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## **Keep on Changing: Recent Trends in Amazonian Anthropology**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article I review several recent books to consider how anthropologists have approached questions of cosmology, history and social transformation in Amazonia. Several of these engage a now well-established tradition in presenting indigenous ontologies as radical alternatives to Western concepts of agency and history. In contrast to the discontinuities described in the “New History” of Amazonia, anthropologists tend to approach social transformation as the extension of an enduring symbolic economy of alterity. I argue that the “New Amazonian Ethnography” would benefit from an openness to understanding radical social change beyond questions of continuity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article looks at six recent books in the anthropology of Amazonia that explore questions of social transformation in terms of shamanic cosmology and indigenous understandings of history. Several of these books build on an established tradition in Amazonianist scholarship in describing radical alternatives to conventional understandings of agency, history and culture in anthropology and Western philosophical traditions more generally. While building on this tradition of defining Amazonia in terms of radical difference, they also analyze how Amazonian people relate to a growing constellation of “others” in the contemporary world – whether in their encounters with other indigenous people or whites/mestizos (Albert and Ramos 2000, Vilaça 2010). While these books engage questions of time, history and memory in specific ways in different parts of Lowland South America, I describe certain trends in how Amazonianists have come to think about continuity and change in this part of the world. Rather than aiming to provide a detailed or systemic overview of the many excellent monographs and other work published in recent years, I draw on these specific texts to identify key trends emerging in ethnographic, historical and archeological research in the region.

What emerges clearly in comparing these texts is a contrast in terms of how Amazonianist scholars approach questions of transformation. Taken as a whole, one of the major contributions of the regional literature in recent decades has been to demonstrate how indigenous cosmologies present novel ways of conceiving transformation – both personal and social. Some of this work has responded to earlier ideas about the “acculturation” of native peoples through their incorporation in national societies and the wider historical turn in anthropology since the 1970s, which has often emphasized the transformative impacts of colonial history in South America (Wolf 1982). Inspired by Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach to kinship and myth, several authors point to specific continuities in Amazonia that persist in the context of transformation. One example of this approach is Viveiros de Castro’s (2011) influential analysis of “other-becoming” as a core ontology ordering relations of alterity in indigenous Amazonia. In contrast to Western understandings of culture, identity and belief as relatively fixed categories, for Viveiros de Castro this “openness

to the other” reveals a certain centrifugal feature of Amerindian societies that has made them appear “inconstant” in the eyes of outsiders for centuries. In this way, processes such as the arrival of white people or conversion to Christianity, rather than constituting what might appear as a form of rupture or discontinuity, are described as transformations anticipated in indigenous cosmology (Vilaça 2009, Vilaça and Wright 2009, Viveiros de Castro 2011). Only recently have Amazonianists considered how new fundamental principles, such as an individualized notion of a Christian inner self, have been meaningfully taken up by indigenous people as they confront new situations (Vilaça 2011, Robbins, Schieffelin and Vilaça 2014).

What is interesting about this formulation is how the notion of transformation itself becomes the structure that reveals apparent sociocosmological continuities across time and diverse areas of Amazonia. That is, Amazonian people and collectivities transform in ways that demonstrate a core ontological premise, what Viveiros de Castro calls a “symbolic economy of alterity” (1996). This is but one example of how Amazonianists have embraced a Lévi-Straussian approach to structural continuity through change. As will become clear in reviewing the literature below, regional scholars increasingly draw on Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) formulation of perspectivism or “multinaturalism” in analyzing indigenous experiences of social transformation in contemporary Amazonia. Whether in studies of perspectival cosmologies or of kinship as a product of living together, the body is often described as the locus of personhood (Seeger, da Matta and Viveiros de Castro 1979) and transformation (see Vilaça 2005, 2007, Bonilla 2009, Grotti 2009, Stang 2009). In perspectivism, where certain non-humans share a unitary “culture” with human beings, the body marks different points of view. This implies that bodily transformations lead to a person engaging a different point of view and ultimately becoming a different kind of being. The same (or perhaps inverse) process is described in studies of Amazonian kinship, where the incorporation of new people, whether affines or newborns, involves a process of bodily transformation whereby people come to share the same substance as a result of living, eating and drinking together (Overing and Passes 2000, Gow 1991, Rival 1998, McCallum 2001).

Recently Viveiros de Castro’s formulation of perspectivism has come under attack as a major reference point in a wider “ontological turn” in anthropology. Bessire and Bond (2014) argue that, in fetishizing indigenous alterity as a philosophical ideal type that ultimately reifies an imagined “radical incommensurability between modern and nonmodern worlds,” such an approach “artificially standardizes alterity” in such a way that does not account for “the domain of real-world collisions and contradictions” (450). Part of this critique is that a focus on radical difference has prevented anthropologists in places like Amazonia accounting for contexts where myths and shamanic cosmology have been marginal to the struggles of indigenous peoples. And yet, recent studies of Amazonian cosmology, whether in reference to perspectivism, other-becoming or ontological predation, have to some extent allowed for new understandings of social transformation. They have also contributed to wider anthropological debates about alterity, including regional studies of other parts of the world (see Kirsch 2006, Pedersen, Empson and Humphrey 2007, Willerslev 2007, Brightman, Grotti and Ulturgasheva 2012, Stasch 2009). However, emphasizing transformation in terms of ontology and structural continuities in indigenous thought may also limit our understanding of the dramatic social changes that are occurring in Lowland South America today (Course 2013). In this article I relate this tendency in Amazonian scholarship to Robbins’ (2007) critical description of “continuity thinking” as a long-

standing tradition in anthropology. I suggest that a new generation of regional scholars, or what Fausto and Heckenberger (2007) call the “New Amazonian Ethnography,” stands to benefit from an openness to understanding radical social change in Amazonia beyond questions of continuity and alterity.

The welcome explosion of ethnohistorical and archeological research in Amazonia tends to tell a different story about transformation, one that emphasizes profound discontinuities, particularly as a result of colonialism. Perhaps the most important influence of this work has been to challenge the age-old assumption that indigenous Amazonia is by nature a place of small-scale and technologically simple societies with relatively little in the way of social hierarchy. Though most anthropologists have long since abandoned the ecologically deterministic model promoted by Meggers (1971), which saw the supposedly harsh conditions of Amazonian ecology as a limiting factor for social complexity, there remains a tendency to read the contemporary societies studied by anthropologists as in some ways representative of the pre-Columbian world (Heckenberger 2005). While many ethnographies describe small-scale and relatively egalitarian societies with few links to other indigenous groups, archeologists like Heckenberger and Rostain are discovering evidence for ever larger urban centers, pronounced social hierarchy, large-scale earthworks for agriculture, and trade networks across distant parts of Amazonia prior to the arrival of Europeans. Ethnohistorians, for their part, have reassessed archival sources to support a similar view of Amazonia as having been a radically different place prior to the arrival of Europeans (Denevan 1992, Whitehead 1993, 1994).

As a result of this historical turn, and the increasing attention to hierarchy and regional inter-group relations, it is becoming clear that the relatively atomized groups conventionally described by ethnographers should not be taken to represent the norm in pre-Columbian Amazonia. The emphasis on discontinuity in the “new archeology of Amazonia” is particularly clear in Rostain’s suggestion that indigenous communities today “share little with their pre-Columbian ancestors” (2013: 232). Given the scale of depopulation in Amazonia already by 1730, and the contrasts between archeological and ethnographic descriptions of Amazonian societies, Rostain’s statement is to some extent understandable. And yet, many of anthropologists whose work I engage in this article would surely argue that, despite this contrast, their ethnographies of contemporary Amazonian people reveal important continuities with pre-Columbian Amazonia at the level of cosmology. What we are left with here are radically different understandings of what constitutes continuity and discontinuity, a difference that has much to do with the distinct tendencies of historical and ethnographic enquiry, which present different approaches to the “temporal revolution” in Amazonianist scholarship.

While historical approaches often highlight the discontinuities between past and present Amazonia, most of the ethnographies I review in this article draw on aspects of indigenous cosmology to suggest that present transformations reveal certain continuities. Several of them explicitly contrast shamanic notions of transformation and agency to conventional Western ideas of history. Fausto and Heckenberger (2007) address this issue in contrasting what they call the “History of the Indians” to “Indigenous History,” pointing us again to radical differences between Amazonian and Western modes of thought. In demonstrating an alternative to a European-centered view of history, it is no coincidence that these authors draw on the notion of “memory” in describing “indigenous history”. While history often implies a sense of discontinuity, or at least a certain separation between past and present

(Hirsch and Stewart 2005), anthropologists often approach memory as a form of continuity across generations (Berliner 2005). In this way, there is a tendency to equate history with change and memory with forms of cultural continuity observed in the present. Recent work in Amazonia, however, has also looked to social memory to highlight indigenous understandings and experiences transformation, some of which incorporate colonial social categories and historical representations (Taylor 2007, High 2009a, 2015). I suggest that this emerging focus on memory, whether in the context of autobiographical narratives (Oakdale and Course 2014) or non-linguistic forms, has the potential to link Amazonian ethnography to wider anthropological debates and move beyond a long-standing regional focus on continuity.

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN AMAZONIAN SHAMANISM

Focusing particularly on the biographical narrative of renowned jaguar shaman Mandu da Silva, Wright's book *Mysteries of the Jaguar Shamans of the Northwest Amazon* (2013) presents an in-depth description and analysis of the shamanic practices and cosmology of the Baniwa, a Northern Arawak-speaking group of Northwest Amazonia. Mandu's remarkable story maps not only the complexity and geographical reach of a fascinating shamanic cosmology, but also the challenges his generation of shamans has endured in their attempts to maintain the health, social harmony and cultural continuity of Baniwa communities in the face of radical social transformations. This work is important not just in its detailed documentation of a life and form of knowledge that is under threat of disappearing, but also in bringing together a wide-ranging comparative perspective on cosmology, mythology and shamanism in the Northwest Amazon.

The book begins by outlining the place of jaguar shamans in the context of a wide range of religious specializations among the Baniwa, including sorcerers, prophets, priestly chanters and dance leaders, among which shamans occupy a distinct yet closely intertwined position. Mandu's story is about the remarkable spiritual and geographical journey that becoming a jaguar shaman (*paje*) entails, as well as the dangerous stakes a shaman faces in combating the ever-growing dangers of sorcery in the context of various historical and contemporary problems in this part of the world. What emerges in Wright's and Mandu's descriptions of shamanism is not simply an esoteric tradition remembered from past times, but a cosmology and mythology that is integral to the everyday lives of indigenous peoples, including their ecological knowledge, subsistence practices, and, above all, understandings of morality.

Part 2 of the book provides a detailed description of the Baniwa cosmos and particularly the "curvature of space-time" reflected in how people understand proximity, distance, fixity and movement in both this world and those temporally and spatially distant (166). An expansive "sacred geography" or "mythscape", including ancient petroglyphs, links the beings and events of cosmogony to specific places in the landscape, ecology, ritual practices and other forms of social life. Just as the shaman's role is to keep relations between worlds in order, they are also "ecologists" who understand the environment in much the same way as they do cultural norms.

Part 3, which focuses on the transmission of shamanic knowledge and power, analyzes the mythical narrative of *kuwai*, who is both the "child of the sun" and a "complex mixture of aspects of being" that produces changes in the world (233). Wright's exposition of shamanic narratives of *kuwai* illustrates how these narratives are a means by which shamans bring "external cosmic powers into the heart of

society” and thus reproduce culture over time (236). As a link between the “eternal spirit world” and this world, *kuwai* remains a key figure in ritual life, as well as in understandings of initiation and gender relations. The famous sacred flutes, for which the indigenous people of this part of Amazonia are well known, are understood to be replicas of different parts of *kuwai*’s body – each with its distinctive identity and agency as a person.

The final chapters move from questions of cosmology to those of social change, conflict, and recent efforts to preserve and restore shamanic knowledge and power in a context where interventions by missionaries, NGOs and other outsiders are creating new inequalities between Baniwa people. Wright explains how, like elsewhere in Amazonia, externally-driven “cultural” projects that aim to revive indigenous traditions can have the effect of reducing complex forms of knowledge to familiar tokens of culture and identity that are in fact quite distinct from those documented historically or promoted by elders. Despite this situation, and the challenge evangelical Christianity presents to the authority of shamans, Wright describes how Baniwa communities themselves have, in collaboration with the anthropologist, organized formal events and institutions to recognize the importance of shamanic knowledge and ensure its transmission to future generations.

In this book Wright makes clear his personal commitment to the maintenance and revival of a shamanic complex that appears to have guided much of Baniwa social life for centuries, a tradition that he suggests is crucial for the ongoing vitality of a distinct way of life in the face of increasing pressure from outsiders. While Wright makes a convincing case that certain Baniwa themselves value shamanic knowledge in much the way he does, one wonders if there aren’t also certain problems and contradictions in approaching cultural continuity as a value in and of itself in Amazonia. One can only hope, along with the author, that the Baniwa School of Shamans’ Knowledge will continue to gain ground in the future. However, as ethnographers of indigenous Amazonia we should also reflect more on our tendency to focus so heavily on valuing continuity over change – especially in a context where contemporary discourses of “culture” and difference generate novel social forms at the intersection of generations and radically different societies. Whereas as some Amazonian peoples express cultural identities as a matter of survival in new contexts, to what extent can we say that shamanism is necessarily more important than business, literacy or other activities?

Reading this book, one wonders if more attention to non-shamans, perhaps even the evangelical Christian Baniwa who reject shamans, might have given a more nuanced picture of the contentious place of shamanism in these communities. In some parts of Amazonia, for example, indigenous people have abandoned or rejected shamanic traditions not because they lack pride in themselves as indigenous people or because they are doomed to be overcome by outsiders, but because they envision new social realities requiring new social institutions in order to achieve the kind of balance and harmony sought by people like Mandu (see High 2012). In Baniwa communities, to what extent do non-shamans understand or question the connections between shamanic cosmology and everyday practice? While the author has good reason to be critical of the influence of evangelical missionaries in the Northwest Amazon, the book risks casting evangelical Baniwa (or those engaged in new market relations) as simply “acculturated” if they don’t follow specific traditions such as shamanism. While I am sure this was not Wright’s intention, and there is little doubt that the revival of shamanism is a positive project for many Baniwa, we should also be

reflexive about the almost uniform value Amazonianist anthropology has placed on continuity, even (and perhaps especially) in studies of social transformation.

Fausto's book, *Warfare and Shamanism in Amazonia* (2012), provides a rich and conceptually ambitious study of shamanism and warfare among the Parakanã, a Tupi-Guarani speaking people from the area between the Tocantins and Xingu rivers of the Brazilian Amazon. Since it is a translation of his original book in Portuguese, *Inimigos Fiéis* (2001), several of its key concepts were familiar to Amazonianist debates long before its publication in English. Alongside Viveiros de Castro's (1992) analysis of predation as a key sociocosmological principle in Amazonia, the book is among the most detailed studies of what Fausto calls "the constitutive role conferred to alterity in the production of Amerindian social life" (8). What he describes among the Parakanã and elsewhere in Amazonia is a symbolic economy of alterity in which "predation" between enemy groups in warfare is oriented not toward the ultimate annihilation of "others", but instead toward producing people and kinship through a process of "productive consumption" or "familiarizing predation". Whether in warfare, shamanism or ritual, a predatory relationship is converted into one of protection or control akin to that between "master" and "pet". Combining a decidedly structuralist approach to cosmology, ritual and social organization with a nuanced historical perspective on the differentiation of eastern and western Parakanã groups over the past century, Fausto places diverse practices and narratives into a single frame of analysis that he uses to identify core principles of indigenous logic, regional variations in myth, and the specific ways in which Parakanã have experienced "pacification" by Brazilian state authorities.

The first chapters explore the history of the Tocantins/Xingu region, looking specifically at the Parakanã's relative isolation in the aftermath of colonial depopulation, the splitting of the Parakanã into western and eastern factions, and their early contact with the Indian Protection Service (SPI) post that began in the 1920s. In comparing the practices, diets and myths of the eastern and western groups, Fausto challenges the idea that groups like the western Parakanã, who transitioned from sedentary horticulture to mobile foraging over the past century, represent a process of "regression" imposed by external forces. While Fausto focuses on how these changes to some extent reflect the choices of Parakanã people themselves, in chapter 3 he considers the recent development of a segmentary social system as generative rather than degenerative, whereby social change is "an outcome of the interaction between internal and external factors" that eventually led to the political and socioeconomic differences between eastern and western Parakanã.

Chapter 4 examines warfare specifically as a mechanism for social reproduction. In this symbolic economy, where the category of *-paje* simultaneously connotes "friend", "enemy", "guardian" and "executioner", Fausto describes how friendship "is as intimate and ambiguous as the relationship between the killer and his victim" (153). In contrast to the processes of dehumanization often described in political violence elsewhere in the world, Parakanã approach war as a productive and communicative act in which names and songs are appropriated from victims, who are themselves highly subjectivized. Following Lévi-Strauss ([1942] 1976) in viewing war as a positive relation that, like exchange, constitutes supralocal social networks, Fausto approaches Parakanã warfare and shamanism as a kind of "creative predation" that involves "an opening up to the exterior" (172). For Fausto, productive consumption implies that "the subjectification of the enemy is a necessary condition for capturing identities from the outside that enable the constitution of persons on the

inside” (178). In this way it is the qualities and symbolic effects of individual victims, rather than their quantity, that is the salient feature of warfare in this part of the world.

Chapter 5 develops Fausto’s concept of “familiarizing predation” as a core principle or capacity underlying shamanism and warfare. A master/pet relation emerges in both of these contexts, in which the conversion of a predatory relationship into one of control or protection constitutes “a single generalized economy for producing persons” that also emerges in Parakanã understandings of kinship, hunting, dreaming and ritual (229). Alterity is pervasive in this symbolic economy, where creativity itself is understood not as an internal mental activity, but a product of interacting with others and appropriating their agency. Propelled by the songs and names captured from enemies, ritual renders this killer/victim, master/pet symbolism visible. This becomes clear in chapter 6, where Fausto describes how ritual allows a killing to achieve its “maximum productivity”, multiplying and turning isolated acts into a “generalized mode of social reproduction” (260). Chapter 7 turns to a structural analysis of “the myth of the origin of pain and the whites” as a lens for understanding the place of white people in this symbolic economy. Following Viveiros de Castro’s (2011) historical analysis of 16<sup>th</sup> century Tupinamba cannibalism and Christian conversion and Boyer’s (1994) writing on the conditionality of truth values, Fausto describes how Parakanã came to believe (and subsequently disbelieve) that white people could revive the dead. For Fausto, myths and their transformations reveal the underlying principle that the reproduction of society depends on constant interaction with its exterior.

Fausto’s fascinating ethnography, and his innovative exploration of “familiarizing predation” among the Parakanã, make this book an important contribution to our understanding of warfare and shamanism in Amazonia. However, his successful attempt to link historical processes, present practices and regional comparisons of Tupi and Ge groups to an underlying logic of predation contributes much more to discussions in regional ethnology than it does illuminate the current situation of Parakanã people as white “others” become an increasingly important part of their lived world. Although he makes a convincing case for his approach to past events and recent encounters, the reader is left wondering whether such a logic of predation can account for everything in the contemporary context. It is only in the final two pages that he addresses how, in a world of money, schools and Amazonian frontier towns, the current situation of the Parakanã should not be understood as “a simple permutation of the figures of alterity, a mere adaptation of the cosmology to new figures” (308). Although the focus on predation in this work is useful in linking diverse domains of social life across Amazonian societies, one wonders whether such a symbolic economy, which is surely itself a product of historical transformations, should be constant measure for assessing continuity and social transformation in these new contexts. And if ontological predation is as central to the Parakanã as the author claims, how might this help us better understand contemporary politics in this part of the world?

It is precisely this question of how indigenous cosmologies relate to wider political and inter-cultural processes that a number of recent ethnographies of Amazonia have set out to address (see Kelly 2011, Cepek 2013, High 2015). Kelly’s ethnography of state healthcare in Yanomami communities in the Upper Orinoco of Venezuela, presents an excellent example of how Amazonian cosmological principles relate social and political transformations in the contemporary world. The book explores the contrasting meanings of being Yanomami and becoming *nape* (non-Yanomami whites) for Yanomami people and the urban criollo/white doctors



and medical students who provide health services in their communities. Drawing on Viveiros de Castro's work on Amerindian perspectivism and the concept of "controlled equivocation" (2004), and Wagner's (1978) concept of obviation, Kelly describes the "working misunderstandings" in which Yanomami and criollo expectations about the implementation of healthcare reveal radically different worlds. The ontological basis of these misunderstandings, which often involves mistaken assumptions about shared understandings (homonymy), is at the very heart of conflicts and challenges in the healthcare system.

Kelly's study is innovative in a number of ways. Instead of just describing Yanomami people and how they relate to state healthcare, the book gives considerable attention to the views, experiences and backgrounds of doctors who work in the Upper Orinoco. This allows us to better understand the interface of Yanomami and doctors, and particularly how the Western assumption that culture must be made through efforts to collectivize social conventions is part of the working misunderstanding that plays out in the health service. Kelly asserts that, in contrast to whites, Yanomami see culture as innate rather than made, and as a result attempt to differentiate and continuously become something else. Since "culture" in this perspective is universal (Viveiros de Castro 1998), there is no concern with somehow "losing" it in the way Westerners often envision acculturation. As a result, Yanomami and doctors see themselves involved in very different "civilizing" projects, with doctors, missionaries and other *nape* attempting to create (or preserve) society, while Yanomami focus their efforts on becoming *nape*. As elsewhere in Amazonia, what needs to be made is not "culture" or "society", but kinship.

These contrasting ontologies help to explain why doctors and Yanomami medical patients contest each other's actions in the ways they do. Doctors complain about the unpredictability or "inconstancy" of their patients, who are persistent in their requests for supplies and often refuse to allow doctors the control they seek in biomedical encounters. For the Yanomami, doctors are morally deficient as a result of their non-co-residence, their inability to communicate, a lack of genuine concern for Yanomami, and their rejection of the exchange of goods expected of *nape*. One of the central arguments in the book is that understanding the interface of doctors and patients requires looking beyond the medical to consider how these relations are part of a "Yanomami trajectory of transformation" (9). The position of doctors as "potential affines" - a category of unrealized affinity (Viveiros de Castro 2001) - is part of what Kelly calls a "*nape* transformational axis" consistent with "Yanomami cycles of village creation and fission" (111). Alongside the expectation that doctors provide objects, their generic position as potential (rather than actual) affines or kin makes them relatively powerless in their interactions with Yanomami. Just as doctors attempt to collectivize and standardize medical procedures in their clinics, Yanomami youth seek to distinguish themselves by resisting their demands and pushing the boundaries of convention as far as possible. The consequence is a seemingly constant struggle to control doctors and stretch them as much as possible in favor of personal and community agendas.

While this dynamic presents daunting challenges for state healthcare in Yanomami communities, in chapter 8 Kelly draws on his analysis to propose improvements to the design and implementation of public health policy. In an area where 70% of Yanomami live beyond the reach of the health system and infant mortality rates are ten times higher than the national average, indigenist identity politics as well as medical and anthropological discourses appear to favor a "conceptual equivalence" between indigenous, medical and cultural issues (184-185).

Approaching Yanomami health as a “cultural” problem and indigenous shamans as analogous to biomedical doctors, the state ends up offering “traditional medicine” to indigenous people in desperate need of biomedical services. The problem this illustrates, according to Kelly, is the constant mistranslation or “uncontrolled equivocation” of indigenous concepts, which are subverted to Western understandings of multiculturalism that mistakenly assume a shared system of reference. More specifically, the problem both for anthropology and for state healthcare providers is the tendency to mistake these equivocations for actual understandings. Kelly proposes that an Amerindian proclivity for controlled equivocation, the recognition of alternate meanings based on different systems of reference, presents a fruitful path toward understanding and improving indigenous health: He argues that “if the state approaches indigenous health without the burden of “culture” and “identity,” it will be better prepared to take Indians seriously and negotiate the most appropriate means for attending to their situation” (199). This argument is particularly relevant in the context of recent critiques of Viveiros de Castro’s model of perspectivism, especially Ramos’s contention that “perspectivism is indifferent to political considerations regarding the predicament of indigenous peoples in adverse interethnic contexts...” (2013: 483). While Kelly’s book does not resolve ongoing debates about the ethical, conceptual, and empirical value of perspectivism as model (see Turner 2009, Bessire and Bond 2014), his work makes clear that taking indigenous cosmology seriously could open up new possibilities for improving inter-ethnic relations in Amazonia.

Kelly’s approach does not propose any easy solution to the problems Yanomami people currently face, but challenges conventional ways of thinking about relations between Amazonian people and the wider societies in which they live. His book demonstrates the potential benefits of an applied anthropology, as long as we resist collapsing or assimilating indigenous concepts and issues to our own notions of culture. The author’s recent work on the Yanomami Health Plan described in chapter nine illustrates this potential and is relevant to similar contexts elsewhere in Amazonia. A range of non-academics stand to benefit from such an approach to their work. And yet, the sophisticated analytical framework Kelly employs in the book make it unlikely to reach non-academic readers. While he clearly relates Yanomami healthcare to wider social and political changes in Venezuela, his analysis of the “*nape* transformational context” is equally clear in prioritizing structural continuities in line with previous studies of alterity in Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 1992, Fausto 2012). In emphasizing “the need to understand interethnic relations as transformative substitutions rather than solely a matter of cultural erosion” (109), the author leaves unexplored the question of what radical social change might look like beyond the innovations that occur within the structure. For example, do Western/Venezuelan ideas about transformation and “culture” effect how Yanomami understand this transformational context?

Although his description of a specifically Yanomami way of being and becoming is convincing, like much other work in Amazonia it risks drawing too sharp a division between “indigenous” and “Western” ontologies (Ramos 2013). One wonders whether Western ideas of culture and particularly multiculturalism are as singular as Kelly and other anthropologists seem to suggest. One of the consequences of writing a detailed and conceptually ambitious ethnography specifically on state healthcare is that the book leaves out much in terms of everyday life in Yanomami communities. While these details can be found in the multitude of monographs written on various Yanomami groups, perhaps a more fine-grained analysis of everyday interactions would challenge or complicate the structural analysis presented

so convincingly throughout the book. This is surely one of the most important contemporary ethnographies of Amazonia, and should also make major contributions to the field of medical anthropology.

Stang's ethnography of the Mehinaku Indians of the Brazilian Amazon, *A Walk to the River in Amazonia* (2009), provides another innovative analysis of perspectivism, alongside a decidedly phenomenological approach to understanding the ways in which indigenous Amazonian people experience everyday reality. She seeks to describe "Mehinaku consciousness" by focusing not on specific practices or events that anthropologists conventionally assume to be important, but instead on the 'fragments' and 'flow' of personal experience one finds in between. This allows her to approach Amazonian perspectivism and questions of transformation through the lens of emotions and relations between Mehinaku people in everyday life.

After a short introduction to the Mehinaku community and the uses of phenomenology within and outside anthropology, the book opens with a description of how Stang herself experienced a walk to the river with her Mehinaku friend, Wanakuwalu. The premise of the book is that the ethnographic chapters that follow this account will allow readers to understand the walk she took, which is described again at the end of the book, this time from the perspective of Wanakuwalu. This final description of the walk to the river from a Mehinaku perspective is fiction insofar as it is hypothetical, yet Stang attempts to make this interpretation familiar to readers through the ethnography that precedes it.

The chapters that intercede these two versions of the walk explore metaphysical questions about how Mehinaku people experience the 'substantiality' of things, such as the soul, animal spirits, mythical beings and even ideas themselves. Among the 'things' that have concrete substance in this cosmology is the 'flow of desire' and the tensions this desire often brings in the rhythm of everyday social life as people and substances move between different worlds. The book's detailed interpretation of indigenous cosmology is achieved through descriptions of Mehinaku practices and particularly myth, which, far from simply being esoteric tales about the origins of society, appear to permeate the intimate and public lives of the Mehinaku.

The book's main contribution is in combining two key strands of Amazonian anthropology, one focused on indigenous experiences of conviviality in everyday social life (Overing and Passes 2000), and the other on how personhood and relations with various 'others' are conceived in Amazonian cosmologies (Viveiros de Castro 1996). The book provides an excellent example of how these two strands of research should not be understood to be at odds, but instead part of the same process. The ways in which Stang describes how myths constitute a cultural frame through which Mehinaku experience is understood and described is an excellent example of Viveiros de Castro's (1992) notion of sociocosmology: that is, in contrast to many western formulations of society, in Amazonian perspective sociality and cosmology become one and the same. Nowhere is this clearer than in Stang's discussion of desire and the body, where she describes how changes in emotional consciousness can cause a person to enter into different bodily states and even non-human worlds. In this context, the body is seen as 'a symptom or expression of the person's vision of the world' (pg 61). Strong emotional states thus have serious ramifications for people who, for example, may become vulnerable to spiritual attack when they experience excessive desire. In response to Viveiros de Castro's formulation of perspectivism, which suggests that in Amazonian cosmology all souls and intentionalities share a human quality and are differentiated through the body, Stang reveals a 'spiritual diversity' in which the state of the spirit or soul affects the state of the body.

The book's integration of cosmology with everyday Mehinaku practice, along with its concise and evocative writing style, makes for an important contribution to Amazonian anthropology. The author's claim that a phenomenological approach allows the book to overcome the tendency to prioritize seemingly exotic practices in favor of the everyday appears somewhat overstated given the number of anthropologists inspired by Overing's (2000) work on everyday life and 'the aesthetics of conviviality' in Amazonia - several of which are discussed in the book. The introduction, which discusses the writings of various phenomenologists who have inspired the author, could have benefited from further discussion of approaches in Amazonian anthropology that have drawn on similar perspectives. However, Stang's book is a good example of how Amazonian research today is beginning to bridge the previous gap between studies of seemingly abstract cosmology and fine-grained ethnography of everyday practice.

## **AMAZONIAN HISTORIES OF TRANSFORMATION**

Rostain's detailed archaeological study, *Islands in the Forest: Landscape Management in Pre-Colombian Amazonia* (2013), explores the impressive scale and variety of agriculture and human modifications of the land before European colonialism in the Amazon. The breadth of the author's analysis, the technical detail of his own research, and his synthesis of related works all lend powerful support to the argument that Pre-Colombian Amazonian peoples had more ambitious, complex, specialized and stratified lives than have conventionally been recognized. By now the critique of Betty Meggers and others' depiction of the Amazon as a kind of "green hell", where the land itself limits social and technical complexity, are well rehearsed in Amazonianist scholarship. However, until recently there was little if any synthesis of concrete archaeological data demonstrating the remarkable monumental architecture built by indigenous people in Amazonia – the kinds of structures associated more with Andean and Mesoamerican civilizations. By describing the extensive building of raised agricultural fields and other large-scale earthworks to support populations that were significantly larger and more interconnected than indigenous societies today, Rostain asks us to reconsider the ways that both popular stereotypes and anthropologists have conceptualized nature and culture in Amazonia.

The author begins by noting that the slash and burn agriculture practiced by many small-scale Amazonian societies today bears little resemblance to the diverse and technologically complex agricultural methods of building raised fields and drainage systems that characterized much of pre-Columbian Amazonia. Prior to the demographic collapse wrought by the colonial period, indigenous peoples created large-scale agricultural earthworks that coincided with communal labor, specialization and centralized power. Although the relative scarcity of stone in Amazonia has left little in the way of historical artifacts found elsewhere in indigenous America, Rostain describes how "the indigenous peoples of the tropical forest nevertheless inscribed their annals in the earth" (60). It is this often ignored history that Rostain hopes to reclaim from centuries of prejudice about Amazonia. By examining the archaeology of raised fields, mounds, drainage ditches, paths and other anthropogenic earthworks in several parts of Amazonia, Rostain describes how many contemporary landscapes would not exist if not for past human activity. One of the strengths of this book is in breaking down artificial boundaries of what we imagine Amazonia to be by showing the linked strategies indigenous people employed along major rivers, on the savannas

of Guyana and Bolivia, coastal areas, and the piedmont of the Andes. What becomes clear in this picture is that the history of these places was far more interconnected, dynamic and specialized in trade than it was after the homogenizing effects of colonialism. In contrast to what has often been assumed, the Amazon is revealed as the birthplace of important human developments, including early ceramic traditions and advanced forms of agriculture dating back several thousand years.

Rostain describes how raised fields reveal not only complex strategies to deal with seasonal flooding in multiple environments, but also a spatial organization that in certain sites suggests social hierarchy. By drawing on archaeology, historical documents, and the memories and myths of contemporary Amazonian peoples, Rostain problematizes the common view of Amazonia as a place of relatively isolated small-scale family groups with simple agricultural technologies. He demonstrates that raised fields of manioc, maize, yams and other crops supported much larger populations than those living in these areas today. Rostain also considers the preservation and disappearance of raised fields, as well as the changing face of agriculture in Amazonia after several waves of migration up to the present day. While one of the challenges of pre-Columbian archaeology is to distinguish indigenous structures from natural landforms and the fields farmed more recently by colonists, it is clear in Rostain's work that knowledge of agricultural techniques in Amazonia was far greater in pre-Columbian times than it is today. Although many raised fields have disappeared as a result of population decline, road building and environmental changes, it is striking to read that some ancient earthworks remain more than a millennium after their construction because they are more stable structures than those built subsequently by colonists.

Part of the importance of this work is in providing ample evidence to discard age-old prejudices about the assumed limits of indigenous Amazonian social and technological complexity. This contribution should not be underestimated. While Rostain makes clear how much of this complexity was lost in wake of colonialism, he also questions the tendency to focus more on the effects of western communities than the impacts indigenous Amazonian peoples have had on the land. This is an area where the new archaeology of Amazonia has certain parallels with critical anthropological approaches to Amazonian history. As Gow (2001) argues, the explosion of important historical research in Amazonia has to some degree defined indigenous histories in terms of the history of white people and colonialism, rather than the ways in which Amazonian people themselves make and understand their own histories. Like the work of Heckenberger (2005), Rostain is able to relate his archaeological findings about the pre-Columbian world to current indigenous practices and ideas. In some ways this reverses the tendency to search for colonial transformations in the myths and histories of indigenous peoples. However, Rostain's conclusion that "modern indigenous communities share little with their pre-Columbian ancestors" (232) risks slipping back into the idea that the indigenous peoples today should be defined almost completely as a product of colonial history. The fact that most Pre-Columbian earthworks were abandoned as the majority of the indigenous population was decimated during the colonial period lends some support to Rostain's statement. However, his book also makes a convincing case for the diversity of pre-Columbian lifeways and their change over time. It therefore seems somewhat generalizing to suggest that relatively small-scale Amazonian groups are not part of a much longer historical trajectory in Amazonia, even if they lack the monumental architecture and scale of agriculture that existed in some areas. Surely, Europe and other parts of the world have transformed in significant ways over the

past millennium, but it would seem arbitrary to suggest that Europeans have little in common with their ancestors.

While Rostain's book is a landmark study in Amazonian history, Fausto and Heckenberger's volume, *Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological Perspectives* (2007), brings together an international group of scholars to explore new ways of thinking about time and change in Amazonia. In moving beyond ethnohistorical approaches to social transformation, the editors break new ground in what they identify as the "temporal revolution" in Amazonianist anthropology. While in the past few decades a multidisciplinary group of historians and archaeologists, including Rostain, have recognized important discontinuities between pre-Columbian and contemporary Amazonian societies that resulted from the "contact" situation, the ethnographers in this volume focus on how indigenous peoples themselves conceptualize time and change. In marking the culmination of a growing body of work exploring alternatives to what we think of as "history" in Amazonia, it is one of the most important collections published on Amazonia in recent decades. In addition to arguing for ethnographic approaches to history, the book's focus on questions of time and social memory creates a potential platform for relating research in Amazonia to wider theoretical debates in anthropology.

One of the key arguments here is that we should distinguish between what the editors call the "History of the Indians" and "Indigenous History". The "New Amazonian History" that has come to light as a result of recent ethnohistorical research is representative of the former insofar as this work tends to reconstruct the past in terms of Western understandings of history and agency, often in reference to discontinuity and colonial transformations. In contrast, as part of what the editors call the "New Amazonian Ethnography", indigenous histories reveal how Amerindian ontologies present radical alternatives to Western regimes of historical action. While historical agency is most often understood as an exclusively *human* capacity, in the animist and perspectival ontologies of Amazonia transformative action is not limited to the agency of humans. Fausto and Heckenberger describe indigenous history as "the outcome of sociocosmic interactions between different types of persons, human and non-human, expressed in a set of always multiple narratives...(14). In shamanism, for example, human agency by itself is not recognized as a precondition for social transformation.

In challenging the idea that "indigenous history becomes history only when *we* enter the equation" (17) and then asking whether or not indigenous people are aware of it, the editors instead ask what Amazonian people themselves constitute as history. The point, then, is not to question whether or not they "have history", but to explore the dialectic between transformation and structural continuities in indigenous forms of social memory. Perhaps the clearest example of this in the volume is Anne-Christine Taylor's chapter on contrasting regimes of historicity in the Upper Amazon. She describes how groups defined in colonial encounters since the 18<sup>th</sup> century as either "wild" or "tame" are today not simply fixed social groups with objective "cultural" differences (as imagined by outsiders), but positions in an "integrated network of dependencies" (137). Taylor argues that these groups or positions can in part be understood as mutually interdependent modes of construing the past. While the collective memory of some groups appears to obliterate any sign of history outside of the adversarial relations by which they define themselves, other groups adopt a "linear, periodized historical narrative structure" which contrasts the past to a present time of "civilization" (155). She notes that moving between these positions is as much

about adopting a new type of historical discourse as it is adopting new cultural practices and languages.

Here we see how divergent modes of social memory are part of the very constitution and transformation of indigenous groups in the region. Whether in experiencing “history” as bodily illness (Taylor 2007), becoming something else by modifying or decorating one’s body, or understanding kin groups as corporal aggregates constituted physically over time (Vilaça 2007: 182), in many cases Amazonian people experience transformation as a bodily state, which in turn determines one’s perspective. And yet, as anywhere else in the world, we find multiple and sometimes contrasting regimes of historicity in the same society (Heckenberger 2007, High 2014). Explorations of time and memory have the potential to propel the “New Ethnography” or “anthropological history” of Amazonia beyond seemingly insular debates about the quality or quantity of history to be found in a particular society. The question then, is not whether a particular Amazonian group is representative of Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) formulation of “hot” or “cold” societies based on differing ways of being in history, but to engage with multiple and often contradictory ways in which people engage with the past and contemplate potential futures.

## **IMAGINING RADICAL CHANGE IN AMAZONIA**

Fausto and Heckenberger acknowledge that, in contrast to the New Amazonian History, New Amazonian Ethnography tends to emphasize “the (onto)logical continuity of the indigenous lived world” (15) and a radical alterity between “us” and “them”. This approach has already produced some of the most original ethnographic work in Amazonia, as well as concepts that have contributed to wider anthropological debates beyond regional studies. While the focus on structural continuity does not preclude the diachronic perspectives richly presented in Fausto and Heckenberger’s volume, it does raise the question of how this “temporal revolution” might deal with the possibility of radical change in Amazonia. In challenging antiquated notions of acculturation, much Amazonianist work, whether on kinship, myth, Christianity or development, tends to show how transformation reveals ever more indigenous innovations. This work has gone a long way in recognizing the agency and creativity of Amazonian people in response to colonial history and ongoing threats to their lands and way of life. However, we should be careful not to allow our arguments for continuity, innovation and indigenous agency in Amazonian formulations of alterity to become a measure of their authenticity or obscure the fact that many of them often have relatively little control over their relations of difference with powerful outsiders. As Course observes, “despite the vibrancy of indigenous resistance in many parts of the Americas, the history of the continent has in many ways been a story of failures to preserve this difference, of the loss of control of the symbolic economy of alterity” (2013: 791). While I do not suggest a return to the concept of acculturation, nor should we assume that indigenous experiences of radical change and power relations in contemporary Amazonia can or should be understood primarily in terms of indigenous agency or a an indigenous cosmology of reversible other-becoming.

In his individual chapter in the *Time and Memory* volume, Fausto (2007) follows Ricoeur (2004) in raising the question of what it actually means to remain the same through time. He notes that “from a structural point of view, duration over space and time implies transformation, and the problem becomes one of recognizing the

limit beyond which a structure ceases to be itself” (84). This is an important yet seldom explored issue in Amazonia, which has long since been fertile ground for what Robbins (2007) calls “continuity thinking” in anthropology. He argues that a strong tendency to emphasize the enduring qualities of culture has prevented anthropologists theorizing radical change, the ruptures many of the people we study experience in their own lives. He describes anthropology as generally being a “science of continuity” in which “the most satisfying anthropological arguments are those that find some enduring cultural structure that persists underneath all the surface changes and, in the last analysis, serves to guide them in the sense they make – a sense that, in spite of whatever new elements might be part of it, should still be one displaying some continuities with those of the past” (2007:10).

While some might take issue with this as a somewhat selective reading of anthropology, recent ethnographies of Amazonia are a striking example of Robbins’ notion of continuity thinking. For example, in a critique of perspectivism and “the crisis of late structuralism” in Amazonianist scholarship, Turner observes a (structuralist) view of structure as “the group of transformations constrained by invariant principles of conservation” (2009: 38). The problem with this tendency, as Robbins observes, is not so much in describing cultural continuities, but that in doing this we may not take our informants’ claims to discontinuity seriously enough. I would suggest that this continuity thinking is particularly problematic in a place like Amazonia, which continues to undergo major social and economic transformations. And yet I suspect that past and present external pressures on Amazonian people are also a major reason why we are often compelled to make arguments for continuity and indigenous agency.

How then might we account for radical changes not just through the historical lens of colonial and state forces transforming indigenous societies, but instead in terms of the ruptures some Amazonian people today embrace as visions of the past, present or future? The predominant approach to change in Amazonia can be seen in Viveiros de Castro’s proposal that the notion of “becoming” is at the core of Amazonian forms of alterity and transformation (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 2011). In contrast to Western ideas of “identity” and “society” as enduring and relatively impermeable categories, the so-called “inconstancy” that Europeans have often ascribed to Amerindian peoples is a result of their apparent “openness to the other”. This, then, allows us to see conversion to Christianity, becoming white people, and various other forms of social transformation, as examples or extensions of a unified indigenous logic of other-becoming. Put simply, becoming someone or something else can only ever be an expression of indigenous cosmology and agency. The problem with this approach, despite its importance in helping us understand certain processes, is that it might divert our attention away from the ways in which some Amazonian people today experience radical change in ways that have little to do with this cosmological framework or even the agency of indigenous people. Rather than simply searching for traces of this agency, we should also attempt to understand how some indigenous peoples have their own sense of failure and decline in social transformations over which they have relatively little control (Course 2013: 791).

With the increasing importance of ethnopolitics in South America, it is tempting to imagine that indigenous people only experience the world as “Shuar”, “Waorani” or “Amazonian” people. The ways in which many of these groups today embrace discourses of distinct and autonomous indigenous “nationalities” and “cultures”, however, in many ways coincides with their deeper engagement with non-indigenous peoples, ideas and institutions. In providing fascinating descriptions of



how indigenous peoples experience new inter-cultural contexts in terms of their own sociocosmological frameworks, there is an unspoken reluctance to view them as Ecuadorians, Brazilians or Latin Americans. One of the consequences of this situation is the relative isolation of research in Amazonia from the wider anthropological literature on Latin America (High 2010). As a result, there is a tendency to ignore the possibility that many Amazonian people today are as much enmeshed in national education programmes, wage labor, and enduring relationships with mestizos in urban areas as they are the forms of sociality traditionally described in Amazonianist scholarship. Alongside descriptions of radical alterity in the form of ontologies that fly in the face of conventional Western thinking, we should also recognize how non-indigenous people and ideas have become integral aspects of the lived worlds of Amazonian people. This involves considering change not just in terms of the extension of an enduring indigenous cosmology, but also taking seriously the ways in which Amazonian people themselves may embrace a sense of profound rupture with the past.

One possible way of reformulating questions of alterity and change in Amazonia is to overcome the relatively atomized way that ethnographies tend to describe Amazonian peoples (Heckenberger 2005). It is striking that, despite compelling arguments that the transformational and open-ended character of Amazonian sociocosmologies challenges conventional Western understandings of society as a stable or bounded unit (Viveiros de Castro 1992), regional ethnographies still present a somewhat bounded view of Amazonian societies. The work I have discussed in this article challenges this tendency in a number of ways. Anthropologists are beginning to take more seriously the ideologies and practices of non-indigenous people who have lived and worked alongside indigenous Amazonian peoples, such as medical doctors (Kelly 2011) and missionaries (High 2009b, Cova 2015), recognizing them as part of the lived worlds of indigenous people. Our understanding of transformation will also benefit from closer attention to a wider scale of relations between different indigenous groups, the regional “ensembles” (Lévi-Strauss 1990) or “larger entities” that we still know relatively little about in Amazonia (Gow 2014). As Gow argues, if we “abandon the conceit that linguistic and cultural thresholds are merely the boundary conditions of discrete objects,” we can then consider the social properties of these larger entities. And yet, given the quantity and quality of existing Amazonian ethnography, it would seem that new approaches to social transformation in this part of the world would also benefit from more serious attention to indigenous understandings of radical change.

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