Endless Stories

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Intimate Frontiers

A Literary Geography of the Amazon

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AND JAVIER URIARTE

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with immense gratitude*

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Endless Stories: Perspectivism and Narrative Form in Native Amazonian Literature

Lúcia Sá

Descriptions of nature are virtually nonexistent in native Amazonian literature.¹ What we call nature is, in native Amazonian stories, inseparable from history: a permanent state of transformation. Native Amazonian creation stories, for instance, never include an idea of a virgin, untouched nature: trees, animals, rocks, mountains, waterfalls, and topographic markers are the result of transformations, often caused by the interaction between characters.² When the European Romantic poet looked at the natural world, he saw the possibility of an encounter with the unchanging and the sublime, and in his poetry he created metaphors

¹ By native Amazonian literature I mean the body of stories and songs written or told orally by the native peoples (the original inhabitants) of the Amazon forest. Although this essay will limit itself to three narratives from two cultural traditions (out of thousands of narratives stemming from an immense variety of cultural traditions), in various moments it will refer to native Amazonian literature more broadly. This is because some (not all) of the formal and thematic characteristics of the stories I will be analyzing are shared, I believe, with the wider body of native Amazonian Literature. One of such characteristics is the lack of nature descriptions.

² For the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, his people's understanding of the forest as populated by myriads of spirits who inhabit each animal, tree, or rock contrasts with western definitions of nature: "Yet hills and mountains are not simply put down on the ground, as I have said. These are spirit dwellings created by Omama. But these are words that the white people do not understand. They think that the forest is dead and empty and that 'nature' is there for no reason and that it is mute" (Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky. The Words of a Yanomami Shaman* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013], p. 390).

and similes that could express his sense of insignificance before Nature. The native Amazonian poet looks at a mountain and invents a story to explain how it came to acquire its peculiar shape, or how it came to be there at all. It is, so to speak, a poetics of narrative: everything that exists has a story, and to exist is to have a story.³ Many of these stories are sacred, and are recited by the shamans and elder members of the community in rituals or special occasions, while others are simply funny, entertaining ways to explain how things or beings came into existence.⁴ Often enough, however, the distinction between sacred, funny, and everyday stories is irrelevant, as the same stories can be all these things at the same time.⁵

Never in Amazonian stories have we a relationship between humans and what we call landscape (rivers, lakes, mountains, topographic markers) without the clear participation, collaboration, and interference of animals.⁶ Differently from the Judeo-Christian genesis, animals in native Amazonian creation stories were not made to be ruled by man: they are an active part of the process of transformation of the world.⁷ Without them, humans

³ As the Pueblo Acoma poet Simon Ortiz says with regard to human generations: "I write because Indians always tell a story. The only way to continue is to tell a story and that's what Coyote says. The only way to continue is to tell a story and there is no other way. Your children will not survive unless you tell something about them—how they were born, how they came to this certain place, how they continued" (Simon Ortiz, *Woven Stone* [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992], p. 153).

⁴ An example of the latter category are the conflicting Pemon stories describing how fire came to exist (Theodor Koch-Grünberg, "Mitos e lendas dos índios taulipangue e arekuná", in Sérgio Medeiros, ed., *Makunaíma e Jurupari. Cosmogonias Ameríndias* [São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002], pp. 31–228 [at pp. 60, 100]). See also Walter Roth's account of competitions to create the best explanation for characteristics of animals and plants (Walter Roth, *An Introductory Study of the Arts, Crafts, and Customs of the Guiana Indians*, 38th report of the Bureau of American Ethnology [Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1924], p. 483).

⁵ For a discussion of humor in native Amazonian ritual and sociality, see Joanna Overing, "The Efficacy of Laughter: the Ludic Side of Magic within Amazonian Sociality", in Joanna Overing and Alan Passes, eds., *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 64–81.

⁶ The idea of landscape itself is alien to native Amazonian stories. In its most common use, landscape presupposes a human observer of aesthetically charged natural surroundings from which he/she is somewhat physically detached. Native Amazonian stories, by contrast, tend to focus on transformative interactions between humans, animals, plants, and other natural phenomena. For a good discussion on whether 'landscape' is an exclusively western concept see W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

⁷ For comparisons between native creation stories and the Bible, see Carlos Fausto,

would not know what they know, and would not be what they are. A recent theoretical elaboration on the relationship between humans and animals in Amazonia is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's discussions on what he has named, with the help of Nietzsche and Deleuze, "perspectivism". Based on his own ethnographic fieldwork and that of other anthropologists, particularly Tania Stolze Lima, Viveiros de Castro proposes that Amerindian Amazonian ontology is fundamentally distinct from our own. While for western science humans and animals share 'animality' as their general denominator (in other words, we are all animals), in Amazonian Amerindian thought the common denominator that links humans and animals is 'peopleness' [*gentitude*]. That is, according to Amazonian thought as interpreted by Viveiros de Castro, animals and humans are all people:

To say that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons; and to personify them is to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view.⁸

Perspectivism, however, as he explains, is not a form of relativism; it is, rather, a 'multinaturalism':

"Too Many Owners: Mastery and Ownership in Amazonia", in Marc Brightman et al., eds., *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra. Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), pp. 29–48: "In the beginning, the world was not given by a divinity to all humans in common for them to appropriate it" (at p. 34). See also Gordon Brotherston, *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through their Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 301.

⁸ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere. Four Lectures Given in the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, February–March 1998* (Manchester: HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory, 2012), p. 99. David Kopenawa's recent description of the relationship between humans and animals confirms, in striking ways, Viveiros de Castro's propositions: "The spider monkeys that we call *paxo* are humans like us Though we are humans, they give us the same name they give themselves. This is why I think our inner part is identical to that of game and that we only attribute to ourselves the name of human beings by pretending to be so. Animals consider us their fellow creatures who live in houses while they are people of the forest" (Kopenawa and Albert, *The Falling Sky*, p. 387).

One single "culture", multiple "natures"—one epistemology, multiple ontologies. Perspectivism implies multinaturalism, for a perspective is not a representation.

A perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body. The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and non-humans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the differences between viewpoints (and a viewpoint is nothing if not a difference) lies not in the soul. Since the soul is formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere—the difference is given in the specificity of bodies.⁹

Thus, as a philosophical system located in the body, native Amazonian philosophy is based on difference rather than identity: "identity is a particular case of difference. There is no relation without differentiation. In socio-pragmatic terms, this means that partners in any relationship relate to each other because they are different from each other and not in spite of being different from each other".¹⁰

Viveiros de Castro's concepts have been applied to various kinds of cultural and social analysis, and have played an important part in attempts to imagine alternatives to late-capitalism's consumerism, social injustice, and overuse of planetary resources, as well as to socialism's record of authoritarianism and/or ecological destruction.¹¹ What I wish to do in this essay, however, is something much more modest: to bring Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism back to the kind of story that inspired it, hoping that it may help us understand the form of native Amazonian narrative. Narrative form—in fact narrative itself—is not at the center of Viveiros de Castro's formulations on perspectivism, which understandably tend to focus on practices and belief systems. Thus, some enthusiasts, as well as critics, of Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism may not even be aware that the crucial 'perspectivist epiphany', namely the realization that what I see as x, a particular animal sees as y, is a formulaic device present in dozens of

⁹ Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism*, p. 111.

¹⁰ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem e outros ensaios de Antropologia* (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2002), p. 422.

¹¹ See, for example, Idelber Avelar, "Amerindian Perspectivism and Non-Human Rights", in *Alter/Nativas*, 1 (2013), pp. 1–21, <<http://www.alternativas.osu.edu/assets/files/essays%201/idelberavelar.pdf>> (October 20, 2015); and Ghassan Hage, "Dwelling in the Reality of Utopian Thought", *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, xxiii, no. 1 (2011), <<http://iaste.berkeley.edu/iaste/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/23.1-Fall-11-Hage.pdf>> (November 20, 2015).

native stories from Amazonia and lowland South America more generally, stories that describe the marriage between a human (or proto-human) character and a member of another species. The hypothesis that moves my analysis is simple: if Amazonian Amerindian thought is based on another ontology—an ontology that promotes the idea that all animals are (or have been) potentially human, and which privileges difference rather than identity—wouldn't the Amazonian way of telling stories (their narrative form) be necessarily different as well?

Before proceeding onto the narratives themselves, I will explain what I mean by 'narrative form'. Narrative, for the purpose of this essay, is synonymous with 'story', or, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, an "account of a series of events".¹² In anthropological terminology, the stories I will be analyzing here are often called 'myths', but I prefer the terms 'narrative' or 'story' in order not to differentiate between them and our own western stories or narratives, and because in everyday language 'myth' has acquired the unfortunate connotation of something that is not true.¹³ Although native Amazonian stories tend to be told orally, as part of rituals and in everyday life, many if not most groups have also been recording their stories in written form, with or without the mediation of non-natives (anthropologists, religious people, travelers). It is in this form that I have read these stories. Of course, the telling of a story depends on several performative elements that are, for the most part, difficult to account for in written form. However, the story itself—that is, the sequence of events—can still be analyzed (as happens to the products of other oral traditions that have been recorded in written form) as an artistic creation—a word-creation that strives to please and entertain. Surely, many native Amazonian stories, including the ones I will be analyzing here, have functions other than entertainment or pleasure. This is also true of much of what we call 'literature' in western traditions, and it should not, in principle, detract us from enjoying them, as well, as entertaining and aesthetic creations. For example, the stories I will be analyzing below are shamanic tales: they tell the adventures of protagonists who, for several reasons that will be explained later, can be identified as shamans. We can assume, therefore, that they play an important role in shamanistic rituals and traditions. However, when the German Theodor Koch-Grünberg heard some of these narratives, they were told to him as part of gatherings which had, amongst their purposes, to entertain: "Most

¹² *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1886.

¹³ For further explanations, see Lúcia Sá, *Rain Forest Literatures. Amazonian Texts and Latin American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. xix.

of the time [when it rains] we sit around the fire under the big tent and tell each other stories about Piaimá, the mischievous cannibal who is finally deceived and killed by a brave and astute man".¹⁴ Akuli and Mayuluaípu, the two Pemon men who narrated the stories, were respectively a shaman and a shaman-to-be, and, at the same time, they prided themselves on their skill as storytellers. Akuli is described by Koch-Grünberg as being a very talented actor: "He reproduces a lascivious dialogue between a mother and her daughter. 'Wölidzáng' (the women) play an important part in his humorous representations. The modulation of his voice in these lively narratives is precious. One can follow all the phases, even when one does not entirely understand the topic".¹⁵ Finally, it should have become clear by now that 'form' in this essay does not refer to something somehow detached from 'content'. As I hope to demonstrate, the form of the narratives I will be analyzing is directly connected to a philosophical system that informs the daily lives and stories of native Amazonians.

My discussion will concentrate on three narratives from two collections: "Como os venenos azá e inég, para matar peixe, vieram ao mundo" [How the poisons azá and inég, to kill fish, came into existence] (henceforth "Como os venenos") and "A visita ao céu" [The visit to the sky], (henceforth "The visit"), both from the collection *Vom Roraima zum Orinoco* [From Roraima to Orinoco], first published by Theodor Koch-Grünberg in 1917,¹⁶ and "O mito de Gáipayã e a origem da pupunha" [The Myth of Gáipayã and the origin of the Pupunha palm tree] (henceforth "Gáipayã"), from the book *Antes o mundo não existia*, by Umussin Pärökumu and Törämu Kehíri, first published in 1980.¹⁷ Both collections are fairly lengthy, detailed, and emblematic of the times in which they were published. *From Roraima to Orinoco* is the result of Koch-Grünberg's two-year journey through the north of the Amazon, across the borders of Brazil, Venezuela, and Guyana between 1911 and 1913. The

¹⁴ Theodor Koch-Grünberg, *Del Roraima al Orinoco*, vol. 1, trans. Federica de Ritter (Caracas: Banco Central de Venezuela, 1984), p. 182. The affinity between the tasks of the storyteller/poet and the shaman has been much discussed within Amerindian studies. See, for instance, David Guss, *The Language of the Birds* (San Francisco, CA: North Point, 1985), and Pedro Cesarino, *Oniska. Poética do Xamanismo na Amazônia* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2011).

¹⁵ Koch-Grünberg, *Del Roraima*, p. 223.

¹⁶ The citations in this essay refer to Koch-Grünberg, "Mitos e lendas", which contains both stories. Further references included parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷ "O mito de Gáipayã e a origem da pupunha", in Umussin Pärökumu and Törämu Kehíri, eds., *Antes o mundo não existia. Mitologia dos antigos desana-hehíhipöräs* [1980] (São João Batista do Rio Tiquié: UNIRT/FOIRN, 1995), pp. 169–77. Further references are included parenthetically in the text.

narration and publication of these stories are marked by mediation processes typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The relationship between the narrators and the collector is clearly asymmetrical, as both Mayulyáipu and Akúli were hired to work as guides by Koch-Grünberg, whose journey was sponsored by a European scientific institution (the Baessler Institute, in Berlin) with a view to studying a region of the world that was then seen as 'wild'. The stories were told in Pemon and Portuguese, and published in German. *Antes o mundo não existia*, was, on the other hand, the first book in Brazil to be produced by indigenous authors. It was published because its authors, Umussin Pārōkumu and his son Tōrāmu Kehíri, wanted to amend what they saw as incorrect versions of their cosmology produced by anthropologists (hence its publication in Portuguese). The collection is, for that reason, a watershed in the history of publication of native texts in Brazil. Both collections stem, as well, from different and distant areas of the Amazon—Rio Branco (Pemon) and Alto Rio Negro (Desana)—and from two distinct ethnic groups: the Macro-Carib Pemon and the Tukanoan Desana.

The three stories were chosen for their similarities and for their differences. Despite being published over 60 years apart and belonging to two very distinct Amazonian cultures, all three describe the marriage between a human (or proto-human) and an animal: a tapir in "Como os venenos", a vulture in "The visit" and a river snake in "Gāipayā". In all three cases, and as it is typical of this kind of story, the proto-human characters travel to the house of their brides and, while there, engage in discussions about differences in their worldviews or, to adapt Viveiros de Castro's terminology, their perspectives. And, in spite of the different lengths and great variation in plot development, all three stories have a similar ending. At the same time, there are also important differences between them, connected to the species of the animal brides in the stories and what the perspectivist epiphany consists of in each case.

"The visit" and "Gāipayā" are, to a large extent and in spite of the length of time and physical distance that separate them, versions of the same story. In both cases we have a solitary man, Maitxaúle in the Pemon story, and Gāipayā in the Desana version, who are so lonely that they have to find a woman from another species: a vulture and a river snake (anaconda) respectively. In both stories the marriage works well (even though, in the case of the Desana story, the pair soon discover they are unable to have sex because the snake-woman has piranhas in her vagina—a problem that is quickly resolved) until the husbands are taken to visit their wives' home place. Gāipayā goes to his wife's village under the river and Maitxaúle goes to the sky. Once there, they are confronted with differences in their diets, as we will see below. In each case, the father-in-law becomes interested in

eating their daughter's husbands, and sets up a series of impossible tasks for them to do. If they do not succeed, they will be eaten. In both stories, the son-in-law manages to do the task with the help of different animals. The father-in-law is surprised and not happy. At the end, the son-in-law humiliates the father-in-law by constructing a seat that, in one case, keeps moving, and in the other, is near a wasps' nest, putting him in danger of being stung. Before leaving his in-laws, Maitxaúle steals, against the desire of his wife's family, a seed of corn which he brings back to the earth.¹⁸ Gāipayā steals a seed of *pupunha* (a palm tree widely used for food).

The third story, "Como os venenos" (from Koch-Grünberg's collection) is longer and, in many aspects, very different from the previous two. It opens with a woman who gets impatient because her baby boy never stops crying. She threatens to leave him outside of her home for the fox, who indeed listens to her and takes the baby away. The tapir, however, steals the boy from the fox and takes him to her home. The tapir is a young female, who feels attracted to the boy as he grows, very quickly, into a young man. The two start a relationship and get married, but they have crucial differences in the way they see the world. When the wife is taken back to the man's village, she steals some pineapples from the family's allotment—an unfortunate move, which provokes the young man's brothers to want to kill her. Without protesting, the tapir's husband only asks his brothers to save his child that she bears in her womb. A new conflict then emerges involving the widower of the tapir and the fishing birds. We learn from the widower, as he tells his own mother, that his son's bathing water can kill fish. Both the father and the grandmother try to hide from outsiders the fact that they use the child's bathing water as a fishing tool. But the children find out the secret and tell the rest of the village, who start to take advantage of the special powers of the child. Many types of fishing bird also discover the secret, and ask the boy's father to wash the boy in a swimming hole under a waterfall, where they have recently seen many fish. The child protests but the father ignores him and takes him to be washed under the waterfall. The great river snake-rainbow kills the child, and the father blames the birds, demanding

¹⁸ As Koch-Grünberg points out, there appears to be an internal contradiction in the story, as Maitxaúle is said to have corn in his garden before going up to the sky, but we are later told there was no corn, and that the seed he brought down was the first corn. Without consulting the original recordings it is difficult to know what was actually meant, but I would suspect that the references may point to different seeds, or even different types of maize. Nevertheless, as we will see, the most important statement of the two (in terms of its narrative consequences) is indeed that Maitxaúle was the first to bring corn down to his people.

that they kill the snake. All the birds that benefited from the fishing try, without success, to kill the snake. Finally, two birds that did not take part in the fishing manage to dive deep enough. They kill the snake and divide it up in many pieces, which are distributed amongst all the birds. As the snake was also the rainbow, each section gives different birds (and some mammals) their color and their song. In the epilogue, we see the child's grandmother carrying her grandson's body on her back. As blood drops fall from the decomposing body on the ground, different types of *timbó*, a plant whose poison is used to kill fish, start to grow.

As we can see, all three stories have a similarity in their structure: in a move that is not announced earlier in the plot, they end with the creation/acquisition of a new plant. They are, in that sense, etiological narratives—that is, they tell us how something (plants in all three cases) acquired its present characteristics: how the maize and *pupunha* became domesticated human crops grown on the ground (as opposed to being exclusively known by birds in the sky, or by fish under the water), and how the fish poison *timbó* came to exist.¹⁹ Yet, if these agricultural developments are important cultural conquests—and the fact that all three stories end with them would indicate that they are—how is it that in all three stories this particular important event is not announced at all in the rest of the plot?

In general terms, the structure of the stories does not seem to privilege the resolution of conflicts or differences—or, at least, the resolution of a conflict does not seem to be the reason why the stories are being told. This is more obviously the case in “Como os venenos”, in which what appears to be the initial conflict unfolds into further conflicts that follow each other successively until the narrative ends with the revelation of an important cultural transformation that is achieved more or less tangentially in relation to the previous conflicts. For example, what is the function of the fox in the story, as she abandons the plot right at the beginning, never to return? Neither is there any conflict between the boy's mother and the fox: the mother simply seems to accept the fact that her son is stolen—in fact, she facilitates the kidnapping by leaving the child outside. Structurally,

¹⁹ These are not the only etiological subplots in the three narratives we are analyzing, which describe as well how certain birds and mammals acquired their colors and their voice (“Como os venenos”); how the xexéu birds started to build their nests near wasps (“A visita ao céu”); how the swallow-tailed kite acquired the habit of gliding near the water, and how the Desana started to use baskets to fish (“Gäipayã”). However, all three stories end with etiological subplots that describe the origin of plants—hence my concentration on these particular etiological threads, which also serve as titles to two of the stories.

the narrative is made up of various successive conflicts whose resolution never leads to a satisfactory (happy) ending: the tapir steals the baby and becomes his guardianship, the mother loses the baby, the boy marries the tapir but his relatives do not accept her as his wife and try to kill her, she dies, and so on. The main objective of the narrative does not seem to be the restoration of a supposed order (the reunion between mother and child, for instance, or between the tapir and the young man), as it would be the case in traditional western narratives, such as fairytales or other types of popular happy-ending narrative. But neither was the narrative created in order to question an established order, as often happens in the modern novel and, to a certain degree, in the classic tragedy. At the end of the story we are faced with a transformation—that is, a new order that had not necessarily been anticipated in the beginning of the narrative. In other words, conflict, in this narrative, is not there to be solved.

The same can be said, to a certain extent, about our other two stories. Although “Gäipayã” and “A visita ao céu” are shorter tales with fewer subplots and a seemingly more conventional (in traditional western-narrative terms) endings, neither of them includes a permanent resolution of conflict: in each case the son-in-law teaches the father-in-law a lesson, but there is no apparent change in the in-law's behaviors, or any indication of what the relationship between the husband and wife will be from then on.

Native Amazonian stories do not differ, in this respect, from other Amerindian narratives, where the resolution of a conflict does not seem to be the main point of the story, and the etiological ending appears to be, to western readers or listeners at least, an unrelated appendix.²⁰ This particular formal characteristic of Amerindian stories was keenly noted by nineteenth-century observers, who tended to emphasize the stories' supposed lack of overall coherence. Joseph Jacobs, for example, in an article published in 1894, observed that: “Those who have read these tales will agree with me, I think, that they are formless and void, and bear the same relation to good European fairy tales as the invertebrates do to the vertebrate kingdom in the animal world”.²¹

Even commentators who were more sympathetic towards native literature tended to see it as ‘childish’ and less developed than its European counterparts. Curtis, for instance, who edited an early collection of indigenous poems and short narratives in 1907, celebrated the spontaneous art of a ‘child race’ that

²⁰ They do not differ either in other respects, such as the importance of trickster characters. See Lúcia Sá, *Rain Forest Literatures*, pp. 17–21.

²¹ Joseph Jacobs, “The Problem of Diffusion: Rejoinders”, *Folk-lore*, 5 (1894), 129–49 (at p. 137).

would have to give its place to the 'adult race' of the Anglo-Saxons.²² In the early twentieth century Franz Boas summarized what many saw as the root of the problem:

European folklore creates the impression that the whole stories are units, that their cohesion is strong, and the whole complex very old. The analysis of American material, on the other hand, demonstrates that complex stories are new, that there is little cohesion between the component elements, and that the really old parts of tales are the incidents and a few simple plots.²³

Alan Dundes's *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (1964), the first comprehensive formal study of Amerindian stories, arrives at a conclusion that ultimately does not differ entirely from those of Jacobs or Boas, even though the lack of internal coherence is, in his opinion, not a negative characteristic:

Notice that the motifeme sequences are basically separate units. They are not included within the frame of one sequence as often happens in European tales. They are rather exemplary of an additive group of a number of motifeme sequences. Part of the genius of American Indian folktale narrators is shown by the skillful welding together of separate motifeme sequences.²⁴

Ultimately, Dundes's close adherence to Vladimir Propp's structuralist model does not allow him to detail why he sees this 'welding together' as a sign of genius in Amerindian stories. As for the etiological motif, he quotes T.T. Waterman's "The Explanatory Element in the Folk Tales of North American Indians", observing that "It is interesting that although

²² Arnold Krupat, "Post-Structuralism and Oral Literature", in Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, eds., *Recovering the Word. Essays on Native American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 113–28 (at p. 125).

²³ Franz Boas, "The Development of Folk-Tales and Myths", *The Scientific Monthly*, 3 (1916), 335–43 (at p. 340).

²⁴ For a useful description of Dundes's "motifemes", see Jan Harold Brunvand, *American Folklore. An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 1439: "Alan Dundes adapted Propp's scheme, identifying minimal structural units as 'motifemes' instead of functions. ... Dundes posited that motifemes—like phonemes and morphemes in language—are finite, stable, and recurrent". Alan Dundes, *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1964), p. 178.

Waterman in his extended study of these motifs demonstrated conclusively that explanatory motifs were casual, gratuitous elements, attached at random to folktales, he failed to note their frequency in final position".²⁵ He then goes on to cite several other studies of explanatory motifs in native North American literature that place them, predominantly, at the end of the narratives, concluding that:

Surveying all these regional reports, one may say with some assurance that a general characteristic of [North] American Indian folktales is a final explanatory motif The explanatory motif is a nonstructural optional element in folktales. Its usual function is to mark the end of a tale or a segment of a longer tale. The overall structure of a tale is not affected by its presence or absence.²⁶

But, surely, if the explanatory motif is a "general characteristic of Amerindian narratives", its role must be more important than that of an appended, disposable segment that bears no connection with the rest. Perhaps the key to understanding the importance of the final explanatory motif in Amerindian stories is to take it seriously not only as a formal trait but also as a relevant thematic and philosophical component of those stories.

The three Amazonian narratives analyzed here are linked by the fact that, along with their etiological endings, they all describe marriages between proto-humans and other species, and include one or more examples of perspectivist epiphany: instances in which the protagonist and his or her wife/husband realize that what each sees as one thing, the other sees as another. In "A visita ao céu", this is done in two phases. First, when the human and vulture couple arrives at the wife's house, she tells him that he does not have to drink what she and her family drink: he can find appropriate food in the parrots' house. Later in the story, when the husband meets his father-in-law, we are told why:

He went to his father-in-law's house. Kasána-pódole gave him beer, made from all the rotten animals from the lake (fish, alligators, snakes), which were full of maggots. This, for the king vultures, is manioc beer. Instead of drinking it, he gave it all to his wife, who drank the beer. He drank corn beer from the parakeets, parrots and macaws' house. He also drank beer at the ducks' house, who had a manioc garden. (Koch-Grünberg, "Mitos e Lendas", p. 114)

²⁵ Dundes, *The Morphology*, p. 67.

²⁶ Dundes, *The Morphology*, p. 67 (emphasis in the original).

In “Gāipayā”, the realization also happens in two phases. First, when the human character brought his snake wife to his own house, he noticed that she ate grasshoppers and ants, and “realized that there was a dietary difference between them, but did not pay much attention to it” (“Gāipayā”, p. 170). Later, when he was taken to meet her parents, the situation is spelled out:

Next morning, Pirō asked his daughter what her husband ate. She answered that he ate their people, i.e. fish. A bit sad, the father said he had an old Maku servant whom he would kill in order to feed his son-in-law ... After a few days, he asked his son-in-law if he had any enemies. Gāipayā answered affirmatively and the old man then asked him to bring those people to feed him [the father-in-law] and his wife. (“Gāipayā”, p. 173)

In “Como os venenos”, the human protagonist is taken to the tapir’s house as a baby, and we are told that the tapir covered his body with ticks, because she “saw them as pearl adornments” (Koch-Grünberg, “Mitos e Lendas”, p. 94). Later, when he becomes the tapir’s lover, he and his bride realize that they see the world differently:

The boy found a rattle snake and yelled: “Careful! A snake!”, and ran away. The tapir followed him. They stopped and said: “Let’s see”. They went back to the snake. Then the tapir said: “This is not a snake! It is my stove!” She explained: “They say that snakes run after us to bite us. But this is not a snake. For us, tapirs, the dog is a snake!” She added: “The snake runs after us and where she bites, it hurts. The snake for us is a stove. Humans think it is a snake and suffer from its bite, in the same way we suffer from a dog’s bite”. (Koch-Grünberg, “Mitos e Lendas”, p. 94)

As we can see, the descriptions are similar renditions of the same realization: that what the protagonists see as one thing, their wives and their wives’ families see as another. In each case, the realization has clear comic overtones, and, at the same time, serious consequences. In “Gāipayā”, for example, the perspectivist epiphany is linked to the protagonists’ anxiety about being eaten, as both the protagonist and his wife’s relatives find out that they can become each other’s food: they all eat fish, but what Gāipayā sees as fish, the in-laws and the wife see as themselves (people), and what the in-laws see as fish for Gāipayā is people—that is, himself and the enemies he kills in order to feed his in-laws. This story is a perfect illustration of what Viveiros de Castro calls perspectivism. And, according to him, the

consequence of thinking we are all humans (the common element being *gentitude*/peopleness) is the fear of cannibalism—in other words, the fear that another human, perhaps one in a different form (a jaguar or a snake, for example) can devour our body. This happens because, as Viveiros de Castro argues, Amazonian cultures that tell stories of marriage between species tend to have hunting and fishing historically at the core of their lives.²⁷

Although “A visita ao céu” is, in many respects, another version of the same story, in this case the fear of cannibalism is not expressed as part of the perspectivist revelation—the diet difference, in this story, is related to rotten meat (as opposed to fermented vegetables). Nevertheless, the protagonist is still anxious about being eaten by the vulture father-in-law if he does not complete the required tasks. It is interesting to note, when contrasting the two stories, that while in “Gāipayā” the father-in-law fits the category of an ultimate predator (he is an anaconda), in the case of “A visita ao céu” the father-in-law is not an animal normally associated with direct predation of humans, as vultures feed only on rotten meat.

In “Como os venenos”, in turn, there is no anxiety with regard to cannibalism from the point of view of the human protagonist, as his tapir wife is a vegetarian animal. She, however, has plenty of reasons to be anxious about her partner choice, as her human brothers-in-law not only threaten but actually kill her, and neither the protagonist husband nor his brothers seem very concerned with her destiny after she gets hunted down. In other words, “Como os venenos” is, like “A visita ao céu” and “Gāypaiā”, a story about hunting and fishing but, in this part of the narrative at least, the fear of predation is one-sided. And while in the other two stories the perspectivist epiphany happens in connection to food, in the case of “Como os venenos” it happens in connection to poison: what the human youth sees as a rattlesnake appears as a *fogão* for the tapir—that is, a round and innocuous, even useful, object. The tapir, on the other hand, sees danger (rattlesnake) in what is merely a pet for the human youth (a dog). Earlier in the story, we had learned that what humans normally see as ticks the tapir saw as beads to decorate her human fiancée’s body (much to the horror of his family when he returned to his village). Poison, one of the greatest conquests of Amazonian cultures, is, therefore, the main topic of “Como os venenos” (as the title indicates). The tapir, the largest mammal in South America, is known for eating all kinds of plant, even the most poisonous. After eating, it ingests river mud as an antidote to the plants’ toxicity. So, a child engendered in the womb of an animal that eats poisonous plants becomes, in the story, poisonous, releasing in his bath a

²⁷ Viveiros de Castro, *A inconstância*, p. 392.

powerful toxin that helps humans to fish. The tapir in the story is also, as we have seen, immune to the poison of ticks and rattlesnakes. It should not be so surprising, then, that the story ends with the development of a new poison, *timbó*, which helps humans to fish. The motif of poison is thus spread throughout the narrative, linking the perspectivist revelation to the etiological ending. Furthermore, there is a causal connection between the existence of the *timbó* plant and the death of the mixed-species boy: it is his half-tapir, half-human blood that, when spilled onto the ground, creates the new plant. And the blood is spilled because humans and birds cannot control their greed, overusing, in spite of his protests, the boy's magical capacity to fish. It is only by noticing that poison is a recurrent image in the story that we can more clearly see the links between the perspectivist revelation and the etiological ending.

By looking at how poison, as a topic, informs the narrative structure of "Como os venenos", we are now in a better position to return to the other two narratives in order to examine the connection between their etiological endings and the rest of the stories, particularly the perspectivist revelation. But first, it is important to remember that all three stories, and indeed most if not all stories that include the perspectivist epiphany, are shamanic stories. Although only in "Gäipayã" is the protagonist explicitly described as a shaman, in all three cases there are clear connections between the journey to another world—that is, the world as it is inhabited and experienced by an animal—and the journey that the shaman periodically makes to another world transformed into an animal. Moreover, the purpose of the shamanic journey, as it is described in various native and anthropological accounts, is to establish contracts with predators, spirits, and other beings, in order to maintain the natural power balance that governs the world. Thus, Årjem described the Makuna shamans as being "identified with the predatory spirits", and the shamanic journey as an act of "active negotiation between the shaman and Spirit Owners of the game animals".²⁸ In Makuna's shamanic discourse, according to Årjem,

the universe of living beings is construed as a cosmic food web of eaters and food. From the point of view of any class of beings all others are either predators or prey. Thus, from the point of view of human beings (masa) this trophic universe is divided into human food (masa bare) including all foods and animals that are food for men and men

²⁸ Kaj Årjem, "The Cosmic Food Web. Human-Nature Relatedness in the Northwest Amazon", in Philippe Descola and Gisli Páisson, eds., *Nature and Society. Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 185–204 (at pp. 190, 193).

eaters. In shamanic language all predators are named after the supreme predator (the jaguar). This is a hunter's universe, the world seen from the predatory point of view.²⁹

This description could well be applied to our first two stories, particularly the Desana tale of "Gäipayã", and it confirms Viveiros de Castro's hypothesis that perspectivism has inherent links with the fear of cannibalism in hunting societies. But this still leaves out the stories' etiological endings: the acquisition of a new plant. According to Årjem, in Makuna's veiled shamanic language, plants are metaphors for meat, following a hierarchical order according to which "at the top are the ultimate predators (jaguar, anaconda), for whom all others are prey. At the bottom, edible plants, which, in relation to other life forms in the system, are only food".³⁰ However, as "Como os venenos" reveals, although predation is indeed an important theme in all three stories, it is not always connected to anxiety about cannibalism, nor to fear, on the part of the human protagonist, of someone at the top of the food chain eating him/her. Furthermore, although all three stories contain moments of perspectivist revelation, these moments are not necessarily related to predation. "A visita ao céu" and "Gäipayã" are as much about predation as they are about food more generally, not only because they end with the acquisition of a new plant but because food is, as well, a pervasive topic throughout both narratives. In "A visita ao céu", the protagonist and his vulture wife first settle their relationship through food exchange: she secretly transforms into a woman during the day, while he is hunting and fishing, and makes manioc cakes. When he finally discovers that the female vulture has been turning into a woman and cooking for him, he proposes to her:

Don't go away. Stay as my wife. We have food gardens. I did not make them, but they are now mine When we need food, I will hunt and fish for deer, tapir or fish. You will never go hungry with me. Stay home and make manioc cakes for us. (Koch-Grünberg, "Mitos e Lendas", p. 107)

In "Gäipayã", the protagonist meets his wife in the orchard while she tries to steal some of his fruit, and their first dialogue is about their dietary differences. Furthermore, as already mentioned, in both "A visita ao céu" and "Gäipayã" the perspectivist epiphany revolves around differences in diet.

²⁹ Årjem, "Cosmic Food", p. 188.

³⁰ Årjem, "Cosmic Food", pp. 193, 189.

In other words, food—not predation—is the common element that links the etiological ending of both stories to the rest of the narrative, in the same way that poison linked the etiological ending of “Como os venenos” to the perspectivist epiphany and the rest of the narrative more generally.

Arjem is certainly right in saying that, for the Makuna, “from the point of view of any class of beings all others are either predators or prey”.³¹ However, a less hunter-centered approach might also recognize that, if native Amazonians are indeed great hunters and fishers, they are also accomplished agriculturalists, having domesticated and cultivated many plant species, including manioc, maize, many types of chilli, palms, poisons, and medicinal plants.³² The three stories that we are analyzing may indeed be about predation, but they are equally a celebration of agriculture. The coming into being of a new plant is the other side of the coin of the anxiety about predation. If the shamanic journey is made with the purpose of renewing ever-dangerous fishing and hunting contracts between human, animal, and spirit people, then agriculture, as it appears in these stories, offers a necessary complement to such contracts. To put it in yet another way: humans eat animals and animals eat humans, and since they are all humans, they engage in forms of cannibalism, but this is not the full extent of their relationship, as animals also help humans to discover and spread seeds, to recognize which foods are edible and which are poisonous, to pollinate, to cultivate, and so on. Humans and animals constantly teach and help each other to transform and maintain the environment they are part of. They can also, of course, serve as obstacles or rivals in each other’s attempts to transform the environment. All in all, humans, animals, plants, and spirits are connected through contracts that regulate the management of resources and the management of themselves as resources.

This contract between species is expressed in all these stories, and in numerous other native Amazonian stories, as a marriage. In western narrative traditions marriage can also serve as a metaphor for a social contract. Many fairy tales, for instance, center on the marriage between apparently impossible partners, who may come from different social

³¹ Arjem, “Cosmic Food”, p. 188.

³² For further discussion on plants and perspectivism, see Laura Rival, “Animism and the Meanings of Life: Reflections from Amazonia”, in Marc Brightman et al, eds., *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra. Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), pp. 69–82 (at p. 70): “‘Perspectivism’ and ‘ontological animism’, which have been used to analyze a relatively narrow range of symbolic ecological data, mainly derived from the treatment of animals, may be renewed by refocusing the analytical lens on representations involving plants”.

backgrounds, such as the poor maid and the wealthy prince or landowner, and the same happens in various other genres, from modern novels to drama, films, and soap operas. Perhaps what makes these native Amazonian stories so intriguing is precisely the fact that they appear to fit within one of the most common themes in western literature—the love story—and are, at the same time, radically different from it. When employed as a metaphor for social contract, marriage, in western narratives, more often than not has the function of a conflict solver. Fairy tales, melodramas, and romantic comedies, whether literary or cinematic/televisual, tend to use marriage as a mechanism to resolve social differences and contradictions. In *Foundational Fictions*, Doris Sommer demonstrated how several nineteenth-century Latin American novels attempted (not always successfully) to resolve major national conflicts (racial, social, political) through love between seemingly incompatible protagonists from different backgrounds.³³ So much so, that the best-known cliché in literature or other narrative arts from the west is the happy ending, the expected moment when the hero and heroine get together and become ‘forever happy’. Needless to say, not all stories involving marriage have a happy ending, but the ‘forever happy’ moment is in the background of most marriage narratives, as an ideal that may or may not be achieved, or even as an undesirable cliché that has to be refuted. Thus, many western narratives dealing with marriages between incompatible couples center around the attempt to resolve the differences between partners, or to demonstrate that those differences were never there to begin with.³⁴

In the Amazonian stories that we are examining, by contrast, marriage is never the solution for conflict. Rather than being the end of the story, marriage appears, in our narratives, at the beginning, and the incompatibility between the bride or groom and her or his partner family is never resolved. In “Como os venenos”, for instance, the tapir is killed by her brothers-in-law, and the husband does not seem to mind it too much—he just goes on with his life. In “A visita ao céu” and “Gäipayã”, the husbands respectively abandon the sky and the underwater villages and their wives and return to their own lands. It is as if these stories started at the moment

³³ Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions. The National Romances of Latin America* [1984] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁴ Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, is based on the idea that the feud that separates the families is less important than the love that unites their children. Incompatibility, in the case of Shakespeare’s play, is an illusion created by the parents’ stubbornness. Love, on the other hand, is the blind instrument that deletes all differences—if not in this life, at least after death.

that traditional western narratives left off: like so many jokes that satirize what could happen after the 'forever happy' ending of fairy tales, these stories center on the husbands' and wives' attempts to live with ogre partners and nightmare in-laws. At the same time, there is no censoring or any suggestion that such different couples should never have gotten together. On the contrary: marriage, in all three narratives, brings as a result important cultural changes, as we have seen. Neither do the human and animal protagonists try to convince their partners, or their partners' families, to change their diet or their habits. Their incompatibility is not an illusion or a misunderstanding, as humans indeed eat tapirs and fish, big river snakes can eat humans and vultures devour human corpses; tapirs do not mind having ticks all over their bodies—in fact, they seem to enjoy it; tapirs do not fear rattlesnakes, which can kill people, and so on. These are irreducible differences, impossible to resolve. In other words, although in these stories marriage serves, as in so many western narratives, as a metaphor for social contract, its *modus operandi* is not the resolution of conflict. The plot in these stories is not based on the elimination of differences, but on their reaffirmation.

Of course, this contrast could be connected to variations in actual marriage practices. On his classic article on love, Alfred Gell argues that for the Umeda of New Guinea "love as we know it is impossible, i.e. romantic love with a relative stranger whom one chooses, out of all the possible candidates, as the one to love".³⁵ This is due to the Umeda's strict kinship regulations, according to which young men and women marry cross cousins (the child of one's mother's brother or father's sister) chosen by their families soon after birth. Like the Umeda, most native Amazonian societies abide by very clear rules which determine that men and women have to look for partners outside their own group, and/or within a very specific group (hence the stories about protagonists having to work for their fathers-in-law, as indeed happens in many Amazonian societies). In turn, in most western societies marriage has become, throughout the centuries, more and more associated with romance, or the mutual attraction, desire, and love (with its array of contradictory meanings) between two individuals who can be (and often are) complete strangers. Thus, in a society where marriage follows clear pre-determined patterns and the choice of partners is reduced, stories would not tend to revolve around the finding of an ideal consort. By contrast, in the west, where we are made to believe that we have an infinite choice of marriage partners, and where marriage for love is seen as preferable to

³⁵ Alfred Gell, "On Love", *Anthropology of this Century*, 2 (2011), <<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39003/>> (October 20, 2015).

other forms of marriage to the point that it has become one of our societies' defining characteristics, the finding of the ideal marriage partner is the ultimate happy ending, one that serves as metaphor for all others.³⁶

Yet, these differences between actual marriage conventions in the west and in native Amazonia do not tell (no pun intended) the whole story. For instance, a relatively recent academic debate focused on the question of whether anthropology has been so obsessed with kinship that it has ignored the importance of love in traditional societies.³⁷ Indeed, the agitation and arousal connected with sexual attraction is as much part of Amazonian traditional societies as it is in the west. Koch-Grünberg, for example, described how his young travel companion Akuli was obsessed with the very beautiful woman he was going to marry, and took her photograph (which Koch-Grünberg had given him) to his hammock at night.³⁸ Native Amazonian narratives do include plots in which men or women are helplessly attracted by someone's beauty, or commit adultery or violence because of jealousy.³⁹ Conversely, in most western societies, the choice of marriage partners is often dictated by many other factors besides love, such as finances, family connections, racial and class identity, and so on—and this, in itself, has been the subject of many stories. Additionally, many couples marry for love, but stay together for a myriad of other reasons after love wears off, including children, family restrictions, finances, and social conventions. Above all, it is almost impossible to separate, in the west, marriage as an institution from the stories that narrate it, as they feed each other in ways that suggest a tightly knit ideology or philosophical system. As Gell puts it:

Modern love would be unthinkable without fiction, romantic fiction in particular ... Fictions are plentiful, life-chances are few; it is not a condemnation of modern society to remark, as has often been done,

³⁶ As Gell puts it, "Arranged marriage" is a scandal according to the British media, and is one of the main reasons Anglo-Saxons believe in their ethnic superiority to Asians ...". Gell, "On Love".

³⁷ Soumhya Venkatesan et al., "The Anthropological Fixation with Reciprocity Leaves No Room for Love: 2009 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory". *Critique of Anthropology*, 31, no. 3 (2011), 210–50.

³⁸ Koch-Grünberg, *Del Roraima*, p. 223.

³⁹ See, for instance, Antonio Brandão do Amorim, *Lendas em Nheengatu e em Português* (Manaus: Fundo Editorial-ACA, 1987), and Ermanno Stradelli, "A Lenda do Jurupari", in Sérgio Medeiros, ed., *Makunaíma e Jurupari. Cosmogonias ameríndias* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002), pp. 273–343. For further reading on Stradelli and the Jurupari, see Rike Bolte's chapter in this book.

that popular fiction proceeds and guides the actions of real-life lovers, rather than representing real life after the fact.⁴⁰

Thus, the 'forever happy' of so many stories is also an important economic factor that mobilizes a multi-billion-dollar industry that includes agencies that attempt to connect individuals to their ideal partners or help them find 'their other half' and to organize engagements and wedding events whose emphasis is the 'dream day', gift lists, and, of course, narratives that culminate in happy marriages. The enabling element that ties all these aspects together is the happy ending as a signifier of the elimination of differences, the resolution of conflicts, 'becoming one'. This does not mean—it is important to repeat—that all narratives in the vast cultural region that we call the west have a happy ending, nor that everyone believes in forever-happy marriages. But, as a concept, the 'forever-happy' moment informs, through its conspicuous absence, even narratives that do not include it, or that challenge it.

By contrast, the native Amazonian stories that we have read are not, as we have seen, structured around the possibility (or impossibility) of a happy ending or the resolution of conflicts. Although marriage in the three stories we have been analyzing serves as a metaphor for a social contract between species, this contract is not based on the elimination of conflicts or differences. On the contrary: conflicts and differences may be problematic and dangerous, but they are also productive insofar as they bring changes. Perhaps this is because marriage itself is not seen in these societies as an alliance whose purpose is to stamp out differences (to become one), but, instead, as an alliance between parties whose differences cannot (and should not) be rubbed out or forgotten; an alliance, in other words, that can only happen *because of* differences. The enemy can never be eliminated: he/she lives within our group, he/she is part of our family, or our lover. As Viveiros de Castro reminds us, in the Tupi language the term *tovajar* means both enemy and brother-in-law:

While the Other in Western social cosmology is rescued from abstract indetermination when we pose him as a *brother*, that is, as someone related to me insofar as we are both identically related to a third, superior term (the parents, the nation, the Church, etc), the Amazonian Other must be determined as a brother-in-law. ... Relation as identity, relation as alterity.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gell, "On Love".

⁴¹ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "GUT Feelings about Amazonia: Potential Affinity

In sum, an ontology based on difference rather than identity generates another way of narrating that privileges not the definitive resolution of conflicts (the end of the story) but thematic links between conflicts that are left entirely or partially open. Instead of resolution, what moves these stories is transformation, understood not as a definitive change from one state into another, but as an ongoing, permanent process. Hence the importance of etiology—that is, of plots or subplots that explain how people (animal, human, and spirit people), plants, and things acquired their current characteristics: the assumption being that the present state is always precarious, as it carries within itself the possibility of further changes. Food and poison gain, in this context, a further, metaphoric meaning: hunted, fished, or grown from seeds or from cuttings, food and poison are then processed or cooked in order to be absorbed and converted by the body into (life-giving or deadly) energy, before being expelled as waste that will feed further food. They are, in this sense, the ultimate signifiers of the various transformative processes that link persons (human, animal, and spirit persons) to each other and to the environments that surround them.⁴² Far from being unimportant or casual appendices, then, the etiological endings of our stories (which explain how a particular food or poison was acquired) highlight the transformative logic and formal coherence of Amazonian storytelling.

and the Construction of Sociality", in Laura Rival and Neil Whitehead, eds., *Beyond the Visible and the Material. The Amerindianization of Society in the Work of Peter Rivière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 19–43 (at p. 26).

⁴² As Marilyn Strathern observes, eating also plays a crucial role in gift exchanges: "Eating is an image for the substitution of one act for another" (*The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], p. 292).