

Somatic Poetry in Amazonian Ecuador

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SUMMARY *In this article, I explore two healing experiences, one in Amazonian Ecuador and the other in Amazonian Peru. I argue that these experiences can be theorized through the idea of “somatic poetry,” which I define as the process of making and experiencing beauty so that life and the story become part of the same thread. I discuss how somatic poetry involves drama and coauthoring with nonhuman natural beings, including spirits. I also explore how somatic poetry works textually in inter-connecting past lives, history, myth, the body, and the myriad and various subjectivities of the Amazonian landscape. [Keywords: ethnopoetics, Ecuador, Quichua, Napo Runa, healing]*

In Amazonia, communicative action is not limited to humans but also includes spirits and beings from the nonhuman natural world. Throughout Amazonia spirits, plants, and other nonhuman beings possess communicative agency, but these beings communicate with humans through dreams, ritual states, feelings, visions, telepathy, or other means besides language.¹ This Amazonian religious philosophy, which has been written about extensively, is commonly glossed as “perspectivism” (Viveiros de Castro 1998), a philosophy of life that attributes agency, souls, and subjectivity to all living things, including some inanimate things. Most of the literature on perspectivism is densely packaged theory.² But what happens when the Amazonian world, through its astonishing presence, overflows the bounds of theory and begins to dissolve the comfortable boundary between self and other in researchers’ lives? What happens when ethnographers become overwhelmed, and they begin to discover that their own life experiences are becoming part of the stories, and the reality, that they study?

I want to explore two healing experiences I had, one in Amazonian Ecuador and the other in Amazonian Peru. I reject a priori the notion that such experiences can be adequately described or explained, especially through words (Grindal 1983; Harvey 2006:904; Mentore 2007). As an alternative approach, I argue that Amazonian healing experiences be viewed as a kind of poetry, a “somatic poetry” that involves listening, feeling, smelling, seeing, and tasting of natural subjectivities, not just those emanating from human speech or from the human mind. In my usage of “poetry,” I draw on the ancient Greek notion of *poiesis*, which conveys “making” or “creating” something of beauty (Heidegger

1971:212; Ziarek 1998). By sharing the poetics of my own experiences in Amazonia with others, I follow the path laid out by a poem by Jerome Rothenberg (1994:523–524), in which the author declares, fully conscious that he is creating a series of contradictions, that “there are many others within me” and that “‘I’ is infinite. ‘I’ contains multitudes.” Like Rothenberg, I accept that I am purposely creating contradictions by traversing the boundaries of lineality, the self, self and other, mind and body, and nature and culture.

From this perspective, Amazonian somatic poetry can be viewed as a process of textual creation (Arnold and Yapita 2006; Derrida 1967; Hanks 1989), one in which individual poems become interconnected and woven into others to create infinite, looping lines of artistic creations, creations that as a whole define experiences and human histories of specific places (Ingold 2007). Somatic poetry organizes the voice and the body as privileged agents of creation. Rather than allow the printed word to dominate the body in the disciplinary sense of Foucauldian biopower (Ziarek 1998), somatic poetry allows the body to not just create but also become the text (Guss 1986). The voice has an incredible force in somatic poetry. It can inscribe meanings on various mediums: the body, the land, stone, the air, and even the imagination.

It is worthwhile to consider the larger implications of such work. Following Hymes (1981, 1985, 1992, 1994, 2003), Tedlock (1983), Rothenberg (1994), Saul Williams (2006), Elgin Jumper (2006; a Seminole poet and artist), Juan Carlos Galeano (2007), and many other poets I have met throughout my life in Amazonia, one can appreciate that poetry is not limited to alphabetic writing or to bookish people. If anything, this point has not been made forcefully enough. Amazonia provides a striking example of somatic poetry, poetry that transcends the boundaries of human agency and includes multiauthoring through the visceral social subjectivities of the natural and spirit worlds. Amazonian people create spectacular poetry, but we still fail to understand its full beauty and genius. We lack sustained experiential knowledge of their art, despite very good research by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists (Basso 1995; Conklin 2001; Graham 1996; Guss 1989; Hendricks 1993; Hill 1993; Oakdale 2005; Olsen 1996; Seeger 1986; Urban 1991). I have only begun to learn about how Amazonian somatic poetry works, and I would like to share with the reader what I have learned.

Part I

Years ago, I returned to Ecuador for a summer of fieldwork among the Napo Runa, Amazonian Quichua speakers of Ecuador. I had not been to Ecuador since finishing my dissertation fieldwork in 1997. Having just defended my dissertation, I had a general feeling of bodily malaise. My Quichua was rusty and I was terribly out of shape. I felt generally tired, nervous, and ill at ease. I returned to visit Don Galo,³ a *yachak* (one who knows or healer) with whom I had lived during an extended period of my fieldwork. When arriving at his house, Don Galo noticed that I had a cold. He said that I appeared weak, *sambayashka*. He told me what I needed was a treatment he referred to as *kushmirina*, a medicinal vapor sweat bath designed to cure illness, cleanse the body, and give strength.

Don Galo had told me that he recently been practicing this kind of healing in addition to his long expertise in *wanduk* (*Brugmansia suaveolens*), a

vision-inducing plant. He claimed that these two areas were his best specialties of knowledge or *yachai*. He told me he had recently cured (*alichina*, to make better) an ill foreigner, one addicted to drugs, through a treatment of various *kushnirina*. He did this treatment for those in his community who requested it, or for foreigners who visited him. I had never seen this kind of treatment during my almost three years of fieldwork between 1994 and 1997, and I was at first skeptical. I just could not understand why Don Galo was so excited about showing me the vapor baths. I did not see the connection between these vapor baths to being a *yachak*. At best, I considered the vapor baths to be a kind of medicinal healing. They did not seem to be related to the spirit world or to other anthropological markers of shamanic practice like soul travel or ecstatic states.

Don Galo invited me into the forest to see what plants were used to make the vapor bath. With my audiotape-recorder and camera in hand, we set out on a hike that took a few hours; many of these plants grow only in the primary forest. Don Galo knew where each plant was located, and as we walked gathering them, Don Galo explained the names and various uses of each plant and invited me to sample their aromas, tastes, and textures. Don Galo stressed that for the treatment to be effective, the right kinds of plants must be used. He did not show those of us present all of the plants, as there were some others that he wished to keep secret.

The first plant Don Galo showed us was *chiriwayusa* (*Brunfelsia grandiflora*), a smallish-looking shrub with aromatic leaves. This plant, he explained, was good at alleviating the body of any malaise and especially a hunting curse. Don Galo noted that one of the great benefits of *kushnirina* is that it entails the use of *chiriwayusa*, which helps hunters stay sharp by cleansing their body. People do not normally drink *chiriwayusa*, because it causes extreme drunkenness (*machana*). Its powers are best realized through vapor.

Chiriwayusa, like other medicinal plants in Quichua, is identified by its pungent taste and distinct aroma. When showing us the leaves, Don Galo made a point of breaking off the leaves and smelling them. Their aroma was evidence of their power. After harvesting some of the leaves, we moved on. We next came to a plant called *kiru panga* (of the family *Melastomataceae*), which had stalks with a distinct lemony flavor that people often “drink” to quench thirst while in the forest. The flowers that protrude from the stalks are distinctive and look like large white teeth, the mimetic quality form which the plant gets its name (*kiru* means tooth, *panga* means leaf). The plant often attaches itself to the trunk of a large tree, but it can also grow on the ground. Because of the poetic and mimetic qualities of Don Galo’s description, I present his words in verse form (Hymes 2003). Don Galo stated:

karan waskamanta yurmanta shamun
 sisaguna paiwa kausai
 paiwa urza
 shinaguna tianaun karan panga sisagunara
 kai waskamanta rik
 waskamanta sisa rik
 rik chita ñalla sisanga raun
 shinaunara tandachini
 tandachisha
 chi urzaunara japingák

from each stalk from the tree it comes
 the flowers are its life force
 its power
 those flowers are on each leaf
 look at this vine
 this vine has a flower
 look, this one is about to flower
 ones like this I collect
 collecting
 to get their powers

Why did Don Galo describe in such detail, and so poetically, the form of these flowers? He might have simply mentioned that the flowers contain more of the forest's *kausai* (life force) than other living things, picked them, and been done with his demonstration. However, Don Galo chose to organize his description in a poetic way, using parallelism, imagery, and the aesthetics of the ecology itself. The flowers, for example, were described in a way that conveyed the idea that they were like shamans—they contained and personified power (they were “strong,” and “powerful”). The notion that life force circulates among all living things was aptly conveyed in the way Don Galo described and showed us the flowers, especially the vine flower *kiru panga*. Don Galo made a point of indicating that the flowers of the plant *kiru panga* came from their vines. The vines in turn “were fed” by the tree and the trees “fed” off the earth (see Cover picture).

Don Galo then showed us some other flowering plants, which he described also as having *ushai* or power, a term often used interchangeably with *kausai*. He showed me the plants *awa uchan panga*, *awa kruz panga*, *arete panga*, *sacha lamar panga* (see Figure 1), *malagri panga*, and *sacha ajo* (*Mansoa alliacea*). He then indicated a vine called *kutu chupa* (howler monkey's tail) and said that the power of this vine is that it gives you *urza* (power) “like that of a monkey.” We broke off and tasted the leaves and stalks of some of the plants. We just smelled others. They all had bitter or aromatic qualities, the kind of taste that would stay in one's mouth for a long time and give one a subtle “buzz.” Don Galo described all the plants as *asnak* (aromatic or stinky) and *ambi* (medicine or poison).

Figure 1.

Healer showing the healing flower *sacha lamar panga*. Photo by author.



Later that afternoon, Don Galo prepared the herbal concoction. He boiled the herbs and flowers in a large pot of water, covering the top with a lid made of leaves. Once the concoction was ready, he had me sit on a small stool in the middle of the floor. He placed the pot between my legs and gave me a large wooden spoon. He then carefully covered me with blankets in a way that would not allow vapor to escape. It was totally dark inside. When he was ready, he said, "Now break the seal."

I took the wooden spoon and punctured the leaf top. I was soon overwhelmed by heat and the strong aroma of the herbs and flowers. The first ten minutes were the most difficult, and I was sweating profusely. I could hardly breathe. I asked Don Galo if that was enough, and he shouted, after laughing, "No, you must stay there for at least fifteen minutes more." After ten more minutes, I noisily coughed up a large ball of mucus that had been dislodged through the vapors. Hearing this, Don Galo stated, "There it is." After the time was up, Don Galo removed the blankets. I emerged completely drenched, dizzy, and disoriented. I was given a towel to wipe off the sweat and vapor that covered my body. I changed my underwear but was not allowed to bathe. I was not supposed to bathe for 24 hours, for the cold water could make me ill.

After taking some time to recover, Don Galo and I began discussing the experience. I told him that I felt cleansed and generally much better physically. I felt the aroma and effect of the herbs in my nose, pores, and eyes. I then asked Don Galo to explain the healing theory of the vapor bath. He said that the bath allows the healer to transfer the power of the plants into the body of the patient. The healer replenishes and augments the life force of the patient by using the substances that contain much of the forest's *kausai* or life force. He also said, however, that the plants alone do not work unless the healer also "puts his power (*ushai*) in there too," a power thought to emanate from his flesh, his *aicha*.

The defining aspect of this liminal state of healing is created through a poetic synesthesia of words, visual effects, heat, aromas, taste, and sweat. In this process, the body is "opened up" to receive the power of the rainforest. This process is described as *paskarina*, or "to open up," and this is the same term used to describe how tobacco smoke works on the body of patients in an ayahuasca (a plant-derived mixture in which the main ingredient is *banisteriopsis caapi*) ceremony. The term *kushnirina* has multiple meanings. In one sense, it means *to vapor oneself* in a reflexive sense. *Kushni* means *vapor* or *smoke*. *Ri* is the reflexive particle and *na* is the infinitive ending. *Rina* also means *to go* or *to travel*, however, so *kushnirina* can also mean *to travel into the vapor*. This additional meaning resonates with the mimetic processes of moving inside of a sensory experience.

For example, reflecting on his work with healers in Putumayo (see Taussig 1987), Taussig considers how nonvisual senses work mimetically and cross over with vision to create powerful bodily reactions such as nausea, which he experienced while working with medicines in Putumayo: "the senses cross over and translate into each other. You feel redness. You see music . . . seeing is felt in a nonvisual way. You move into the interior of images, just as images move into you" (Taussig 1993:57–58). What occurs is an experience where vision is but part of a larger mimetic whole in which the senses cross over. "Seeing," Taussig (1993:58) writes, "is felt in a nonvisual way."

Sensory crossing over is explained by reference to cosmological processes in the ritual space of Napo Runa culture; it is not simply a psychological phenomena but also an aesthetics that is essential to healing. Don Galo explained that, during the process of being inside the vapor bath, the patient becomes “opened up” to the powers of the forest spirits, spirits who come into direct contact with the soul substance of the patient. The healer guides these actions, of course, but there is no trance involved. As Don Galo explained to me, the healer’s body does the work and there is not any real effort involved. The healer intends to heal, so his aicha or flesh sends out power of its own accord. This power also “goes into the vapor bath” and augments its healing power. This is the body’s subjectivity, its shamanic self.

Because the ritual is both beautiful and theatrical, I find it useful to see it as a dramatic social process structured by the narrative shape of *onset*, *ongoing*, and *outcome* (Hymes 2003). The *ritual space of healing* in the kushnirina is a dramatic transformation (*tukuna*) that responds to the social connectedness of people to hostile others, both human and nonhuman. In any healing ritual, the healer assumes that the cause of illness is dark shamanism or an evil spirit, which often sends invisible darts into the flesh of victims (*onset*). In the ritual space of healing, the healer removes these foreign objects from the patient’s body and reinforces the patient’s weakened soul substance (*ongoing*). The patient gets better but healing might also involve the ritual assassination of the offending shaman, for to heal a sick patient often requires that the healer “kill” the enemy (*outcome*).

While I was under the blankets, and after each of my complaints, groans, and labored breathing, those around commented with such phrases as *ah-hah* (yes)—comments identifying the invisible struggle going on in my body. I noticed that, when I spat up the ball of mucus, Don Galo became animated and excited and urged me to get rid of even more of the mucus. This excitement reflected the implicit knowledge that the spirit pathogens were being forced out of my body. When using visionary plants, for example, at that time spiders, thorns, darts, and lizards (all of which are the perceived sources of shamanically caused illnesses) appear in the body as wrapped in purple mucus.⁴ The shaman sucks out these entities, swallows them, regurgitates them, and sends them away, often aiming them back at the originating source. Kushnirina, like visionary healing, removes such spirit pathogens, but through the power of the vapor rather than “sucking.”

Language expresses many of the aesthetic qualities of *samai* (breath, soul substance) in the healing ritual, and language works together with imagery, sound, smell, and taste to produce a holistic communicative experience. We saw how Don Galo described flowers as having the animistic qualities of *kausai* and *urza*—terms of *strength* and *power* that reflect the warrior-like context of healing. He also framed the kushnirina ritual in terms of recognized shamanic terms of *ushai*, *alichina* (to make better), and using healing plants. The healing process elicits cleansing and spiritual strengthening, but as patterned against the background of cosmological violence and ever-present spiritual attacks.

In the kushnirina ritual, contact with powerful substances is emphasized, as these powers must be ingested and embodied. The qualities of *kutu chupa*, for example, are said to transfer the power of the howler monkey to the patient. The

furry-looking vine is not a mere “copy” of the monkey’s tail; it is a manifestation of the monkey’s invisible soul power. The vapors that are released when the patient punctures the top of the pot are also defining of the ritual’s imagery and its name; because the vapors are medicine, they cannot be wasted and must be released in concentrated form and in intimacy with only the patient. The vapors (*kushni*) circulate through the patient’s body and are felt as well as seen. They flow into and move through the nose, eyes, and pores of one’s skin—mimetically imbuing the patient with refortification.⁵

As a patient, I went from feeling ill to feeling overwhelmed by extreme heat to feeling cleansed and refreshed. The aesthetics create a sense that one’s illness is being assaulted and purged by a more powerful healing force. The plants, in this sense, are an ideal means to this end. Their beauty and aromas intimately connect with the aesthetics and ontology of the Napo Runa “soul,” for they, like shamans, have powerful internal essences, essences that “work” on others and the world in specific ways.

Merleau-Ponty said that “whether it is a question of another’s body or my own, I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it” (1962:198). Although I do not think that all bodily experiences must be dramatic, Merleau-Ponty’s point that somatic experiences are central to many of life’s dramatic events resonates with what Quichua speakers have taught me about vapor poetry.⁶

Part II

A few years later, I made a trip to Amazonian Peru to help a friend, Juan Carlos Galeano, do preliminary research on a documentary film about *chullachaki* stories,⁷ a very important spirit guardian in the larger Iquitos region. During our trip, we taped many stories, including dozens of accounts from many different kinds of people: fisherman, mestizo people, indigenous people from various groups, and various shamans who lived in or on the outskirts of town. My friend, originally from the Amazonian (Caquetá river) region of Colombia, had worked in the Iquitos area for over a decade. A poet by trade, my friend Juan Carlos had only recently taken up this new project of making a documentary.

Part of our research involved studying ayahuasca knowledge, and as part of our research, we attended an ayahuasca ritual, one that is in the *mestizo-ribereño* tradition described in Luna and Amaringo (1991), and also Dobkin de Rios (1973, 1992) and Katz and Dobkin de Rios (1971). My friend had attended rituals in this place for some years, and was good friends with the network of shamans who did the ceremonies. But this was a new experience for me. In Ecuador, I had attended only one ayahuasca ritual in my life, and Don Galo, my mentor in Napo Runa culture, was an expert in *wanduk*, not ayahuasca. Because there exists an extensive literature on ayahuasca, its uses, effects, cultural dynamics, and psychological properties by people far more knowledgeable and experienced than I (Harner 1973, 1980; Luna and Amaringo 1991; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972; Shannon 2002; Whitten 1976, 1985), I only wish to focus on my own experience as it relates to my interest in somatic poetry.

Although native people throughout Amazonia have relied on ayahuasca for artistic inspiration for thousands of years, most scientists studying this plant have emphasized its psychological, neurophenomenological, clinical, and legal applications rather than its aesthetic qualities. Most of this literature disfigures ayahuasca because it approaches it as a “drug” that induces hallucinations or whose power is mainly psychological. My good friend Bruce Grindal understood what was at stake in a conversation we had about my experience. He commented that ayahuasca was “a mixture of plants that come out of the ground, Amazonian ground” (personal communication, Grindal, September 28, 2007). To describe ayahuasca as a hallucinogenic or a drug is to invoke Western histories of repressing people and substances. As well, it would be to ignore the visceral role the body plays in experiencing ayahuasca poetry.

I have found that, like the plants in the vapor bath, Amazonian people are adept at using ayahuasca to provoke experiences of multisensory poetry coauthored by the subjectivities of the vegetable, animal, and spirit worlds. Although it is a unique genre of somatic art, ayahuasca poetry, like the vapor bath I just described, follows a dramatic patterning of onset, ongoing, and outcome.⁸ As Taussig (1987) and many other sources have indicated, ayahuasca experiences often involve a beginning defined by terror and an ending of beauty and healing.

This somatic drama, as argued by Weiskopf (2002:238), is linked to the power of this specific mixture of plant matter to force people to confront their inward imperfections, their deepest weaknesses, all of which are revealed through physical and psychological pain. The process of working through these imperfections results in what many people describe as purification or a purge, and this purification is realized through what one may term a “somatic poem.” Some people describe this poem as a “vision” and nowadays many people use their visions as material for paintings and other contemporary arts (Luna and Amaringo 1991). As Katz and Dobkin de Rios argue (1971:324), the music helps to create the images and visions; whistling evokes “the spiritual forces of nature and the guardian vine, itself” (see also Belzner and Whitten 1979; Olsen 1996).

Clinically minded researchers have commented on the power of the ayahuasca mixture to provide psychological benefits, but severe mental or even physical damage is a very real possibility (Dobkin de Rios 2006). Reichel-Dolmatoff, for example, describes the Tukano myth about ayahuasca (the *yajé* child) as involving poignant anxiety because it equates ayahuasca with sexuality and possibly incest. He writes, “The effect is therefore highly unpredictable. . . . This fact worries the Indians [sic], who, apart from the combination of components used, attempt to influence the effects magically to eliminate the more unpleasant aspects” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972:98). In 1977, even the well-known shaman Pablo Amaringo gave up taking ayahuasca because of the excessive shamanic battles and resultant “terrible nightmares” (Luna and Amaringo 1991:28).

Here, I recount my experience of ayahuasca in the Peruvian Amazon, an experience that became my somatic poem. I begin my story somewhere in the middle of the events, one night at approximately 10 p.m. Already under the effects of ayahuasca, I could hear in the background the healer, Don Fernando, singing beautiful *icaros* (shamanic songs), and they tormented me.⁹ I put my hands over my ears to block out the *icaros* and kept telling myself that I had to

survive. I was angry at myself and prayed to God, asking him to save me from what I was beginning to think was my imminent death. I became aware of spirits around me who were tormenting me psychologically. They knew all of the details of my life and they used these to “teach me a lesson.” That lesson, which was incredibly painful, was to show me how impure my life was and how much effort and energy I had invested into superficial things. They were angry that I had doubted that they actually existed, and kept punishing me repeatedly for doubting that they were real. I did not want to communicate with them but they communicated with me through a kind of telepathy that forced me to listen to their cruel exploitation of my weaknesses and personal failures in life. They berated my projects, my anthropology, my public persona, my teaching, my professional relationships, my department, my theories about them, and especially my research in Ecuador. They caused me great pain through a very subtle technique that involved revealing my own pride and investment in something and then crushing it by showing its superficiality.

I finally came into contact with a *sacha warmi* (forest woman) who was not being mean. She emphasized the same lesson as the mean spirits but she was very gentle and criticized the other spirits for being so cruel. Each time they poked me or tormented me, we said to each other, “That was just mean.” I began to feel a bit better, because I had gained a bit of agency, but this agency did not make them go away. They continued coming.

I slowly became aware of other gentle spirits, who like the *sacha warmi*, kept emphasizing the same lesson as the mean spirits had, but who began to show me beautiful things about the world. They taught me the interconnectedness of all living things and the power of love (or was it intimacy or conviviality? Is there really a word for such a thing?) in the world. They began to teach me two things over and over again. The first was that my love for my family defined me and was the only pure area of my life. The second was the connectedness of my life and love to a river in Amazonian Ecuador where I do most of my research. I acknowledged that I had understood their lesson and asked them to leave me alone, but they would not let me go either. They were enjoying teaching me these things and wanted to continue the lesson. They took me into the river and I said hello to the *chinlus*, which are small, very fast-moving fish that are ubiquitous in the river in question. I felt a glowing energy that emanated from the *chinlus* toward me and my family. I then felt like I had been forced to grasp the very fabric of life, and more importantly, my own life, which was connected to this flow of love and energy emanating from the river. The flow connected me to the place, people, and spirits of the area.

I was now only in the presence of these gentle spirits and I thanked them for being so kind to me, for teaching me such profound things and protecting me from the mean spirits. I spent a good deal of time with a soft-spoken man who, I realized, felt love for me. He then revealed to me who he was. He and the rest of the kind spirits who had been teaching me beautiful things were the spirit ancestors of the place that defines me and my research in Ecuador, which is named after the river I mentioned before. They did not reveal their names or specific relationships, but I felt that we were kin. I felt the presence of the ancestors I had heard about in stories in Ecuador. These spirits intensified the lesson. They then showed that we were all part of the same flow of love and

energy that derived from the river. They told me that they especially loved my daughter and that they were so happy that she visited them during the summers in Ecuador. They then gave me a message to take back to Ecuador.

Six weeks later, I left Peru, taking a plane back to Ecuador to be with my family. My wife and daughter had gone onto Ecuador ahead of me and I had not seen them all summer long. I felt like I was finally returning home, because I realized that home was not a physical space but the place inhabited by the people I loved. I tried to share my message but could not find the words to describe it. I realized that my relations in Ecuador already knew what I was trying to tell them, for the message was already implicit in their own somatic poetics of the place.

I later took a trip to visit Don Galo, my healer and mentor in all such things in Ecuador, and asked him to interpret my somatic poem. Because of the intensity of the evil spirits and the physical and mental pain involved, he too told me that this was sorcery, a violence that is intrinsic to Amazonian cosmologies and shamanism (Whitehead 2002; Whitehead and Wright 2004). Don Galo commented that the shaman in Peru had sought to do me harm, mainly because of what he, Don Galo, had taught me. Don Galo was referring to *envidia* or envy, and he reframed my vision in terms of my connection to him and our shared history, experiences, and knowledge. It was his power, his teachings, that had saved me. Yes, Peru was interesting, but it could never become for me what Ecuadorian Napo was, the site of my Amazonian birth, growth, and maturity. I was rooted. I had come to a clear vision of the future, one in which the future would be intimately linked to the past and to specific places and people. I realized that Napo, Ecuador, had ceased to be just a field site. It had become my home.

Part III

I now wish to push the analysis a bit further to explore some of the larger semiotic dynamics of somatic poetics, dynamics that I was able to discern by recounting my own experiences to others. I have thus far argued that somatic poetry is dramatic as well as artful, and that it involves coauthoring with natural beings and spirits. These are not just entities in the abstract but, rather, subjectivities that are linked to geography and the experiential contours of the landscape. As Cruikshank (2005) argues, when studying “oral traditions” it is useful to follow the philosopher Edward Casey’s distinction between space and place (Arnold and Yapita 2006; Casey 1997; Derrida 1967; Ingold 2007). Space, as she explains, is modern Western theory of the land as mapped, measured, and easy to fix using Cartesian coordinates (Cruikshank 2005:67). Place making is a different process. It is a process of becoming connected, of having a history and specific social meanings tied up with specific locations.

Place takes on unique and complex characteristics in relation to somatic poetry. For example, most native cultures do not separate space from time and thus inhabit a world more similar to Einstein’s theory of relativity than Euclidian geometry (Cruikshank 2005:67). In other words, somatic poetry (that which is visionary) follows a different perspective about the nature of the world itself, one that has affinities with some of the greatest discoveries of physics

(I would also include fractality and dark matter). Somatic poetry is a total philosophy, one that “works” when one comes to understand it in its own terms rather than reducing it to the assumptions of the older Western philosophical traditions (Casey 1993, 1997). As I will try to show, somatic poetry is part of life, part of experience and the way realities are made, not just an external commentary on life’s more basic processes (Vilaça 2002).

There are countless examples of somatic poetry and its relationship to place and the experiences of daily life among my community in Napo. After recounting my somatic poems or stories to people in Napo, they shared with me their own stories. Sharing one’s somatic poem, even a simple one, invites others to share theirs. These stories, taken as a whole, reveal the meaning of *samai* or soul substance, as a kind of energy that is crucial not only to life but also to storytelling. Within this gigantic looping of mysteries and interrelations exists an infinite potential for somatic poetry.

Eugenio, for example, likes to recount the history of his *ayllu* (kindred group) by way of a metaphor about a manioc plant. In telling his story, he draws on the imagery of the segmented stalks of the plant to analogize human relatedness. As Eugenio says, “The plant grows, bears fruit, and is harvested but it is replanted and continues to grow and reproduce in the same spot. This is how we are.” Eugenio uses gestures and points to the growth lines on the stem of the manioc plant, each of which represent a segment of human and manioc growth (see Figure 2). For this somatic poet, the plant’s shape and line structure express perfectly the rootedness, vitality, and continuity of human–vegetable *samai* in both place and time.

Indeed, manioc is one of the most meaningful plants throughout all of Amazonia, the source of all life, and associated with the production of children (Descola 1996). Manioc can reproduce itself from its own body without any need for seeds, and its gardens are mimetic extensions of the feminine body. In expressing the *ayllu* by reference to a manioc plant, Eugenio expresses the mysteries of individual human bodies as defined through the complex lines of vegetable matter and its tangled rootedness in the earth. His somatic poem is intertextual. It is built up on all the other manioc poems and myths he has heard in his life. Indeed, somatic poetry is full of such lines, lines in the sense described by Tim Ingold, who aptly writes:

I have suggested that drawing a line . . . is much like telling a story. Indeed, the two commonly proceed in tandem as complementary strands of one and the same performance. Thus the storyline goes along, as does the line on a map. . . . Far from connecting points in a network, every relation is one line in a meshwork of interwoven trails. To tell a story, then, is to relate, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning their own. But rather as in looping or knitting, the thread being spun now and the thread picked up from the past are both of the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins. [2007:90]

Ingold’s notion that the story and life are “of the same yarn” provides insight into my own experiences with somatic poetry in Amazonia. As I have recounted, my experiences were integrated into the mythology and lifeways of a specific place within Amazonia. That my journey began in Omaha, Nebraska,

Figure 2.

A monochrome photograph of a manioc garden, a format that accentuates the “lines” used in Eugenio’s somatic poem. The segmented stems of the manioc, that is, the small lines and nodes that cross the stems at intervals, can easily be seen highlighted in front of the two men. Photo by author.



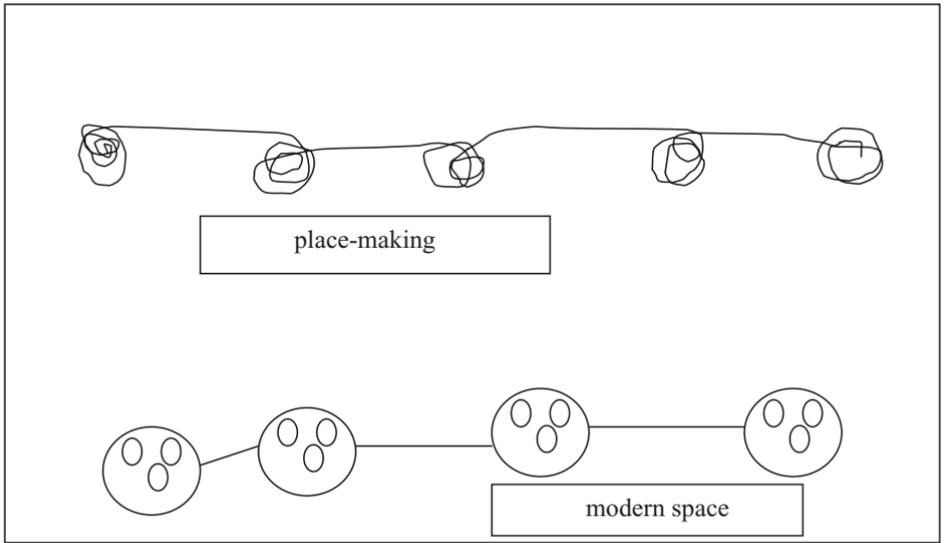
the place of my birth, does not make it inauthentic, nor does the fact that I came to know Ecuador better by way of a trip to Peru.¹⁰ On the contrary, Quichua speakers in Ecuador found these threads as enriching, and they masterfully integrated my experiences into their own traditions of somatic poetry.

Somatic poetry, as I show, is constituted by lines that loop through past lives, history, myth, the body, and the myriad and various subjectivities of the Amazonian landscape. This is place making, which can be contrasted with some modern notions of abstract space (see Figure 3). Placelines are written into the landscape in countless other ways, by way of petroglyphs, other large stones, trees, paths, animals and plants, gardens, and even familiar sounds. Indeed, place, lines, and somatic poetry are all part of the same reality, one whereby people, their environment, and the past share in a common destiny, one in which life and the story are one and the same pathway.

The Cubeo Henhénéwa of the Vaupés region describe their world through the somatic “lines” of anaconda spiritual and soul substance. They say that the

Figure 3.

Visual representation of the difference between place making and space within somatic poetry and that within much of modernity. The looping, curved lines of place making in somatic poetry indicate the rootedness and entangling of human identities and forms in and among the complex meanings of specific places. Modernity, by contrast, controls people by encompassing space (which is uniform), and which is interconnected through lines of commerce and communication. Diagram by the author adapted from Tim Ingold's *Lines: A Brief History* (2007).



anaconda's "heart and soul enter into the river itself: into its fish, birds, and fowl, into trees, into human houses, and through hallucinogens, into ritually engaged human beings" (Goldman 2004:33). The semiotics of anaconda reality involve complex transmutations of form, social relations, meaning, and geography. These relations are not external to the body but occur within it and work through it. They are the dramatic contours of the cosmic body, of the body's shared substantiality and coagency within a myriad of natural and spiritual beings. To conceptualize these interrelations demands that one become a poet, in that thinking poetically is the key to knowing the system in its own terms, terms we might describe as evoking mystery, power, and beauty. It is to participate in an "extraordinary anthropology," one in which "transformative events lived with others in their world cannot be wished away" (Goulet and Miller 2007:7).

Conclusion

In this article, I discuss two somatic poems. The first was a vapor-bath healing experience and the second was an ayahuasca ritual. With vapor-bath healing, one experiences the beauty and power of plants through all of the senses. This beauty and power moves from the forest, into the vapor, and finally becomes part of the body. As I discuss, the poetics of the Quichua language, imagery, and

the artful use of aromas and heat allowed the healer to create a multisensory work of art. Ayahuasca healing is a different genre, one that is defined by a process of “purification” or “purging” by way of vomiting, pain, interactions with spirits, both bad and good, and the music of healers. In this ritual space, I found that my life history and innermost feelings were poeticized and rearticulated by external entities so as to reconnect me to what I valued most in life. The reconnection was realized by way of a somatic poem that involved surviving evil spirit attacks and sorcery, seeing the interconnectedness of *samai* (or soul substance), and communications with specific ancestors and beings of specific places, including fish.

I describe these experiences as somatic poetry to emphasize the body’s central role in the creation of artistic meaning, which, in both cases, was substantial, visceral, and dramatic. Both of these somatic poems were indescribable. They were defined by complex aesthetics that far surpass the beauty and power of most bookish poetry, a particular kind of art linked to the social and cultural transformations of alphabetic writing, the printed word, and the history of the West (Ingold 2007). Both poems connected my life to the history of a community and its landscape in a way in which my experiences in life are now tangled up with the stories and history of the place. Indeed, if nothing else, I hope I have provided some sense of the communicative dynamics of somatic poetry to connect individual lives to the larger narrative of a community’s connectedness to place, the subjectivities of that place’s ecology, its history, stories, and traditions, plants, animals, and people, both living and dead.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The research in this article is based on more than three years (noncontinuous total time) of living and working in Napo Runa communities, as well as a two-week research trip to Amazonian Peru. The research here was conducted in the Napo dialect of Amazonian Quichua and Spanish. I first and foremost thank the Napo Runa people from all the communities that I have lived in and visited over the years. I would also like to acknowledge the following organizations that have supported my research: the Fulbright Institute for International Education, Pew Charitable Trusts, the University of Virginia, Florida State University, the Dirección Bilingüe Intercultural de Napo, and the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) of Ecuador. I would like to thank Joseph Hellweg, Syed Ali, Edith Turner, Bruce Grindal, Juan Carlos Galeano, Neil Whitehead, Norman E. Whitten Jr., and many others for their comments. All shortcomings in this article are my own.

1. The “natural” divide between our reality and their reality (Viveiros de Castro 1998) creates a communication barrier, but when this barrier is traversed, one is thrust into religious experiences that involve power, beauty, and danger.

2. Perspectivism is the idea that the world is defined by a common field of soul matter or soul substance (in which all living things possess some degree of subjectivity and also possibly “culture,” but the world is inhabited by many bodies, many natures (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Vilaça explains the underlying logic of perspectivist thinking when he writes,

What enables the permutability of the body is precisely the equivalence of spirits: all are equally human, equally subjects. By modifying the body alimentation, change in habits, and the establishment of social relations with other subjects, another point of view is acquired: the world is now seen in the same way as the new companions, that is, the member of the other species. [2002:351]

3. Don Galo is a pseudonym for reasons of identity protection.

4. I thank Norman E. Whitten Jr. for this insight.
5. Mimesis is most often discussed as reflecting the transference of power created through making "copies" (representations) of original things (Benjamin 1979; Callois 1984; Stoller 1995; Taussig 1993), but here, like in many other rituals, mimesis is simultaneously organized around substance embodiment and contact (Taussig 1993:111).
6. I say that it is dramatic because of the poetics involved and the drama (action) of bodily healing. I realize that all poetry is not necessarily dramatic, but drama is central to somatic poems of healing.
7. The title of the film is *The Trees Have a Mother*, directed by Juan Carlos Galeano and Valliere Richard Auzenne. The film is in the final phases of production at this time.
8. Jimmy Weiskopf, a journalist and expert on ayahuasca, writes, "I felt like I was collaborating in a great theatre of compressed symbols that hugged my body, my memory, and my mysterious subconscious . . . I would say my mega-conscious, since it touched upon worlds that simply do not fit within the closed schemes of orthodox sociology" (2002:300).
9. This too is a pseudonym used to protect the signer's identity.
10. The main requirement is to make a sincere and sustained effort to participate in the world of the field, not as an arrogant outsider, but as someone who takes participation, and the critical interpretation of that participation, seriously. Fabian has argued that the process of working through such experiences is a requirement of good ethnography. He writes, "critically understood, autobiography is a condition of ethnographic objectivity" (Fabian 2001:7; see also Goulet and Miller 2007:7; B. Tedlock 1991).

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