenborough, Liliana Jaramillo, Renato Valencia, and Olivier Dangles. “Ant Mutualism Increases Long-Term Growth and Survival of a Common Amazonian Tree.” *The American Naturalist* 188, no. 5 (2016): 567–75.

18 Frederickson, Megan E, and Deborah M Gordon. “The Devil to Pay: A Cost of Mutualism with Myrmelachista Schumanni Ants in ‘Devil’s Gardens’ Is Increased Herbivory on Duroia Hirsuta Trees.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 274, no. 1613 (February 13, 2007): 1117–23. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2006.0415>.

19 Amaringo, Pablo. “Ayahuasca Visions.” Accessed November 24, 2022. https://www.academia.edu/22987063/Ayahuasca_Visions.
132

can see these encounters in the clearings—and that to some extent form them—by using psychoactive substances, in this case, *ayahuasca* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*).

What interests me is how the *supay-chakra* is made possible through the entanglement of these distinct forms of being in “complex web of relations,” each holding and exchanging their ontologies—their world-making projects—characterizing what Eduardo Kohn defines as an “ecology of selves.”²⁰ It is as if each of these entities—the ants, trees, Kichwa, the Chullachaki, the animals, and their master spirits—have each one a point of view towards the Clearing. More than that, in these *assemblages*, they negotiate their forms of being; they change and exchange. The *Myrmelachista Schumanni* remarkably adapts their use of formic acid, while *Duroia Hirsuta* makes space inside itself through the *domatia*; the Kichwa “become other” with the use of *ayahuasca*, while the Chullachaki spirit animates and gives voice to the animals of the forest and their master spirits. These are the “degrees of becoming” depicted in the diagram (Figure 3). Ultimately, they result in *slippages* of particular points of view towards creating the *supay-chakra* Clearing precisely through these ontological (ex)changes.

The “degrees of becoming” involved in the conception of the *supay-chakra* exemplify what Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser define as “doing difference together.” They state that, in these moments, “none of the heterogenous knower participants become the other, yet they do not remain only what they were either.”²¹ It is an act of

20 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. 1st ed. (United States: University of California Press, 2013),

21 Blaser, Mario, and Marisol de la Cadena. “Introduction: Pluriverse Proposals for a World of Many Worlds.” In *A World of Many Worlds*, edited by Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, 0. Duke University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478004318-001>. 11.

‘remaking us’ by ‘making worlds.’ The Clearing becomes a space where ants, trees, humans, and spirits become *something else* and, by doing so, weave worlds together to create new forms of being. Such ontological negotiations, however, also take place in settings where the subjectivity of dominant forms of being—hegemonic worlds that exist by constantly dismantling other worlds—are challenged. Diogo de Carvalho Cabral’s reflections on a battle over selfhood between the *saúva* ants and the Brazilian elites in the early twentieth century exemplify this.

Either Brazil puts an end to the saúva, or the saúva will put an end to Brazil. By unpacking this figure of speech—a nationalistic trope attributed and appropriated by botanists, writers, and politicians—Cabral recognizes the construction of Brazilian national identity as resulting from a constant negotiation between human and other-than-human beings.²² Until the mid-twentieth century, the *saúvas* ants represented the biggest threat to national development projects, which relied mostly upon the expansion of the agricultural frontier and colonization of the Brazilian hinterlands. As deforestation advanced—transforming primary forest in fields for crop plantations—so did the *saúva* domain over the landscape, with the proliferation of its colonies devastating (consuming) the crops cultivated by Brazilian *colonos*.²³ Advancing more traditional approaches that demonstrate the relation between the environment and Brazilian nation-building, Cabral does not see the other-than-human being—here represented by the *saúva* ant as an object hijacked into a discourse or in

22 Diogo de Carvalho Cabral, “At the mercy of ants: landscape change and multispecies nation-building in Brazil, c.1820-1950” (unpublished manuscript presented at the Spring 2023 Agrarian Studies Colloquium, February 10 2023), typescript.

23 Carvalho Cabral, Diogo de. “Creatures of the Clearings: Deforestation, Grass-Cutting Ants and Multispecies Landscape Change in Postcolonial Brazil.” Text. White Horse Press, November 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734022X16384451127294>.

which national identity is projected on. He argues that here, the *saúva* are *active agents* of the nation's production amid its modernization, co-authors of this idea of “nation.”

The “either-Brazil-or-saúva” trope is not merely an entry point to the argument, if not the *means* through which Cabral demonstrates the multi-ontological construct of this nation’s identity. This is only possible because of language's role, not only in the reiterations of the trope (in reports, novels, or radio broadcastings at the time) but also in the spatialized relationships through which the trope originated, in the first place, in the Brazilian landscape. Grounding his analysis on the semiotic work of Eduardo Kohn’s development of an “anthropology beyond the human,” Cabral demonstrates that, in these spaces, ontologies are constantly negotiated through embodied communications and the emission and interpretation of signs by humans, plants, and ants.²⁴ It is precisely an entanglement of worldmaking projects activated through these beings' bodily communications—both in and with an environment—that characterizes what Cabral defines as “landscape.”²⁵

As such, human material actions in the landscape—such as the opening of clearings—are understood as spatialized signs by other beings, establishing human-other-than-human communication: “it is as if forest clearers are writing into the world as a text: for some peoples, the meaning of “clearing” is closely related to those of “home” and “culture” while standing in constitutive opposition to those of “wilderness” and “nature.”²⁶ Non-symbolic selves, such as leafcutter ants, bodily interpret these signs according to their own perspective, their own world in which they occupy the center.

24 See also Carvalho Cabral, Diogo de, and André Vasques Vital. “Multispecies Emergent Textualities: Writing and Reading in Ecologies of Selves.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, March 31, 2021, isab024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isab024>.

25 De Carvalho Cabral, “At the mercy of ants,” unpublished manuscript.

26 Ibid.

Following Kohn's work on cross-species semiosis based on his work with the Runa group in Ecuadorian Amazon, Cabral shows that through spatialized signs in their environments, humans and other-than-human beings establish negotiations of meaning according to their own perspectives. Undertaken through another point of view, such interpretations—based on iconic and indexical associations, that is, words that point to words and not directly to things—result in what he calls “cross-species misunderstandings.” Thus, the question is, “how do the ants perceive and interpret” these signs, such as the clearing? How to be *seen seen* by them, and why this matters.²⁷

To support this question, Cabral presents an overview of what he defines as Brazilian early-Anthropocene—the agricultural developmentalism and expansionist endeavor towards the country's hinterlands—and its representation in literary works of the time, such as Jorge Amado's and Lima Barreto's. What becomes clear is how developmentalism—through deforestation and agriculture—walks hand in hand with the proliferation of *saúva* nests and crop destructions. Nonhuman forces and agents persist in these landscapes.²⁸

In the opening of clearings from primary forests, the *saúva* thrive. To the degree that the leafcutter ant sees the human opening of clearings as a service for *their* development, and the humans as *servants*.²⁹ Cabral's argument adds to the chorus of Eduardo Kohn and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro when they say that ‘trans-species communication is a dangerous

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 See Carvalho Cabral, Diogo de. “Meaningful Clearings: Human-Ant Negotiated Landscapes in Nineteenth-Century Brazil.” *Environmental History* 26, no. 1 (January 2021): 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/ema058>.

business.³⁰ As Viveiros de Castro remarks in his seminal essay *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*:

The typical 'supernatural' situation in an Amerindian world is the meeting in the forest between a man - always on his own - and a being which is seen at first merely as an animal or a person, then reveals itself as a spirit or a dead person and speaks to the man. [...] These encounters can be lethal for the interlocutor who, overpowered by the non-human subjectivity, passes over to its side, transforming himself into a being of the same species as the speaker: dead, spirit or animal. He who responds to a 'you' spoken by a nonhuman accepts the condition of being its 'second person', and when assuming in his turn the position of 'I' does so already as a non-human. The canonical form of these supernatural encounters, then, consists in suddenly finding out that the other is 'human', that is, that it is the human, which automatically dehumanizes and alienates the interlocutor and transforms him into a prey object, that is, an animal. Only shamans, multinatural beings by definition and office, are always capable of transiting the various perspectives, calling and being called 'you' by the animal subjectivities and spirits without losing their condition as human subjects (Castro, 1998, p. 483).

As the passage indicates, the danger is especially true when the *other* subject in the encounter talks back. That is, when the *saúva*, with their intelligence, social organization, and “cultural sophistication,” attest to their condition as a *self*, their “humanity.” The human—who aspires to be the dominant force over the landscape—then risks becoming what the *saúva* defines as their *other*, an object, a servant. The trope—originated in other-than-human

30 See Kohn, Eduardo. “How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transspecies Engagement.” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007): 3–24. and Castro, Eduardo Viveiros de. “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.

negotiations on the cleared ground— becomes not an economic, ecological, or political one; but ontological. The fight is for selfhood: *Either Brazil puts an end to the saúva, or the saúva will put an end to Brazil.* But the development can't stop; the frontiers must be crossed, and the forest cleared. And with them, the *saúva* thrives. Their presence, the fight to exterminate them, the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the development, and the trope coexist— spinning together in the same direction—and somehow uniting the country towards an idea of a nation: a more-than-human, multi-ontological reality.

I use both examples—coincidentally both about clearings occupied by ants—to argue that the Clearing, as a conceptual physical and imagined space, becomes a venue more likely for such ontological negotiations to happen. A place where “difference is made together” and in which conditions of dominant selfhoods and worldviews are questioned and, even for a moment, challenged. It is a place where a stubborn refusal to collapse is continuously performed, where potentiality is sheltered and always points to *something else* when willfully called by through quasi-events.

*

Haunted Spatialities

Clearings are haunted spaces inhabited by ghosts who appear as “vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present.”³¹ It is clearly the case of the chonta palm groves and the intergenerational anthropogenic *presence* that permeates the secondary forest growing vigorously there and signing to a possible future occupation. A once-clearing co-

31 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 1.

existing with a clearing-to-become, a non-linear temporality-space sewn together through kinship and other-than-human threads, like in Einstein's space-and-time diagrams. It is the *tradition* always evoked in the Clearings occupied by the Waorani alongside oil operations through acts of weaving and singing, renewing a spiritual and bodily connection to the forest, their territory, and the assemblage of social ecologies inhabiting there. Or in the *encounters* and adaptations of a secular ecological knowledge of cultivating *quehuencoris* to harvest cocoa for the contemporary industrialized production of chocolate. Still, the haunting of past and imminent deaths feeding a will to endure such a state of exhaustion. Nevertheless, as argued by Avery F. Gordon in her reflections on the cultural experiences of haunting, even though haunting "registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present," it produces a "something-to-be-done":

[...] Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done. It is this sociopolitical-psychological state to which haunting referred. (Gordon 2008, xvi)

What is this "domain of turmoil and trouble," with exposed cracks and riggings and where things no longer occupy their assigned places, if not the potentiality for alternative life

forms sheltered within these haunted landscapes? This eagerness for “something-to-be-done” that at the same time needs to be “something different from before” that seems to dialogue with the quasi-eventfulness of the initiatives that continue to “do something as long as [one] refuses to do nothing.”?

This potentiality of “doing something different” and “being a different self,” in the sense of making different worlds, is sheltered within the Clearing. A place where selfhood and the dominant point of view are challenged, like in the typical ‘supernatural encounters’ in the forest narrated by Viveiros de Castro and the *saúva* “threat” to the Brazilian elite’s subjectivity. It is the case of the Clearing invoked by Toni Morrison in her work *Beloved*, where fugitive and freed slaves “decimated but stubborn”³² carve out “a fugitive site that not only envisions but practices the *otherwise*.”³³ It is in *Beloved’s* Clearing, a haunted “wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place”³⁴ where Babby Suggs, a freed slave, performed her “powerful Call (she didn’t deliver sermons or preach—insisting she was too ignorant for that—she *called* and the hearing heard).”³⁵ There, in the “heat of every Saturday afternoon,” she would call the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry, and then all got mixed up:

32 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 131.

33 Kelley, Elleza. “‘Follow the Tree Flowers’: Fugitive Mapping in *Beloved*.” *Antipode* 53, no. 1 (2021): 181–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12679>. 194.

34 Morrison, *Beloved*, 102.

35 *Ibid.*, 208.

Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. [...] She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it (Morrison 2007, 103).

As Elleza Kelley remarks on her powerful reading of Morrison's work in relation to fugitive mapping and black geographic knowledge, the rituals that take place in the Clearing "become fugitive acts, affective expressions of a humanity they are denied in the world, expressed and protected in the sacred safe space of the Clearing. When such expressions get "mixed up," the Clearing also becomes a space for the congregation to refuse the mapping of racialized, gendered taxonomies."³⁶ In other words, dominant subjectivities and selfhood are refused, enacting alternative life forms, "alternative utopian futurities," mapped and performed in such spaces.³⁷ The Clearing is, in itself, a strategy of dwelling within a haunted landscape and, by doing so, carving ways of "doing something different from before," a way of enduring exhaustion, of persevering. Borrowing Farah Jasmine Griffin's concept of "safe spaces," Kelley recognizes the Clearing in *Beloved* as one of such "sites of ambivalence, whose sedimented polytemporalities are at once radically collective and affirming, and at times, strangling and stifling."³⁸ As seen, a place where crying, dancing, and laughing not only

36 Kelley, *Follow the Tree Flowers*, 194.

37 *Ibid.*, 193.

38 *Ibid.*, 194.

coexist but intertwine. As Kelley reminds us, in African-American migration narratives, Griffin defines safe spaces as “[...] places where ritual evokes a Southern or African ancestor. In many ways, they are spaces of ‘safe time’ as well, for they evoke history and memory ... In these spaces, linear notions of time are challenged. The past exists alongside the present”. [Griffin] cautions that “at their most reactionary, [safe spaces] ... are provincial sites which discourage resistance and bind the protagonist to an oppressive past.”³⁹

A “sedimented polytemporality” is also present in the haunted-anthropogenic chonta palm groves, where the “past exists alongside the present” and signs to possible futures. It is the ambivalence of a place defined by “radical collectivity and affirmation” as well as “strangling and stifling” exemplified by the fact that actions of weaving Waorani objects—and, by doing so, renewing a tie to culture and territory—often flourish within communities heavily affected by oil operations. Not by chance, the physical and imagined Clearings opened in the Waorani territory share a “palimpsestic spatiotemporalities that are improvisatory, fluid, imaginative, and multipurpose” with *Beloved’s* Clearing, as the latter is defined by Kelley. Both Clearings are products of contact zones’ ambivalences, oppressions, traumas, endurance, and potentialities.

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The Clearing

Through Baby Suggs’s call, the saúva’s appetite, Waorani’s trekking and weaving, and Martín’s call for a living “counter ordering of nature,” Clearings become radical spatialities

39 Ibid., 193 quoting Griffin F J (1996) *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press), 111.

stubbornly providing the healing and, eventually, material means necessary to support a refusal to collapse. By accessing the potentiality sheltered within these spaces, “otherwise forms of life” can be imagined or, at least, strategies to continue enduring an always-threatened existence within the “belly of the monster.” Perhaps more importantly, the Clearing can be seen as a venue for ontological negotiations, where dominant ideas of selfhood “get mixed up.” It is through these “dangerous” but nonetheless radical negotiations that Martin’s living museum’s most significant subversion seems to operate.

As a Clearing—and consolidating its condition as a parody—the *Museo Vivo* can be seen as the Collection’s antipode. As argued in chapter 1, the Collection is the ultimate non-temporal site of decontextualization, where, stripped from their original—or previous—context, objects are *reborn* under the image of the collector, a settler *self*, colonial Euro-American. Inhabiting an ahistorical, mythical time and “bearers of nothing but their own individual name,” the diaspora imposed on these objects not only guarantees the preservation of the collector’s selfhood but its positioning in an epistemic and ontological center. Again, the subjectivity threatened is that of the object, not the collector; the rebirth is of the book, not the collector. In the Clearing, however, the battle is over the dominant selfhood, and things get mixed up. The potentiality sheltered within these radical spatialities makes it possible to *see things differently* and to imagine the rebirth of the *subject* that enters these ambivalent spaces where the archive is absent and the self, bearer of nothing, change and exchange; the rebirth of the collector, not of the book. Different from the “a-temporal rectangle” of the modern museum, the Cabinet of Curiosities or the *studiolo* of Prince Francesco I, the *Museo Vivo* Clearing is a space of “sedimented politemporality,” like *Beloved’s* Clearing or the chonta palm groves, where different possibilities of being in time

stand in a haunted Relation and, by doing so, endure a hostile present.⁴⁰ As a haunted “safe space,” where signs of past ways of life are still charged in the present, the Clearing that Martín’s “museum” invites us to imagine is a spatial palimpsest of multitemporal contexts, coexisting and steering the present while signing for possible alternative futures, otherwise life forms.

The Clearings that permeate the Waorani traditional territory are not isolated entities but operate in a network of relationality, in times coexisting and “wombing” each other. Martín’s *Museo Vivo*, as Clearings occupied alongside oil activities, the ones cut open by trekking and weaving, or the ones opened to cultivate futures; they are all part of these same haunted multitemporal contexts, informing and working as portals to access each other. As such, the next chapter will look closely at the context in which the living museum’s Clearing is opened by crossing other radical spatialities and paying attention to their respective entangled social ecologies and ontological negotiations.

40 Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Chapter 4

A Set of Clearings' Social-Ecologies

Forming unlikely alliances

Western Amazonia has, for centuries, shared the conflicting condition of being both a biodiversity hotspot and site of commodity extraction while housing the largest concentration of isolated Indigenous communities on the planet.¹ The region is haunted by past extraction cycles of *chinchona* bark and rubber, which intensified from industrialization during the mid-19th century until the post-World War II period, engulfing the Amazonian landscape into the global economic stage. Both cycles exposed local Indigenous communities to a cataclysmic encounter between worlds—the multitude of localized, native ontologies and globalized, extractive capitalism—setting the groundwork for modern resource and human exploitation systems.² Amidst the collapse of life and earth, native communities endure by developing particular ways of countering extractive economies produced by colonial contact. Following Martín's will to develop a living museum, I intend to briefly cover how the Waorani group, inhabiting the area between the Napo and Curaray Rivers in the Ecuadorian Amazonia, has developed alternative spatial strategies to counter the state's neoliberal extraction policies. It argues that such forms of spatial resistance, similar to the one proposed by Martín, can be seen as social ecological assemblages—the visible and

1 Finer, Matt, Varsha Vijay, Fernando Ponce, Clinton N. Jenkins, and Ted R. Kahn. "Ecuador's Yasuní Biosphere Reserve: A Brief Modern History and Conservation Challenges." *Environmental Research Letters* 4, no. 3 (September 2009). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/4/3/034005>.

2 Wasserstrom, Robert. "Surviving the Rubber Boom: Cofán and Siona Society in the Colombia-Ecuador Borderlands (1875-1955)." *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 525–48. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2681786>.

invisible relationality networks between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate forces—and spaces of ontological negotiation.³

By contextualizing the historical entanglements between Waorani ontologies and extractive practices, the following lines aim at two complementary goals. First, to shed light on the complex and conflicting social ecologies that—historically—have shaped the Ecuadorian Amazonia region. As seen in Chapter 1, the Waorani have traditionally been wrongfully portrayed as “living fossils of the Stone Age,” abruptly ‘brought to civilization’ due to the work of North-American missionaries during the late 1950s. Such a misleading idea obscures the intense processes of world negotiations and suppressions that the Waorani has been part of for centuries. To recognize this past is to see the opening of Clearings in the Ecuadorian Amazon resulting from a long and complex history of survival and refusal undertaken by native groups. Second, it aims at demonstrating that “unlikely alliances” with extractive practices and unexpected agents have been a constant in the history of Indigenous endurance in the Upper Amazon. Facing the historical and colonial legacy of such alliances and exchanges becomes fundamental when reading strategies developed today by the Waorani to reaffirm their existence amidst the forest, since they often blur preconceived ideas of Indigenous identity and recognition.

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Since early colonial contact with commodity traders and religious organizations, Upper Amazonian’s resistance strategies ranged from forming “unlikely alliances” with

³ Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372561>.

extractive economies to adapting and hybridizing traditional forms of territorial occupation. The latter represent ways of operating these emergent contacts by navigating their traditional territory's complex and familiar ecologies.⁴ For example, to resist the Jesuits' assimilation to establish agricultural and livestock settlements, Ecuadorian Amazonian communities collaborated with gold, pita, and chinchona bark (*Cinchona officinalis*) traders to maintain their traditional forms of territorial occupation based on shifting horticulture, hunting, gathering, and fishing expeditions.⁵ Local traders would provide native communities with *licencias* that would ensure an economical alternative from subordinating to Jesuits' evangelizing strategies, which implied the appropriation of Indigenous resources surpluses—such as gold, tobacco, and pita—in exchange for prayers and weddings.⁶

Similarly, the profound knowledge and regional familiarity through which various communities navigated Amazon's complex and "hostile" environment allowed alternative ways of engaging with, and being affected by, extractive activities. For example, groups in the Ecuadorian rainforest were affected differently by the rubber boom period if compared to lowland Amazonians in Peru, Colombia, and Brazil due to the distinct ecology of rubber

4 Muratorio, Blanca. "The State, Missionaries, and Native Consciousness in the Upper Amazon, 1767–1896." In *The State, Missionaries, and Native Consciousness in the Upper Amazon, 1767–1896*, 86–98. Duke University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822390114-010>.

5 Since the mid 17th century, Europeans had already translated traditional knowledges of Amazonian communities, understanding that the powder extracted from the *chinchona* tree bark could be a powerful prophylactic against malaria. With the "discovery" of the substance, by 1640 the Jesuits established trade routes to transport cinchona bark throughout Europe. It was during the mid 19th century, however, that quinine started to be widely accepted as capable of killing malaria parasites, after French chemists, Pierre Joseph Pelletie, and Joseph Bienaimé Caventou isolated the active ingredient from cinchona barks (*Cinchona succirubra*). The importance of quinine as a global commodity during the following century cannot be overestimated. Authors point out how the dissemination of the prophylactic originated in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian rainforest—and collected by indigenous Amazonians—made colonization in Africa possible, drastically reducing the number of European deaths by malaria during the continents invasion. With the increased demand for quinine as a basilar tool for imperial expansion, Dutch and British merchants smuggled cinchona tree seeds from Bolivia, starting plantations in Java and Madras, respectively, which would soon become the world's major source of quinine. Thus, by transplanting indigenous knowledge and Amazonian endemic species in Southeast Asia, "European colonialism in Asia furnished the *sine qua non* of the scramble for Africa."

6 Muratorio, Blanca, 2009, p.88

trees in each region.⁷ The variety of rubber found in Amazonian lowlands grew close together and could be tapped repeatedly for years, resulting in a continuous, consolidated slave-labor system between native groups and settlers. In contrast, upper land varieties in Ecuador are scattered and isolated, bringing about labor arrangements within native groups that ranged from coercion and debt to highly unequal or semi-voluntary trade relations.⁸ To a certain degree, through entanglements with local ecologies, these groups were able to persist with traditional mobile forms of territorial occupation.

The Upper Amazonian environment also provided local Indigenous communities with the possibility for geographic isolation in areas of remote access, far from the sight and coercion of the Church or the State. For these communities, the rainforest was a “refuge where they could ensure both their own material and spiritual existence, and the valued resources coveted by the whites to be exchanged for manufactured goods.”⁹ Thus, for local Amazonian communities, navigating the forest and its resources represents a way to consciously operate between contact and isolation within a complex spatial strategy of resistance. As will be further seen, in recent times, Waorani communities have continued to navigate between these two instances—contact and isolation—during contemporary resistance movements against hydrocarbon exploitation.

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The Waorani identity has been manipulated by various agents, constructed to orient the perception around their character within a narrative that supports settlers' interests. A

7 Taylor, Anne Christine. 1994. "El oriente ecuatoriano en el siglo XIX: 'El otro litoral.'" In *Historia y Religion en el Ecuador, 1830–1930*, edited by Juan Maiguashca, 17–68. Quito, Ecuador: Corporacion Editora Nacional.

8 Wasserstrom, 2014. p.527

9 Muratorio, 2009, p. 89.

crucial example is the history of re-making of Waorani culture—in special the myths of warfare and isolation—to justify settler extraction, one of the many points of collision between worlds the Waorani have to navigate to persevere.

Several authors have addressed the strategies through which the Waorani supposedly avoided contact with early gold, *chinchona*, and rubber extractive economies. Reasons for the apparent success in keeping a distance from the ravaging presence of extraction activities range from the group’s isolation within the depths of the Yasuní region to extremely hostile warfare against outsiders.¹⁰ It became commonplace in literature to describe the Waorani as the “most violent society known to anthropology,”¹¹ or with the highest occurrence of spear attacks and internal warfare known to any indigenous group in the world.¹² In one of the first ethnographic descriptions of the Waorani, in 1923, German ethnologist Günther Tessman mentions how “it seems that the tribe is not very numerous, since the different groups, whether they are sub-tribes or clans, constantly wage [internal] war and have already significantly annihilated each other.”¹³ As seen in Chapter 1, the Waorani has continuously been described in media as a group that, through complete isolation, still “lived in the Stone Age” by the late 1960s when they were “discovered” or “first contacted” by North American missionaries. Isolation, primitiveness, and violence are images often projected into isolated

10 Rival, Laura. *Huaorani Transformations in Twenty-First-Century Ecuador: Treks into the Future of Time*. University of Arizona Press, 2016.

11 Robarchek, Clayton Allen, and Carole Robarchek. *Waorani: The Contexts of Violence and War*. Harcourt Brace College Pub., 1998.

12 See “The Nomads of the Rain Forest.” *Nova*, November 6, 1984. It should be no surprise, then, that to this day the vitrine devoted to Warfare in the American Museum of Natural History in New York Hall of South American Peoples gives special emphasis to the sensationalist narrative of violence and spear raids created around the Waorani and Yanomami groups.

13 Tessmann, Günther. *Los indígenas del Perú nororiental: investigaciones fundamentales para un estudio sistemático de la cultura*. 1. ed. completa en español. Publicaciones de la Fundación Harvey-Bassler. Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1999. Original: “Parece que la tribu no es muy numerosa, puesto que los diferentes grupos, sean sibtribus o sean clanes, constantemente se declaran la guerra y ya se han aniquilado bastante.” p.168.

Amazonian communities already affected by colonial contact. It is the case of the Yanomami, portrayed through such distorted lenses in Napoleon Chagnon's polemic *Yanomamö: the fierce people*,¹⁴ brilliantly and bitinglly torn apart by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in his preface to David Kopenawa's seminal text *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*.¹⁵ As Casey High reminds us: "While anthropologists and historians have done much to counter this image, the idea that certain "lost tribes" live in a state of "primitive" isolation from outside influences remains a powerful popular media representation of indigenous people. Rarely does a year pass without a major news story about aerial sightings of an uncontacted Amazonian tribe or a dangerous encounter with people assumed to be living as if in the Stone Age."¹⁶

Recent studies, however, show how the relationship between Waorani groups and outsiders can be traced back to the 19th century and has continuously reshaped patterns of violence and power within Waorani societies.¹⁷ In other words, the Waorani world has, for a long time, been entangled with multiple other world projects. Works by Miguel Angel

14 Chagnon, Napoleon. 1968. *Yanomamö: The fierce people*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston .

15 "Champion of one of the less sophisticated versions of human sociobiology, a discipline (?) that does not manage to impress, in general, either for its theoretical sophistication or for the fruitfulness of its conjectures, Chagnon spread an image of the Yanomami as a "fierce people" (title of his most famous book), a tribe of dirty, primitive and violent people, true extras of a Hobbesian Grand-Guignol. Such an ethnocentric cliché was repeatedly used against the Yanomami by the many agents of the Whites — bureaucrats, missionaries, politicians — interested in stealing their land and/or souls. The American researcher defends, among other bizarre ideas, the thesis that Davi Kopenawa's people are made up of genetic automatons driven by the imperative of maximizing the reproductive potential of the great 'killers', the men who would have the greatest number of of enemies killed in combat. This proved to be a grotesque misinterpretation of Yanomami warrior practices, directly linked not to genetic conditioning, but to a sophisticated sociopolitical system and a funerary ritual device of strong symbolic density, both in turn associated with a vision of life and death, of space and time, of human physiology and cosmic eschatology of which we can get an idea by reading the splendid exposition given in several chapters of *The Fall of the Sky*." by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in "O Recado da Mata", the preface of the Brazilian edition of Kopenawa, Davi, and Bruce Albert. *A queda do céu: palavras de um xamã yanomami*. Companhia das Letras., 2015. See as well Elizabeth Povinelli review of Changon memoir "Noble Savages" in Povinelli, Elizabeth. "Tribal Warfare." *The New York Times*, February 15, 2013, sec. Books. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/books/review/noble-savages-by-napoleon-a-chagnon.html>.

16 High, Casey. "Lost and Found: Contesting Isolation and Cultivating Contact in Amazonian Ecuador." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (December 2013): 195–221. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.3.009>. p.201

17 Wasserstrom, Robert. "Waorani Warfare on the Ecuadorian Frontier, 1885–2013." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2016): 497–516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12217>.

Cabodevilla (2016), Robert Wasserstrom (2016), as well as Casey High (2015) demonstrate that the influence of external actors—such as commodity extractors, missionaries, and government agents—in altering Waorani's relation to their outside and internal worlds is far from being a modern phenomenon. Wasserstrom's illuminating analysis of the historical relationship between the Waorani and extractive economies shows that Waorani groups have provided rubber to the market in exchange for metal tools and Western goods since the late 19th century. Peaceful trade between Waorani, local traders, and other Indigenous groups, such as the Jivaro, lasted until the mid-1910s. These "unlikely alliances," however, do not exclude the fact that violence between *caucheros* (rubber explorers) and Waorani was a constant. By the 1920s, direct armed conflicts between *cowodi* (outsiders) and Waorani communities increased exponentially due to the Indigenous "resistance to being tamed." As Wasserstrom's work highlights, the escalation of violence between Waorani groups and outsiders and between clans intensified after the *decrease* in rubber exploitation. With Western goods and metal tools becoming scarce, inter-ethnic and inter-clan looting raids became more common as a form of acquiring these goods, and Waorani society changed. Within a few decades, "the warfare economy undermined solidarity within Waorani society," and the groups "later came to associate leadership and individual authority with extreme violence."¹⁸

Wasserstrom's reflections seem fundamental to re-access Waorani's "war complex" as a post-contact phenomenon. He argues that the narrative of Waorani's extreme violence being a cultural trace of a supposedly isolated and primitive group "underlie the fundamentally misguided government policy that has failed to safeguard indigenous rights in

18 Wasserstrom, 2016, p. 503

eastern Ecuador and to protect vulnerable peoples on extractive frontiers.”¹⁹ For authors such as Wasserstrom and High, ignoring the historical influence of extractive practices in the constitution and transformation of Amazonian Indigenous cultures becomes a smoke screen, blurring the real causes of conflict and their potential solution. Moreover, such a tool of misleadingness and neglect is often brought up by the Ecuadorian State, as exemplified by the public hearing for the case *Pueblos Indígenas Tagaeri y Taromenane vs. Ecuador* at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which took place on August 23rd, 2022.²⁰

At a specific moment, Ecuadorian State representatives attempted to undermine the relationship between the presence of oil companies in Tagaeri and Taromenane traditional territories (two Waorani clans that live in complete isolation) and the occurrence of interethnic massacres. While questioning anthropologist Laura Rival—the expert invited to testify in Court—the lawyers quoted her doctoral dissertation *Hijos del Sol, Padres del Jaguar*, suggesting violent spear-raids between different Waorani families, and their revenge motivations, are a basilar component of Waorani’s culture. One of the State representatives highlighted a passage that says: “The traditional culture of the Waorani is fundamentally characterized by war and that the post-contact pacification was the key to cultural change.”²¹ The event demonstrates the political consequences of the— academically disseminated— concept of Waorani’s war complex as a cultural trace inherent to the group’s *primitive*

19 Ibid, p. 498

20 “This case refers to the alleged international responsibility of the State of Ecuador for a series of alleged violations of the rights of the Tagaeri and Taromenane Indigenous Peoples and their members, in the framework of projects that allegedly affect their territories, natural resources, and mode of life. Three events of violent deaths of members of said groups that occurred in 2003, 2006 and 2013 are also cited; as well as the lack of adequate protection measures in relation to two Taromenane girls after the events of 2013.” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASvdKuPqdEs&t=11887s>

21 Ecuadorian State representants at *Pueblos Indígenas Tagaeri y Taromenane vs. Ecuador* public hearing held on August 23rd, 2022, at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASvdKuPqdEs&t=11887s> Time: 05:00:00

tradition *prior* to contact, more than a historical condition resulting from colonial extractive encounters.²² Under this narrative, contact brought peace. Nevertheless, what the event also brings to the foreground is how Ecuadorian State representatives choose to not only ignore that current massacres are directly linked to the highly disturbing presence of oil activities within the isolated group's traditional territory,²³ but also silence the fact that “cultural warfare” is the result of more than a century of entanglements and conflicts between distinct worlds, the Waorani’s and extractive capitalism, more than ‘an exotic trace of a primitive community.’

To briefly unpack Waorani’s long contact history with extractive practices is relevant to our general analysis in a couple of ways. It primarily represents an attempt to “unlearn” the common understanding of the Waorani as “living fossils from the Stone Age” already hinted at in chapter 1. As we have seen, the encounter between the world made and inhabited by the Waorani and *couhour*’s world projects has been a constant for more than a century. These encounters not only affected the way the Waorani engaged with the “outside” at the time but left profound marks that would later be claimed to be primitive cultural traces, such as with Waorani’s “war complex.” In other words, through these early encounters, they changed and became the group extensively studied by anthropologists, scientists, and lawyers and displayed in museums since the early 1960s. Again, as P.T. Burnam stated about his American Museum in New York: “Curiosities are *made*.”²⁴ The following section show how

22 Laura Rival had to successively explain to the Court that the work was published more than 20 years ago, and that, since then, her perspective towards the Waorani warfare changed significantly.

23 Pappalardo, Salvatore Eugenio, Massimo De Marchi, and Francesco Ferrarese. “Uncontacted Waorani in the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve: Geographical Validation of the Zona Intangible Tagaeri Taromenane (ZITT).” *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 6 (June 19, 2013): e66293. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0066293>.

24 Irmscher, Christoph. *The Poetics of Natural History*, Rutgers University Press, 2019. p.113.

the Waorani continue to navigate and operate today in this continuous encounter between distinct worlds, this arena of ontological negotiations and endurance that defines the Amazonian landscape as a contact zone. When analyzing each story, it will be crucial to remember that, as High points out, “the experiences of Amazonian people today should be understood in terms of historical transformation and indigenous practices that extend beyond the local.”²⁵ Unlike the myth of complete primitive isolation, these communities have continuously engaged, for a long time, in ontological negotiations as a way of persevering. More than that, they have survived the cataclysmic encounter between worlds by being able to change and exchange through these negotiations without ceasing to be who they were before either. Hence the ‘*quasi-eventfulness*’ of these stories. In that sense, when faced with Waorani members weaving lighting fixtures inspired by contemporary designs to be exhibited and sold globally, navigating their own identities while receiving international tourists in *ecolodges*, sharing a desire to create a living museum in the forest, or even working for oil companies in their operations platforms, one should not be estranged or inclined to see them as ‘less Indigenous.’ This study is, perhaps, an invitation to look differently towards all these “unlikely alliances” and forms of endurance, an invitation to see these communities as Indigenous precisely *because* of such forms of, historically, “becoming other,” rather than *despite* them.

Ultimately, how native Indigenous communities in Ecuador have countered extractive economies and state policies for centuries demonstrate how the lenses through which the globalized world looks at Upper Amazonia—namely biodiversity, extraction, and isolation—are far from being independent, isolated attributes. They are, in fact, entangled

25 [High, 2015, p. 57 (mentioned in Wasserstrom, 2016, p. 500)]

and complex realities constantly creating and dismantling worlds that are in association or at odds with each other.

*

Oil entanglements

The following lines describe Waorani contact with missionaries and oil companies during the second half of the 20th century. It focuses on how such ontological entanglements define the region's contemporary landscape and the refusal strategies negotiated within the boundaries of colliding worlds—at times offering points of solidarity between communities and at others making potentials of solidarity vulnerable. Such assemblages in the region can take the form of what anthropologist Flora Lu defines as "oil entanglements," that is, the complex power relations between oil and traditional forms of life in Ecuadorian Amazon. For Lu, the metaphor of entanglements goes “beyond a dualistic understanding of power as a struggle between domination and resistance: entanglements shape, constrain, and influence personal, professional, and organization identities so that spaces are lived and experienced in particular ways.”²⁶ Such entanglements take a variety of forms in the region, ranging from force dependence on governmental or private water treatment systems—due to toxic oil waste particles that contaminate the water and indigenous bodies—to the unlikely alliances with oil extraction that lure Waorani groups to move from communities deep in the forest to the margins of oil-roads.

²⁶ Lu, Flora, Gabriela Valdivia, and Néstor L. Silva. *Oil, Revolution, and Indigenous Citizenship in Ecuadorian Amazonia*. Springer, 2016. p.5

The Yasuni Biosphere Reserve, located in the Northeast portion of Ecuador's Amazonia and established in 1989, is widely considered Earth's richest biotic zone and the traditional territory of several indigenous groups—such as the Jivaroan-speaking Shuar, Achuar, and Shiwiar groups; the lowland Kichwa (or Runa) speaking three dialects of Kichwa; the Tucanoan-speaking Siona and Secoya; the Záparo who primarily speak Kichwa, the A'ingae speaking Cofán and the Waotededo speaking Waorani—while concurrently accommodating most of the country's oil reserves under its rainforest canopy.²⁷ Since the drilling of the first oil well by Texaco in 1967, hydrocarbon exploitation has become the bedrock of Ecuador's economy and a critical threat to Yasuni's environment. Oil represents 4.39% of Ecuador's GDP and 36% of total exports, resulting in a petrostate heavily dependent on its oil economy.²⁸ If, during the 19th century, the recently independent Ecuadorian State granted the church and rubber barons the official and extra-official administration of the Amazonian region,²⁹ the discovery of oil and the concession of its exploitation to multinational companies represent the neoliberal iteration of such policy. As Suzana Sawyer, an anthropologist working on the Ecuadorian Amazonian oil frontier since the 1990s, summarizes:

[the presence of multinational oil-companies in the region] illustrated a twofold process under neoliberal rule whereby the state increasingly assumed the role of a fiscal manager geared toward facilitating transnational capital, and private enterprise

27 Myers, Norman. "Threatened Biotas: 'Hot Spots' in Tropical Forests." *Environmentalist* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 1988): 187–208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02240252>. p.194

28 Source: World Bank. By contrast, oil in Brazil, the largest producer and exporter in South America, represents 1.85% of the country's GDP.

29 Muratorio, 2009. p.91

selectively assumed a pastoral role. As the state retreated from its role of caring for the well-being of its subjects, ARCO [Atlantic Richfield Company, a North-American oil company] stepped in. From the moment it gained rights to its oil concession, ARCO bestowed gifts and small “development” projects on the isolated communities near its exploratory operations, purportedly as compensation for letting the company complete its work. Gifts and projects ranged from candies to tin roofing, from school supplies to a new schoolhouse, from airplane rides to high school scholarships. For a corporation that invested hundred of millions of dollars in oil exploration, these gestures were incidental expenditures; for a materially poor and politically marginalized indigenous communities, they were near-monumental. Supporting DICIP³⁰ not only demonstrated the corporation’s compassion for local people, but also created the docile and compliant bodies necessary for oil operations to proceed. (SAWYER, 2004, p .9)

Sawyer’s remarks demonstrate that, in the contemporary Ecuadorian Amazon, the early colonial collection of surplus in exchange for prayers and weddings performed by the Church gave place to the provision of “gifts and small development projects” by multinational oil companies in exchange for territory. Such a “pastoral role” granted to extractive enterprises ultimately resulted in a high level of dependency of local communities on basic provisions and infrastructures provided by oil companies.

The absence of the State and the tenacious presence of oil companies in the region is remarkable. Indigenous communities rely on extractive companies to establish schools,

30 Antagonist indigenous association opposing the consolidated union of indigenous populations from Pastanza and that, arguable, was manipulated by ARCO. *(not sure how to create a note inside a long quote)*

health facilities, jobs, and subsistence provisions. Even international scientific stations researching the unique biodiversity of the Yasuní, are created, financed, and monitored by the oil companies that operate the block in which the scientific facilities are located. By retreating “from its role of caring for the well-being of its subjects,” Ecuadorian neoliberal policies supported a wicked entanglement between oil operations and the bare minimum needed for Indigenous communities to survive with dignity. Under this logic, to resist the exploitation of its underground resources—as is the case of the Waorani community I visited along the Nushiño River—is to abdicate health access, potable water, and proper sewage treatment systems.³¹ While resisting oil operations within their community, the families I visited had to open a new clearing in the other extreme of their territory to be closer to oil platforms in adjacent communities, which could provide better access to education and health.

In the case of the Waorani, the colonial frontier of the group’s traditional territory was finally traversed in 1958 when North American missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) established long-term peaceful contact with Waorani members.³² Soon, SIL would work with the Ecuadorian government, orchestrating the resettlement of 80% of the Waorani population into the Protectorate region, established in the Pastaza province, in the Western portion of the group’s traditional territory.³³ With the significant concentration of Indigenous presence in a much smaller area within the Yasuní—less than one-tenth of the

31 At a particular moment during my stay, two community members—one suspected of having malaria— had to travel close to three hours by boat to the nearest community adjacent to an oil platform to receive health treatment. One month after my departure from the community, a member passed away after a series of visits to precarious medical facilities that could not provide a precise diagnosis of his malady.

32 Bengé, Janet, and Geoff Bengé. *Rachel Saint: A Star in the Jungle*. YWAM Publishing, 2005.

33 Yost, James A. *Twenty Years of Contact: The Mechanisms of Change in Wao ("Auca") Culture* (pp. 677-704) In *Cultural transformations and ethnicity in modern Ecuador* edited by Whitten, Jr., Norman E. · Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

original size—the government started to grant extraction permission to multinational oil companies in the region while a “civilizational” project was undertaken on the relocated Waorani communities.

After a rise of epidemics within the Protectorate region during the 1970s, several Waorani groups decided to settle back in their original territory— a movement that coincided with the expansion of oil activities within Waorani traditional land and sparking a wave of colonization, deforestation, and defaunation.³⁴ After a series of Indigenous upraising on a national level led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the Ecuadorian government made a series of concessions. Among them, the demarcation of the Waorani Ethnic Reserve, an area encompassing one-third of the group’s original territory, in 1990. Ultimately, the demarcated territory reflects neither the group’s original occupation nor the contemporary movement of the isolated Tagaeri and Taromenane clans—who constantly get in conflict with extractive workers outside the demarcated borders—and settlements of several Waorani communities, such as the ones alongside Via Maxus and Via Auca, two of the major oil roads in the Yasuni region. With the return to a portion of their homeland after the initial settlement within the Protectorate, some groups decided to move back into the rainforest depths, while others opened new Clearings by establishing communities alongside recently created oil infrastructures, such as roads, wells, and platforms, to access Western goods, technologies, and working opportunities quickly.³⁵

34 In conversation with Manuela Omari Ima, October, 2022. See also Lu, Flora, Gabriela Valdivia, and Néstor L. Silva. *Oil, Revolution, and Indigenous Citizenship in Ecuadorian Amazonia*. Springer, 2016.

35 Doughty, Caitlin, Flora Lu, and Mark Sorensen. "Crude, Cash and Culture Change: The Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador." *Consilience*, no. 4 (2010): 18–32.

While having their lives strongly affected by oil, the Waorani have no control over when, how, and where oil activities will occur in their traditional or demarcated territories. The threat of extraction is a constant, even for communities that, in unison, stand entirely against opening their territory resources for exploitation, such as the one I visited alongside the Nushiño River. Even though holding constitutional rights over their territory and as official citizens of Ecuador, Waorani's fragile sovereignty over their traditional and demarcated lands is constantly violated or bracketed to prevent it from interfering in State decisions in alliance with oil interests. It goes without saying that crude sovereignty and oil block demarcation in the Yasuní were never understood within an existent logic of Indigenous land-use patterns, authority structures, and identities as nationalities. On the contrary—and similarly to the subdivision of the region in title land blocks representing distinct *comunidades*—the demarcation of blocks for extraction can be seen as dividing the integrity of Indigenous nationalities, undermining their solidarity, and eroding the deeply embedded ties to a living landscape; the “scientific dehumanization of Amazonian worlds,” a disenchantment of a sacred and living forest.³⁶

The successive governmental strategies of manipulating previously established boundaries for the Yasuní National Park (YSN)—a United Nations Biosphere Reserve—to allow the construction of oil infrastructure and facilitate its exploitation by multinational companies is a clear example of territorial and boundary insecurity in the region. At times, the YSN park border was extended, engulfing Indigenous lands into a conservation “blank white space devoid of humans,” and seen by local leaderships as a pretext used by the State

³⁶ Sawyer, Suzana. *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador*. Duke University Press, 2004. p.51

to gain exclusive control over Indigenous lands.³⁷ In others, the park boundaries were systematically manipulated to avoid overlapping's with oil concession blocks to facilitate transnational corporate exploitation and free the State of lawsuits questioning extractive activities in protected areas.³⁸

The demarcation of the Intangible Zone Tagaeri-Taromenane (ZITT) to guarantee the protection of the two Waorani clans in voluntary isolation from undesired contact and extraction is a clear example of the ambiguities of recognition, sovereignty, and territorial demarcation within Yasuni's oil entanglements and its consequential opening of Clearings. Even though Ecuador's constitution of 2008, the first one to mention People in Voluntary Isolation (PVI), states that the territories of PVI are of "ancestral possession, irreducible, and intangible, and all extractive activity is prohibited therein" and that the State is responsible to "ensure their lives, see to it that their self-determination and decision to remain in isolation are respected, and to see to the observance of their rights" under the risk of being accused of genocide, it hardly reflects the reality involved in ZITT's demarcation—questionable on multiple levels. Its official demarcation in 2007 was strongly influenced by oil companies, such as Encana and Repsol, who were responsible for surveying PVI presence and establishing the boundaries of the Tagaeri and Taromenane territory (!). Consequently, and as one would readily imagine, plans for maintaining existing plans for projected oil wells in the northwestern portion of the YSN and oil interests guided the delimitation of the ZITT, not the actual Tagaeri Taromenane traditional territory or consultations with Indigenous

37 Ibid. 52

38 Ibid.

communities or their representative organizations.³⁹ The outcome is catastrophic and today the territory of Tagaeri and Taromenane actual occupation overlaps with national parks, oil blocks, Indigenous territories, colonist lands, and areas of tourism, extraction, and research, resulting in a series of complex conflicts with several agents and several killing raids between PVI, other Waorani communities, and agents of legal and illegal extractive economies.⁴⁰

Amidst these strategies of erasure by demarcation and through a refusal to let a particular world collapse, the PVI endure and, along the way, produce material manifestations of this stubborn perseverance: traditional necklaces and ornaments made by Tagaeri and Taromenane members using pieces of plastic gathered near oil platforms are found scattered in the forest, while spears used in raids against other Waorani communities or extractive workers are ornamented not only with natural fibers and feathers but wrapped with strings of electric wires.⁴¹ There is a subversive sense of adapting ‘dominance matter’ in these material manifestations that seems to intertwine with Martín’s *will* for a living museum, or Manuela’s art store in the city of Shell. If, in Manuela’s case, the art-market logic is appropriated to stimulate the production of traditional crafts and alternative economies within communities affected by oil extraction, the PVI adapts the production of traditional objects with the waste originating from the same extractive economy; Clearings opened by refusing to give away who one is in a context of continuous exploitation, exhaustion, and extraction.

39 Lu, Flora, Gabriela Valdivia, and Néstor L. Silva. Oil, Revolution, and Indigenous Citizenship in Ecuadorian Amazonia. Springer, 2016. p.56

40 See Pappalardo, Salvatore Eugenio, Massimo De Marchi, and Francesco Ferrarese. “Uncontacted Waorani in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve: Geographical Validation of the Zona Intangible Tagaeri Taromenane (ZITT).” *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 6 (June 19, 2013): e66293. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0066293>.

41 In conversation with Manuela Omari Ima. October 2022.

To shed light on the contemporary political economy of oil extraction in Ecuador and its entanglements with social, cultural, and recognition issues afflicting local communities, anthropologist Flora Lu has developed extensive field research with Waorani communities settled on oil roads in the Yasuní region. Lu's work demonstrates the complex and far from obvious relationship between hopes and burdens faced by Waorani families when they decide to inhabit alongside oil activities. They escape straightforward understandings of these communities as mere “passive or downtrodden victims of oil activities,” bringing to the surface the myriad of ways that Waorani members assert their sovereignty by “demanding for goods and services from corporations and the state or exacting payment from outsiders for the privilege of being allowed in their territory, in their communities.”⁴² Even though one can easily question calling such survival practices “sovereignty,” Lu’s work seems fundamental when accessing the *will* and strategies these communities undertake to persevere within oil entanglements. What I suggest is that the hopes, desires, demands, and alliances that take place in these communities that coexist with oil, just as much as the revolts and sabotages, should not be seen as acts of succumbing—in the sense of both collapsing to crude or embracing it—but as a more cunning and radical way of enduring an exhausted existence within the oil frontier.

For example, settling alongside oil activities should not be seen simply as a form of succumbing to extractive economies but as a more complex phenomenon fostering cultural resistance and existential endurance. For example, Lu’s work on communities such as

42 Lu et al *Oil, Revolution, and Indigenous Citizenship in Ecuadorian Amazonia*, 3.

Gareno and Tiwino, in the Pastaza region, demonstrate how Waorani members who previously lived in more remote regions in the rainforest saw the occasion of inhabiting clearings alongside oil activities as a form of defending and reaffirming the connection to their original territory. In the search for benefits and sovereignty over ancestral territories, Waornai communities “use a politics of recognition dependent upon their presence as the foundation of their claims upon spaces affected by oil, and upon the limited benefits the industry provides.”⁴³ In these cases, Waorani members would justify opening Clearings in certain areas around oil platforms as an opportunity to perform the traditional practices of returning to an area previously inhabited by their direct forebears; the opening of these spaces become a way to reaffirm a bond to ancestral land and challenge dominant geographies by simply refusing to collapse.⁴⁴ Such was the case of Babe Ima, well-known Waorani warrior and founder of Tiwino, who decided to move from the Protectorate to Via Auca and establish a new community: “Babae felt that it was up to him and his family to come out in its defense, confront the colonists, fight for the land, and put up barriers to stop the colonists from going deeper, even at the cost of his own life”⁴⁵ While enduring by making a world present and refusing to ‘not to do something’ the proximity to oil activities does not guarantee the development that many communities hope for; on the contrary, communities living alongside oil platforms and wells carry the physical, cultural, and environmental burden of such activities while having access to a minimal portion of its benefits.

43 Ibid., 138

44 Caitlin Doughty, Flora Lu, and Mark Sorensen. “Crude, Cash and Culture Change: The Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador.” *Consilience*, no. 4 (2010): 18–32.

45 Albán Compañía, D. 2015. Teen Pregnancy on the Oil Road: Social Determinants of Teen Pregnancy in an Indigenous Community in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Master’s thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 16. Quoted on Lu et al *Oil, Revolution, and Indigenous Citizenship in Ecuadorian Amazonia*, 138.

The inhabitants of communities such as Gareno, Tiwino, and many others living alongside oil platforms end up developing a high level of dependency on the provisions and common spaces (education, health, and leisure) funded by the oil companies operating their respective blocks, the wage labor provided by extractive practices, and the market economy that gradually take the place of the subsistence from forest resources. At the same time, if, on one side, the dependency indicates these communities' subjection to the oil economy, it also indicates a more complex entangled way of persevering within a hostile extractive context, of 'inhabiting the belly of the monster.' In these communities, unlikely forms of enduring occur, and unexpected Clearings, which often blur the lines of recognition and imposed ethical perceptions, are open. These Clearings can crack open within these own logics of dependency when the Waorani question the dominance of oil in their territory.

The entanglement between a series of conflicting agents—the state, multinational oil companies, the Waorani, and so on—also makes it possible for moments when questions of territoriality, identity, and recognition are contested, and forms of dominance tremble when Clearings are opened. For example, alliances and agreements between Waorani and oil companies are defined by inconstancy. If Waorani living alongside oil roads are often portrayed as succumbing to crude interests, they are also the ones who—more often than not—threaten basic oil operations and shut the wells down as a way of persevering amidst the misery imposed by extractive economies. One of the most common forms of protests are the *paros*, when communities cut down trees alongside oil roads blocking the passage of vehicles and interrupting oil operations. As Flora Lu mentions, during 4 months of fieldwork research in 2014 in the community of Gareno there were about 10 *paros* that ranged from requests for oil company food to protests against avoidable deaths that occurred in the

community due to infrastructural and administrative negligence by the company. On regular days—like the one I crossed Gareno to access the river that would take me to a community alongside the Nushiño River—the gateway is an iron barrier operated by a Petroecuador employee.

While this thesis is being written, a similar *paro* takes place for four months in the northern portion of the Yasuni National Park, in the province of Orellana, led by communities within the influence zones of oil blocks 16 and 67. The protests began days before the expiration of Repsol's authorization to operate in the region; at that point, the state-owned company Petroecuador would take over the oil operations. The communities called for the state and Repsol's responsibility for the environmental contamination caused by the companies and the fact that the community was not consulted prior to Petroecuador's entry into the group's ancestral territory.⁴⁶ The community claims that for 38 years, the oil exploitation has transformed the community's way of living, providing no rest with 24 hours of heavy traffic and noise of the industry, while none of the six companies that have exploited the field has respected the constitutional right to prior, free and informed consultation. As part of the negotiations, the community asks for a bonus of \$5,000 if any member of the community dies, affiliation to the IESS (Ecuador's Social Security Institute) for everyone, whether they are one year old or 100 years old. In addition, among the demands are also a monthly payment of \$1,200 by Petroecuador to each of the workers of the Waorani community for the right of passing through their territory, food, and transportation; a semi-annual bonus of \$1,000 to single mothers and \$2,000 to families in the community. The

46 El Universo. "Acuerdo entre Petroecuador y comunidad waorani de Dicaro pone fin a casi cuatro meses de protestas," April 11, 2023. <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/economia/acuerdo-entre-petroecuador-y-comunidad-waorani-de-dicaro-pone-fin-a-casi-cuatro-meses-de-protestas-nota/>.

group requests Petroecuador to finance the expansion of a medical center, the purchase of an ambulance, the delivery of uniforms, and the construction of a complete educational. They also request the construction of houses, the construction of a House of Craftwork, a Church, an auditorium, and a Community House, among others, to which Ecuador's Ministry of Energy replied as being requests "a little bit out of place."⁴⁷ As a form of enduring the exhaustion of almost four decades of oil extraction, the community seized access to the platforms—causing a decrease of 3000 barrels a day in block 16's oil production (what could be estimated at \$7 million dollars a month)—and reinforced the will to defend an ancestral territory even while working for oil operations. Amid this venue of ontological negotiations, of worlds in direct conflict, the Waorani navigate their identities and subjectivities as Indigenous Nationality *and* Ecuadorian citizens while negotiating, in the Clearings opened by the *paros*, the material means to survive an ongoing end of a particular world.

Sites of constant ontological conflict, such as communities that strive adjacent to oil roads, shelter a myriad of spaces of endurance that might be seen under the proposed image of the Clearing. These sometimes arise from the desire to keep an embodied relationship with the forest's social ecologies alive while adapting to market economies to materially survive. It is the case with the practices promoted by the Association of Waorani Women from the Ecuadorian Amazon (AMWAE) within communities heavily affected by oil operations, such as Tiwino. To counter Waorani women's dependency on the income originating from their husbands' work in oil operations—which often gets spent on alcohol resulting in cases of domestic abuse—AMWAE promotes workshops of traditional craftwork

47 "Comunidad Waorani pide bonos de \$5.000 y afiliación al IESS para todos como condición para permitir la explotación de campo petrolero." Accessed April 22, 2023. <https://www.lahora.com.ec/pais/comunidad-waorani-pide-bonos-afiliacion-ies-condicion-permitir-explotacion-campo-petrolero/>.

and mediates their commercialization nationwide, nurturing a grassroots alternative economy. In the context of this production, I met Manuela Omari Ima in her store in the city of Shell and was hosted by her family at the margin of the Nushiño River to engage in the production of the *yoo*, the Waorani traditional hammock. While president of AMWAE, Omari oversaw the development of such initiatives and the opening of several stores (*tiendas*) throughout the YNP, aiming at commercializing Waorani art.

The hammocks, baskets, necklaces, and all sorts of objects present in Omari store, however, go beyond merely responding to an economic need of Waorani communities inflicted by oil operations. Amidst subsistence oil entanglements, these objects are living entities that attest to an embodied relationship between Waorani women and the forest. That is, while providing the material means to survive, the production of such objects—such as the weaving of *yoo*—represents a way of renovating an ancestral connection to a territory anew, similarly to how Povinelli described her colleagues’ ways of knowing in Australia as an “embodied commitment to place that over time becomes an embodied obligation.” Producing objects such as the *yoo* involves intense trekking through the forest and gathering source materials throughout vast portions of the group's traditional territory. Carefully observing and mapping the location of *chambira* palms—that provide the fiber to be weaved into traditional objects—or trees that provide seeds, barks, or leaves with each natural pigment can be extracted, production becomes a way of dwelling and renovating a sense of belonging to a landscape and its social ecology. After long and complex processes of collecting sources of different pigments and fibers in the forest—the trekking to collect just a handful of *wepeta* barks from which a red pigment is extracted took more than 9 hours through the dense tropical forest, while longer incursions can take several days—the women jointly process the

materials and start the weaving. While chanting songs that recall the human-other-than-human relations embodied in the materials—or oral histories attesting to a multigenerational and supernatural connection to the forest—the Waorani women collectively weaved together memory, place, and matter, inscribing their sense of continuous bodily reciprocity with the Amazon. To Omari and her family, to *know* is to weave and sing in an entangled form of being with Yasuni’s social ecologies (Figure 4).

The resulting artifacts become an archival assemblage, a counter-map that makes Waorani ontology and territorial occupation legible, despite attempts at erasure through colonization. What originates as a way of countering the dependency on crude economy suddenly becomes a way of nurturing an otherwise form of life amid dominant modes of being, of reclaiming the memory capable of weaving a world from collapsing, of opening a Clearing within a context of exhaustion. It becomes crystal clear how the social ecology present in the weaving of the colorful *yoo* is obliterated when transported to the AMNH, or Yale University. Removed from its worlding context, the hammock, not the weaver, seems to inhabit an ahistorical outers-space when enclosed by the glass displays in Manhattan or lying within Rudolph Hall classrooms. If Martín’s *Museo Vivo* can be understood as an invitation to a new *way of seeing*, as a form of counterwitnessing colonial forms of displaying to reveal the political ontologies hidden within the reborn object, the Clearing in which *yoo*s and baskets of *otome* are weaved doesn’t go without speaking to whoever decides to cross its opening. Ultimately, and as counter-maps, the *yoo*s and their colorful threads point to something else that resides within the urgency of exhausted bodies that—against all expectations and colonial projects—have chosen to persevere. As Jaider Esbell beautifully illuminates, “Contemporary Indigenous Art is a trap to catch curious onlookers. It is not a

painting, arrow, or pottery [or hammock]; it is a spell to talk about a serious matter which is the ecological urgency.” An ecological urgency that implies a crisis of subjectivity, ongoing world endings amidst people that refuse to come apart and choose to open Clearings as a form of—stubbornly—cultivating spaces of endurance.

Medi(t)ations on The Clearing

While writing this thesis' final lines, I received a phone call from a friend who works at a scientific station within oil block 16 in the Yasuní National Park. He wanted to share the recent updates on the complex situation described in Chapter 4 regarding the Waorani communities in the province of Orellana. The roadblocks established by the local communities affected the station operations since the Waorani cut the electricity—provided by Petroecuador—forcing the station to be completely evacuated. My friend mentioned that an Indigenous national representative informally proposed that the station could mediate the conflict between the communities and Petroecuador. While asking my take on the issue, he expressed disbelief that the station could fulfill this role since it was a university.

The scientific station was created in 1994 by a former oil company that occupied the block to offset environmental damages caused in the region. Today, the station is operated by a university in Quito, with solid international partnerships aiming to study the high biodiversity in the area. The station relies on the oil companies operating within the block for energy and transportation. Simultaneously, its staff have been developing close relations with Waorani communities alongside the oil road by providing them with educational support. Since the station hosts many multidisciplinary professionals working with Waorani groups in the region, its staff guarantees that visiting researchers nurture reciprocal relationships with these communities through offering workshops, lectures, and other forms of knowledge and resource exchange.

The station operates in several ontological intersections between scientists researching Yasuni's ecology, anthropologists studying and/or collaborating with local communities, oil companies that support and monitor its activities, and the Waorani communities who endure by occasionally allying with the station, its visiting researchers, and staff. For these reasons, I was surprised by my friend's aversion to mediating the complex relationship between the Waorani communities and Petroecuador. My first reaction was to ask whether they consider themselves inevitably mediators due to their participation and existence at the crossroad of so many world projects—visiting researchers, the oil companies, the Waorani groups, etc. Nothing more was said, and the conflict still awaits a resolution as this thesis is being concluded.

If an additional reflection can be drawn from the effort of wandering through Clearings—a walk that began in Martín's *Museo Vivo*—is how these spaces result from complex and sometimes unexpected subject networks... and mediations. The *supaychakra* is not only opened by the mutualistic relationship between the ants and their hosts, but through a broader network of human and other-than-human agents who open, contain, and occupy these spaces. Myself, by crossing them with my Waorani friends, talking, and writing about it, become a part of its political ontology. And isn't Omari, sharing her knowledge by breaking the tree bark to eat a couple of ants nested there, mediating some of its relationships?

Recently the Waorani members of the community I visited alongside the Nushiño River, and another one alongside the oil road Via Auca, were invited to weave intertwined structures using traditional techniques and naturally colored chambira fibers to be exhibited at the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale. Alongside the weavings, “counter-maps” of their

community, painted or embroidered in barks of *wengo*, and a soundscape—all produced by the communities in collaboration with architects and artists—will be displayed. The project develops an open archive with these communities composed of drawings, maps, photographs, audio recordings, oral histories, and traditional songs. Together they document the entangled territorial and cosmological assemblages embedded in complex production processes. Ultimately, as this work argued, these projects embody the endurance inherent to a stubborn refusal to collapse, an act of weaving worlds that nest otherwise-forms-of-life. This partnership's primary goal is to exhibit these works of endurance and provide space for the Waorani women to tell their stories.

However, as seen in Chapter 4, the story of the work developed by the Association of Waorani Women from the Ecuadorian Amazon cannot be understood apart from a history of conflict and endurance against oil operations, environmental damages, and domestic violence. The potentiality for an otherwise form of life sought by this collective of Waorani women weaving these structures for the Venice Biennale originates within this context; their Clearing is opened amid the wreckages of a collapsing world. To engage with their work, exhibit the material form, and support their perseverance is to participate in the opening of the Clearing and the weaving of its relations. It is, to a certain extent, to mediate relations. For everyone involved in the project, it is clear that it is impossible to stay ‘out of trouble’ once engaging with the acts of weaving. In a certain way—and as Povinelli described as one of the primary goals of the “mobile phone project—” to engage with the social-ecological practices performed by the Waorani women is to perform, together, an “embodied commitment to place that over time becomes an embodied obligation;” or as a Wapichana artist and friend cautioned me when we discussed my initial research steps, “This

oil will stick on you as well.” The point becomes where to go after that. What relations will be woven and which Clearings should be crossed and opened.

Institutions engaging in the processes involved in the opening of Clearings—being through support or suppression, acts of solidarity or colonialism—at times don’t see themselves as such. It is the case of an ornithologist whom I have met and who undertook field trips to the Yasuní National Park for decades to capture and collect birds for a North American University. When I asked in which ways he engaged with local communities—such as the Waorani—when he entered their territories to capture birds, he replied that he preferred not to engage with them at all, as if that was an ethical solution for his practice, a way of staying out of trouble. These same scientists, however, are based in a local research station—that receives support from the oil company operating the block—while sometimes relying on the low-wage labor of Waorani members to work as guides or boat drivers when not criticizing local communities' hunting practices as sources of environmental disturbances. In that sense, an ‘innocence’—proper of the anti-conquest phenomena—seems to prevail in the assertion that to be a scientist or academic is to be out of the power dynamics shaping—not only the landscape—but the lives and struggles of local communities. An innocence that makes one not see their own hands already operating on the Clearing. This is an unbreakable ‘self’ that, for example attempts to justify, during environmental impact assessment projects, the intensity of a power generator on an oil platform by comparing it with the sounds of the forest... in decibels.¹ Amidst moments of solipsism, the question then becomes how to be *seen seen* in the Clearing.

¹ In a last critical moment of *Pueblos Indígenas Tagaeri y Taromenane vs. Ecuador* public hearing, Ricardo Benitez, a biologist at the state company Petroecuador, responded to inquiries about the company's methodologies of environmental impact assessment. At a given moment, Benitez was questioned about the environmental disturbance caused by the noise generated from oil platforms, construction sites, and power generators. He explained that during the development of environmental impact assessments, a

In chapter 1, Martín's project for a living museum was understood as something not necessarily tied to a physical presence in space but as holding the potential of an alternative *way of seeing*. In other words, a method to cultivate an alternative code of looking capable of dismantling dominant strategies of visibility and display, the latter perpetuated by practices of colonialism and erasure in which anthropology and the modern museum played no minor role. Engaging with Indigenous calls for the museum's sense of responsibility concerning an ongoing history of 'dissecting worlds,' Martín's *Museo Vivo* was conceptualized as a parody of the Euro-American museum: a strategy for appropriating the language of dominance to create an emancipatory oppositional self-representation (chapter 2). To see it as a parody implied a move from the site of imperial accumulation to the site of imperial intervention, from the archive to the forest, conditioning a counter-ordering of nature according to a particular world-making project. Once in the forest, the concurrence of Martín's idea for a living museum and the need to defend a territory becomes crystal clear (chapter 3). The *Museo Vivo* is then seen as one of many radical spatial strategies undertaken by the Waorani to endure the exhaustion inflicted by Ecuador's neoliberal extractive policies. Relying on Elizabeth Povinelli's concept of *quasi-events*, these radical spatialities—living museums, ecolodges, art stores, former and to-become-clearings, etc.—are considered as strategies part of a stubborn refusal to collapse; as ways of providing emotional and material means to just “keep going” within the belly of the monster. To these spatialities, I proposed the imaginary of Clearings.

company hired by Petroecuador visits the site where the new platform will be built and measures, throughout the day, the intensity of the sound in the area in decibels (dB). The highest value collected during the analysis of the site in its 'natural' condition is then considered, supposedly, as a reference value to determine the maximum noise intensity that can be detected after the installation of oil infrastructures. That is, if during a night in the forest, the decibel meter device detects a value of 60db, the same value will be considered as the maximum intensity that an oil well or generator can produce. Ricardo Benitez at *Pueblos Indígenas Tagaeri y Taromenane vs. Ecuador public hearing* held on August 23rd, 2022, at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASvdKuPqdEs&t=11887s>

Clearings are wombed spaces nourished by contact zones' ambivalent values. Where strategies of enduring exhaustion are nurtured, potentiality is sheltered, and forms of dominance—even if for a moment—rattle. As the *antipode* of the ahistorical collection, in the Clearing, time is not only nonlinear but “sedimented in poly temporalities,” ultimately taking the form of a ‘wonderful tangle.’ Perhaps even more importantly, in the Clearing, “things get mixed up—” as in *Beloved*—and subjectivities are exchangeable and challengeable, as with the *sáivas*. These are spatialities formed by encounters in which difference is made together and after which “none of the heterogenous knower participants become the other, yet they do not remain only what they were either;” a site of divergence and discomfort, possibilities and transformations.²

But again, reading the political ontologies of the Clearing is not about seeing the *other* as much as been *seen seen* by one other. To wander through Clearings is to think about our own degrees of becoming—in all its ambivalences—and our roles as mediators. In the sedimented polytemporalities of the Clearing, one can see their own hands operating in its creation and deformations. In Toni Morrison’s work, *Beloved* is the daughter whom Sethe—a fugitive and the story’s main character—kills as a baby to escape an imminent recapture, even if it means neglecting her offspring's life. Later on in the story, *Beloved* returns in the body of a young child that, once in the Clearing, sees her own ghost at times choking and in others hugging her mother. This is the ambivalence Kelley refers to: the Clearing as a place of “radical collectivity and affirmation—” of care and hope—as much as “strangling and stifling.” The ambivalence hiding behind the veil of anti-conquest innocence covering the work of scientists, academics, museums, universities, and young researchers—

² Blaser and de La Cadena, *Introduction*, 11.

like myself—when these decide “not to engage” or “not to mediate” relations... as if it was an option. The Tlingit elders did not simply speculate about museums' role in their collapsing worlds; they called the museum to its sense of responsibility. In other words, to face its own ghost.

To wander through Clearings certainly brings to light the stubborn practices of endurance undertaken by subjects who refuse to collapse under a perennial threatened existence—and that strife to maintain their form of being as the center of a particular world. What it also brings to light is the ambivalence of our own ghosts chocking and hugging our friends and our “ethnological things” amidst our good intentions and personal aspirations. To wander the Clearing is also to see oneself. As a trap that lures “curious onlookers” to an alternative way of seeing, perhaps the living museum is Martín’s way of putting ourselves, *cowaris*, on display. But not for anyone’s gaze if not our own. As a way to call our responsibilities—as designers, academics, researchers, scientists, artists, etc.—to become others within these social ecologies. Only then can we start asking, as architects, if *designing* Clearings might point us to something else (Figure 5).

Figures



Figure 1. Clearing the way. Photo by the author. Community of Tepapade, 2022.

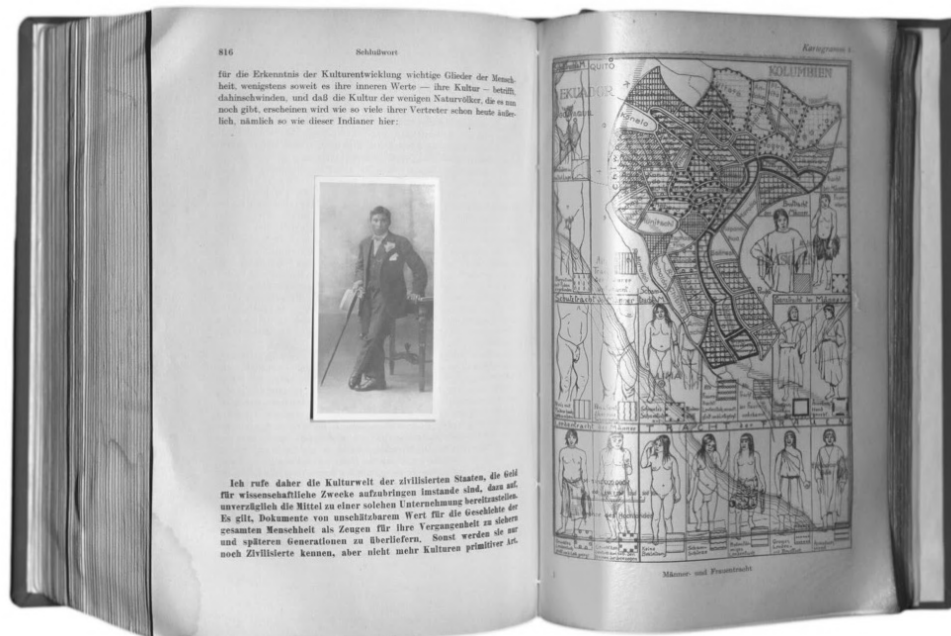


Figure 2. Example of Gunter Tessmann's cartograms. In *Tessmann, Günter. Die Indianer Nordost-Perus: Grundlegende Forschungen für eine systematische Kulturkunde (Veröffentlichung der Harvey-Bassler-Stiftung) - 1. Germany: Friederichsen, 1930.*

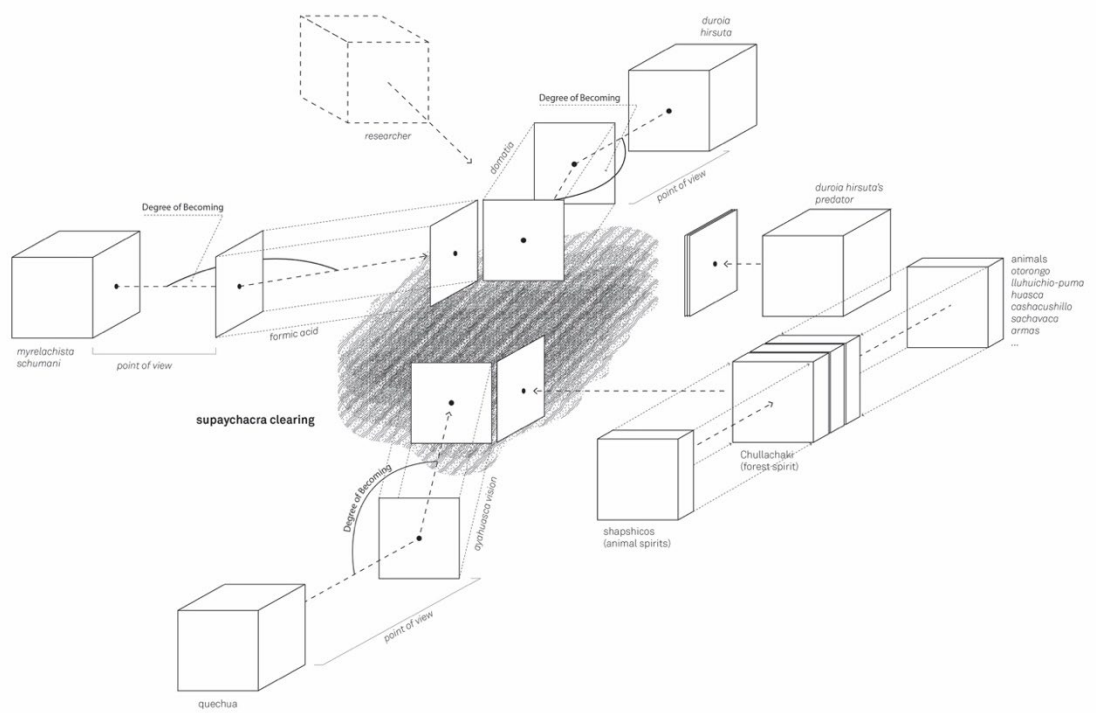


Figure 3. Diagram indicating the “degrees of becoming” involved in the opening of the Supaychacra Clearing. Diagram by the author, 2022.



Figure 4. Manuela Omari Ima and her family opening the chambira heart. Photo by the author. Community of Tepapade, 2022.



Figure 5. The author is seen trying to process chambira fibers, failing consecutively to do so. The community laughs. The author doesn't know what jokes are made about him since he doesn't speak wao tededo. Quoting a 6-year-old kid, "he has ears but can't hear a thing!" Photo by Manuela Omari Ima. Community of Tepapade, 2022.

Appendix A

When Dete's papa became a jaguar

[Recorded by the author translated from wao tededo to Spanish by Omari Ima. English translation by the author.]

“For three days, our father was lost, I didn't know, I thought he was at my brother's house. Then I asked my children, and they hadn't seen him either. My brother Omaca said, “Maybe my dad was taken by the Jaguar.” Now what will we do, and where will we look for it? At that moment, we went out to look around the house, there were no footprints; we came back and looked closely and saw a jaguar footprint and understood that our father was with the jaguar spirit.

We imagined that it [the jaguar spirit] took him on the path of the evil spirits, the “Queweiri,” up the Tiwino River, and there he could be. We thought that this was the path it took him by, and we started walking, but night fell, and we kept walking, and there was an unpleasant smell; it was the jaguar dung leaving a mark. Omaca told Cahuiya and me—I was carrying my son on my back—“Give your son to the jaguar so that it can go with him,” I said no; because he is my son, and he laughed at what he said was a joke.

We had already walked three days, and Omaca was sad because the jaguar had taken him [our father] very far. We slept many days in the jungle; in the old trunks, we covered ourselves with dry palm leaves. At dawn, we felt the presence of the jaguar. We heard its footsteps on the dry leaves; Omaca was the first to hear it, Cahuiya and I thought it was a lie, and then we heard a whistle, and I was very afraid. It was crying like a dog and talking too.

The jaguar said why are you coming to look for him, your father is going to stay with us; I looked, and my dad was dirty, and my dad told us, “the jaguar took me, and I belong to them.” My dad told us that the jaguar had already told him that the children were going to come looking for him, and he said that it happened just as the jaguar said. My dad told me that the jaguar carried him without getting wet in the river, through the mountains; he took a machete, boots, and a matchbox with him.

The spirits that died, the warriors, wanted to find my dad, wanted to take him to where they lived, and when they spoke to him, he lost consciousness and woke up with the spirits. My dad always wore boots, he cleaned the farm, he lived in the house, but we didn't know that he communicated with the jaguar spirit. The jaguar Meñera fed him, gave him *chicha* to drink. My brother Cahuiya wanted to talk to him about God, but my father said that his spirit belonged to the jaguar.

My brothers were carrying my father, we returned slowly but my father told us that the jaguar was coming after us, “Wherever I go he will follow me.” We walked all day, my dad couldn't talk, his body was turning into a jaguar, he didn't want to listen to us or understand when we talked to him.

We got home and we took care of him so that he wouldn't return with the jaguar, but it [the spirit] came every night looking for him and talked to my dad and told him to go live with them, because he already had the power of the jaguar. One night my dad went with the jaguar to the mountain where he was born and his spirit was free in the jungle, many times he comes to visit us and leave food.”

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