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# CHRONICALLY UNSTABLE BODIES: REFLECTIONS ON AMAZONIAN CORPORALITIES

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Based on ethnographic material relating to the Wari' (Rondônia, Brazil), this article questions some of the presuppositions concerning native conceptions of the body present in contemporary anthropological literature by exploring a central dimension of Amazonian corporality – one that has been little explored in ethnographic works on the region – its unstable and transformational character. This dimension only becomes evident when our analysis presumes an expanded notion of humanity – first called to our attention by authors such as Lévy-Bruhl and Leenhardt – that includes not only those beings we think of as humans, but also other subjectivities such as animals and spirits. Central to the problem's development is a discussion of the relations between body and soul, humanity and corporality.

## Introduction

Though it only became a specific research topic from the 1970s onwards, the human body has held a certain fascination for anthropology since its outset for two reasons: firstly, owing to its ostensible physical features, it has been used as a means of classifying different races; and, secondly, owing to the impact of culture on the way the body's characteristics and potentialities are seen, it has been assumed to be a naturally given substrate (see Lock 1993: 134; also Conklin 1996: 373). The works of the French sociological school provide our earliest examples of truly sociological or culturalist approaches to the body; pioneering texts include Hertz's paper (1973 [1909]) on cultural – or, more specifically, religious – aspects involved in the predominance of right-handedness and Mauss's essay (1985 [1936]) on body techniques.

Rather than provide a historical résumé of studies on the body,<sup>1</sup> I wish to recall the work of two authors, also French and both contemporaries of Mauss. In texts largely forgotten now by anthropology, they call attention to somewhat exceptional aspects of the body that relate to its natural instability rather than its cultural fabrication. In *L'âme primitive*, published in 1927, Lévy-Bruhl observes: 'He [the primitive] therefore sees no difficulty in metamorphoses which to us appear utterly incredible: beings can change their size and form in the blink of an eye' (1996 [1927]: 8).

Leenhardt, in *Do Kamo*, a book inspired by Lévy-Bruhl and dedicated to him, makes similar observations in his description of the Canaque concept of the human being:

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Animals, plants and mythic beings have the same claim men have to being considered *kamo*, if circumstances cause them to assume a certain humanity (1979 [1947]: 24).

He [*kamo*] undergoes metamorphoses; he is like a character endowed with sumptuous wardrobe who perpetually changes costume ... With our own concept of man such a view is impossible, but it is possible with a broader representation of what is human. For the Melanesian, a glance, in fact, is enough to give the form of humanity to an animal (1979 [1947]: 25).

These descriptions will sound familiar to any Americanist, although what they tell us about a very particular concept of the body has been little explored in the bibliography directly related to corporality.

My aim in this article is to complement the existing descriptions of Amazonian bodies by focusing on processes and phenomena that involve their transformation rather than their fabrication – although we are clearly faced by one and the same problem. Indeed, this is revealed by the apparent contradiction between the abundance of indigenous discourses and practices concerning the gradual make-up of the body, and diverging ideas on the way in which this carefully fabricated body can – in the blink of an eye, as Lévy-Bruhl puts it – turn into another type of body. This general uncertainty over forms is a key factor in understanding the concept of body found in the Amazonian region.

The evocation of Leenhardt was not just designed to introduce an Amazonian theme through Melanesia. Although I shall not embark on any systematic comparison of the two ethnographic areas, Melanesia – or, better, some analyses of Melanesia – will be used in the text as a counterpoint enabling the highlighting of certain characteristics of Amazonian concepts of bodies.

## Studies of the body

Though it comprises a problem for Americanists, the body is even more of an issue for native peoples, who spend a sizeable portion of their daily lives executing processes they conceive to be linked to the fabrication and controlled transformation of bodies.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1970s, Americanist authors have drawn our attention to the centrality of the body in defining – and differentiating – persons and social groups, as well as to the intense use of the body surface – perforated, painted, tattooed, and decorated – in the circulation of values. Indeed this theme helped free Americanist ethnology from the exogenous models then in vogue in anthropology, centred on notions of descent, corporate groups, and the gift economy, in contrast to which the continent's societies were made to appear amorphous and lacking in structuring principles (see Overing 1977; Seeger, Da Matta & Viveiros de Castro 1979). In the place of corporate descent groups, Amerindians displayed, in the words of Seeger (1980: 130), 'corporeal descent groups', understood as groups of people related by substances, such as blood, semen, and food. So while classical anthropology supplied us with a notion of social structure as a system of relations between groups, Amerindians presented us with structural principles based on a system of relations between bodies (Seeger, Da Matta & Viveiros de Castro 1979: 14). To quote the apt expression of Seeger, Da Matta, and Viveiros de

Castro, 'indigenous socio-logics is based on a physio-logics' (1979: 13).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, rather than an exchange economy alive with objects and commodities capable of mediating relations and standing for people, the Amazonian region revealed values that were directly inscribed on bodies via specific forms of visual and verbal display (Turner 1995: 147).

Interestingly, the attention that Americanists began to show towards the body seems to have arisen independently of the general interest in the theme that began to stir in anthropology around the same time (see Viveiros de Castro 2002a: 16). Authors such as Latour (2004) see the interest as relating to, 'on the one hand, the meeting of feminism, science studies and a fair amount of Foucault's redescription of subjection, and on the other, the expansion of bioindustry into all the details of our daily existence' (p. 227). We should also note the general trend towards the rejection of abstract categories which has found an important point of support in the widespread conception of the body as the basic substratum of persons (see Csordas 1999: 186; Lock 1993: 140; Turner 1995: 143–5). It is likewise interesting to observe that a dialogue between Amerindian ethnology and this literature only took off much later – and then in a one-way fashion – as Americanists used these new theoretical groundings to analyse their ethnographical data.

In an essay entitled 'The body's career in anthropology', Thomas Csordas surveys a wide range of anthropological approaches to this topic. Although he mentions in his introduction that '[t]he body has especially impinged on the ethnographic consciousness in regions such as New Guinea and Amazonia' (1999: 173), he fails to cite a single Amazonian text on the body. Overall, then, the Amazonian materials seem to have contributed very little to these new theories concerning the body.<sup>4</sup>

Heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Bourdieu's theory of practice (see Csordas 1999: 178; Lock 1993: 137), most of these theories look to overcome the great ontological divide between the West and the Rest by showing that our bodies are – or at least should be, as they were in the past – identical to those of native peoples: that is, 'naturally' mindful and relational (see Csordas 1990: 31 ff.; Lock 1993: 136; Lock & Scheper-Hughes 1987: 14, 22, 28 ff.; A. Strathern 1999: 8, 41–62). Similarly, theories deriving from studies in medical anthropology also deconstruct what are assumed to be exclusively Western dichotomies, such as nature/culture and body/soul, albeit starting out from equally Western ideas and practices, particularly those related to the context of the suffering body (Lock 1993; Lock & Scheper-Hughes 1987; see also McCallum 1996: 365). In all these instances we can perceive a universalizing aim which Pollock noted in his critique of the interpretative tool known as 'embodiment', which takes the body 'as the locus of authentic experience whose "embodied" reality is supposedly hidden or distorted by such cultural practices as mind/body dualism' (1996: 320, also n. 2).

Mindful and relational bodies have been described in fine detail for at least two decades in Amazonian literature, although here this universalizing aim is absent (see Conklin & Morgan 1996: 659).<sup>5</sup> Amazonian ethnographies have shown how the body is slowly and continuously fabricated 'in a constant flow involving nutrition, abstention, the application of medicines, body painting, baptismal rituals, and formal training' (McCallum 1996: 352; 2001: 27).

Treatments directly applied to the body such as ornamentation, piercing, and tattooing 'are conceived as being part of normal physiological processes, not as opposed to them' (McCallum 1996: 350).<sup>6</sup>

However, as we shall see below, another dimension emerges when we take into account the 'much wider representation of humanity' evoked by Leenhardt. This concerns the fact that in Amazonia, as the ethnographic literature makes abundantly clear, humanity is not restricted to what we conceive as human beings: animals and spirits may also be human, which means that humanity is above all a position to be continually defined.

### Different bodies

In his studies of Amerindian perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro notes that every being considered to be human pursues typically human activities, such as having a family life, performing rituals, drinking beer, and so forth (1996; 1998a; 1998b). Sharing what we may term the same culture, the difference between them arises from the fact every kind of being sees things in a particular way due to its different body.

As a reading of various ethnographies reveals, this conception of the body as the site of differentiation is by no means a phenomenon confined to Amazonia. This suggests a need to re-evaluate the universalizing approach adopted by the new studies on the body, where, as I pointed out, the human body appears to be (potentially) the same everywhere. Here we can recall an anecdote by Leenhardt which appears to be the best known part of his work if we judge by its frequent citation in texts discussing the body (Csordas 1999: 174; Le Breton 1995: 17 ff.). Chatting with the chief Boesou one day, the missionary Leenhardt asked whether the novelty brought by whites had been the notion of the soul. Boesou instantly replied that they had always had the soul and that the new thing the whites had brought them was the body. Leenhardt explains this by arguing that this new body was the Western body insofar as the notion of an individualized body had been completely alien to Canaque thought (1979 [1947]: 164).

I have no wish to delve into Leenhardt's explanation here since the authors cited above have already done so. What I want to highlight is the fact that it was the body (or different *conceptions* of the body) which was chosen by the Canaque as the site for differentiating themselves from the whites living alongside them. This transports us directly to the Amazonian universe, from whence I extract a very similar dialogue overheard by the anthropologist Peter Gow (pers. comm. 2001; see also Viveiros de Castro 2002b: 140). The topic of the conversation was the effect of boiled water on infant diarrhoea. A Piro child was suffering from diarrhoea and the teacher instructed the mother to give her only boiled water to drink. The Piro mother refused, claiming that while boiled water might have an ameliorative effect on children from the city, it provokes the opposite in Piro children by actually causing diarrhoea. This, she explained, is because their bodies are different.<sup>7</sup> While one of the aspects of this difference is the native conception of the body as the site of difference between beings, a second aspect relates to the difference between the Western or Euro-American conception of the body and those of natives from

Amazonia. Commenting on the same anecdote about the Piro mother and the Peruvian teacher, Viveiros de Castro observes:

The argument that 'our bodies are different' does not express an alternative – and naturally wrong – biologically theory ... or a non-standard imaginary objective biology. What the Piro argument manifests is a *non-biological idea of the body* ... The argument affirms that our respective 'bodies' are different, meaning that the Piro and Western *concepts* of the body are divergent, not that our 'biologies' are different. The Piro water anecdote does not reflect *another* view of the *same* body, but another concept of the body, whose underlying dissonance to its 'homonymy' with our own is, precisely, the problem (2002b: 140).

If we relegate extra-human phenomena (extra-human in our terms) to another dimension of analysis, we find bodies impregnated with a biological conception, as body processes continue to occur within a clearly defined biological species. The Amazonian material I shall now select will allow us to discern a body whose existence is fleeting and whose reality lies in the eyes of others.

### The Wari' body

As the starting point for my attempt to identify an Amazonian concept of the body, I shall turn to my own ethnographic material on the Wari', a Txapakura-speaking people of Brazilian Amazonia living near the border with Bolivia.

The Wari' term we could translate as body is *kwere-*, a substantive that exists in possessive form only. The term, in other words, is invariably accompanied by a possessive suffix: his-*kwere*, her-*kwere*, its-*kwere*, and so on. The child's body is gradually formed in the womb from semen or, according to some informants, from a mixture of semen and menstrual blood. All the men who have sexual relations with the mother during pregnancy collaborate in making the baby, although only one of them – usually the mother's husband – assumes paternity. Thereafter, this body is continually fabricated through alimentation and the exchange of substances such as sweat, semen, and vaginal liquids. In this way, husband and wife become consubstantial; indeed, they often say that they have the same body. Since physical proximity is just as important as consubstantiality, the Wari' usually consider all those who live together or nearby to be consubstantial kin. In this sense, adopted children are conceived to be real children. Inversely, people very often drop from their list of kin those genealogical kin with whom they have little contact (see Vilaça 1992; 2000b; 2002). However, it is not just substances which circulate. The Wari' body is also constituted by affects and memories. Memory, say the Wari', is located in the body, meaning the constitution of kin is based to a high degree on living alongside each other day-to-day and on reciprocally bestowed acts of affection and care.<sup>8</sup>

However, any deeper understanding of this notion requires us to take into account the fact that not only human beings possess *kwere-*. Nor is this attribute restricted to what we conceive as living entities; stones, water, and even the wind have *kwere-*. Consequently, while one of the referents for *kwere-* is meat as bodily substance, meaning you can say that you ate the *kwere-* of



a game animal, the fact that things like wind have *kwere-* would seem to imply more a specific mode of acting – a way of being. So, for example, people may say that a certain woman is quick to anger because her *kwere-* is like this, just as an animal species feeds on one fruit and not another because of its *kwere-*. Likewise, the wind blows strongly because the *kwere-* of the wind is thus, and rain soaks everything as it passes because of its own specific *kwere-*. The term *kwere-* primarily designates ‘a set of affections or ways of being’ (Viveiros de Castro 1996: 128) rather than a physical substrate (see also Allard 2003: 52; Surrallès 2003: 37).

*Kwere-* comprises, therefore, a kind of body absolutely consistent with the descriptions of bodies found in the Amazonian literature, although in some of these works the reading of the data tends to be made back-to-front. In these we find a substance impregnated with dispositions and affects (mindful bodies or embodied knowledge) rather than a way of being actualized in bodily form. This is a key point since it reveals the conceptual interference of the Western idea of the body as the starting point which is subsequently reworked.

As I have shown elsewhere (Vilaça 2002), kin-making activities focused on the construction and modification of bodies, so well described by Americanist ethnologists, not only relate to the domestic group but also to this wider universe of subjectivities including animals and spirits. The couvade and other abstinence rituals clearly show that human bodies, subject to a continual process of fabrication, can be attracted by other subjectivities, such as animals, and transformed into them. Kinship processes involve an implicit dialogue with non-human subjectivities, indicating their relationship to much wider cosmological processes. This suggests that the fabrication of the human body ‘is based on a negativity: on a negation of the possibilities of the “non-human” body’ (Viveiros de Castro 1987 [1977]: 32; also see Descola 2001: 108).

The body metamorphosized by these relations is one aspect of that which the Wari’ conceive as the soul, as we shall see below.

## Humanity

In Amazonia humanity is a condition extendable to various types of beings, while the context of its definition is always relative. Among the Jivaroan Achuar described by Anne-Christine Taylor, the category ‘we’ or ‘person’ is defined in opposition to ‘they’ and its content is variable: it can include spirits with a human appearance and others with a non-human appearance that exhibit human behaviour. In other circumstances these same beings do not fall under the ‘we’ category (Taylor 1996: 204; 1998: 322–3).<sup>9</sup> Among the Wari’, the term *wari*’, which signifies we, people, human being, is defined primarily in opposition to game animals, and more broadly contrasts with foods in a general sense, all of which are defined as *karawa*. Nevertheless, the very same animals hunted and eaten by the Wari’ are also considered human, especially since they themselves can act as predators and eaters – the core meaning of the term *wari*’. Acting as humans and predators, they treat the Wari’ as game. In sum, while – as in the Jivaro case – the definition of we, person, is contextual, in the Wari’ case we can observe the potential for a complete over-

lapping of the two categories. All – or almost all – prey animals can be people, depending primarily on their ways of acting.

Although they see jaguars as animals, the Wari' know from their shamans that jaguars see themselves as humans: that is, as people pursuing a full social life and endowed with a human appearance. A similar instance among the Carib of British Guiana, taken from Ahlbrinck's work of 1924, is cited by Lévy-Bruhl as an example of this extended notion of humanity: '[A]nimals (just as plants and inanimate objects) live and act like humans. In the morning, the animals go "to work," as the Indians do. The tiger, the snake and all the other animals leave to go hunting; like the Indians, they must "look after their family" ...' (Ahlbrinck 1924: 221 in Lévy-Bruhl 1996 [1927]: 30).

While the human form is a strong indication of a human being, it may nonetheless be deceptive.<sup>10</sup> It is always best to distrust one's own eyes. An event which befell some of my Wari' friends provides a perfect example. A child is invited by her mother to take a trip to the forest. Many days go by as they walk around and pick fruit. The child is treated normally by her mother until one day, realizing just how long they have spent away from home, the child starts to grow suspicious. Looking carefully, she sees a tail discreetly hidden between her mother's legs. Struck by fear, she cries for help, summoning her true kin and causing the jaguar to flee, leaving a trail of paw-prints in its wake. One woman, telling me about this event, said that, after finding her, the girl's true mother warned her to always distrust other people. Whenever she went far from home, either with her mother or father, she should take along a brother or sister as company (in order, I assume, to secure her point of view).<sup>11</sup>

The question of humanity is so central in Amazonia that the human/non-human opposition (or predator/prey in the Wari' case) ends up encompassing all others. It therefore comprises the key idiom for expressing difference in general (see Vilaça 2000a). To pick one example, gender distinctions in Amazonia tend to be conceived as human-animal or predator-prey oppositions (Taylor 2000: 314–316; pers. com. 2004). Among the Wari', being a predator is a central feature of being a man, and the male position is constructed in opposition to the female. This may operate in a triangular fashion when men act as providers of game and enemies to be eaten by women, or through direct opposition when the relation between men and women is conceived as equivalent to the relation between predator and prey (Vilaça 1996a; in press). The Wari' may refer to the sexual act as the hunting or killing of prey, in sentences such as 'did you shoot her?', 'did you kill her?' The equation between having sex and eating is widespread throughout Amazonia, and beyond. An event mentioned by Stephen Hugh-Jones (pers. comm. 2004) highlights this point. One day during fieldwork among the Tukanoan-speaking Barasana, he saw a group of brothers leaving a communal house, turning, as they left, to speak to another who was staying behind. 'I am going to hunt you a tapir', said one brother. 'I am going to hunt you a peccary', said another. When they returned one of them carried on his back a foreign captive woman, tied up in the same way as animal prey. She was put on the floor in front of his brother, who married her. It should be clear that since gender is the outcome of a relationship and not prior to it, the same applies to the equation between women and prey. As Taylor (2000: 316) reminds us apropos the Achuar, game is female because it is seduced by men (see Allard 2003: 26).



The comparison with Melanesia made by some authors proves valuable in highlighting this point, since there it is precisely gender which is used as an idiom to express difference. The relation of humans with non-humans and particularly with animals 'may be as central to the understanding of Amazonian sociability, as are gender distinctions to the construction of Melanesian identity' (Descola 2001: 108; see also Viveiros de Castro 2002a: 444, n. 7).<sup>12</sup> Marilyn Strathern stresses the same point in relation to Melanesia:

[H]umanity, and thus a division between humans and others, is not the principal ontological axis. I do not think that the difference between 'spirit' and 'animal' or 'human' has been the archetype for perspectival traffic in the Amazonian sense. Rather, it is persons who offer perspectives on one another. By this I mean that the significant lines are internal, between human beings as distinctive social entities, that is, between types or kinds, distinguished by their relationships with one another. That is why gender, as a means of reification, giving a form to persons, has figured so prominently in Melanesian anthropology (1999: 252-3).

As we shall see later, this implies different processes of body objectification: while in Melanesia people work to construct gendered bodies, in Amazonia what are objectified are specific human bodies.

### Bodies and souls

The Wari' define as human or potentially human all beings possessing *jam-*, a term which I have translated elsewhere as soul or spirit. However, unlike other Amazonian peoples, they do not conceive any necessary relation between *jam-* and a vital principle. There are living beings without *jam-*, such as spider monkeys, for example, who lost it after they had stolen some Wari' women (see Vilaça 1992). We could say that no living being, when acting in an ordinary manner, has *jam-*. For the Wari', *jam-* implies the capacity to *jamu*, a verb which means to transform, especially in the sense of an extraordinary action. Hence, when people say that a particular animal *jamu*-ed, they mean it acted as a human, shooting and killing a Wari' (an event which appears to Wari' eyes as the victim's sickening and death). Similarly, the shaman *jamu*-s when he acts together with his animal partners, perceiving them and being perceived by them as a similar.<sup>13</sup> *Jamu* therefore indicates a capacity to change affection and to adopt other habits, thus enabling the person to be perceived as a similar by other types of beings.<sup>14</sup> This focus on a metamorphic capacity as a central feature of humanity is not exclusive to the Wari'. Indeed, Ingold makes a similar observation concerning the Ojibwa: '[T]his capacity of metamorphosis is one of the key aspects of being a person' (2000: 91). The Wari' soul, like the Melanesian *mana* or *imunu*, is 'a quality or a set of qualities, rather than a thing' (Williams 1923: 362-63, cited in Lévy-Bruhl 1996 [1927]: 5).

It seems evident that we cannot speak of the body without speaking of the soul, as various Amazonianists have shown (see Conklin 1996: 375). However, the reason, at least for the Wari' with whom I have been working, seems to be not that the soul gives this body feelings, thoughts, and consciousness, but that it gives it *instability*. This is conceived as a capacity typical to humanity

which must be controlled since transformation may always be the result of the agency of other subjects rather than ego's desire (such as the processes of illness conceived by the Wari' as the capture of the soul by animals wishing to make the victim into kin: see Vilaça 2002). This idea of controlling an intrinsic (or even innate) capacity for transformation is present in many Amazonian ethnographies, taking the form of procedures – primarily prophylactic or healing – for impeding the soul's departure or for fixing the soul within the body (Rivière 1974: 431–3).

For the Wari', the soul's relationship to the body is at once symmetric and asymmetric. Considered as a capacity, that is, the potential to adopt an indefinite number of body forms, the soul's relation to the body is equivalent to the relation between the single and the multiple – hence asymmetric. However, since this capacity is always, from an outsider's perspective, actualized as a specific body, we can also state that the soul is symmetrical to the body.

Adapting a concept used by Marilyn Strathern (1988) in her analysis of Melanesian ethnography, we could say that while Melanesia reveals dividuals conceived as male and female, in Amazonia we are faced with dividuals conceived as human and non-human (or body and soul). But, as for Melanesia – when we consider that 'gender difference is not trivial ... the crucial difference was that between same-sex and cross-sex relations' (M. Strathern 1999: 253; 2001) – the concept of dividual carries within it a latent asymmetry. If, as we saw, the soul is another body, or a body seen from the perspective of the Other, it is also a capacity (or an adjective) in opposition to the body as a realization (or a substantive). Thus we have a pair composed, on one hand, by a single term and, on the other, by an infinite multiplicity of terms. We can also perceive this pair fractally: the soul is always decomposable into a body aspect and a soul aspect (as same-sex relations can contain cross-sex relations in Melanesia).<sup>15</sup> With this in mind we can comprehend the prophylactic procedures mentioned above as an eclipsing of the soul, just as in Melanesia it is necessary for one of the genders (or one kind of relation) to be eclipsed for a person to be able to enter into a new relationship (M. Strathern 1988; see also Gell 1999). In other words, the potential for metamorphosis has to be annulled in order for a specific humanity to be defined. Hence, the Wari' insist that healthy and active people do not have a soul (*jam-*).

The aspect of the soul as an actualization of the body in another world (which means within another set of relations) is evident in the association the Wari' make between soul, shadow, reflection, and traces left by the body, all named in an identical manner: *jam-* (also see Conklin 2001: 258 n. 9). This association is not restricted to the Wari' and is, in fact, widespread. Lima (1995: 139–40) tells us that another Amazonian people, the Juruna, call both the soul and the shadow or reflection *āwi*; among the Araweté, Viveiros de Castro (1986: 514; 1992) reports that *î* is the term for shadow, image, reproductions (such as the recording of a voice, for example), as well as being the term for vital principle.<sup>16</sup> These authors, as well as myself (see Vilaça 1992), did not draw any further conclusions from this fact, and chose not to associate the term's different referents, taking the soul, as a principle of subjectification, and the shadow to be essentially distinct.<sup>17</sup> However, it now seems to me that the homonymy between the principle of subjectification/transformation and the

shadow implies that the soul is actualized as a body in another world, very often conceived as a world in negative, exactly like that of the shadow. The Wari', as well as a number of other peoples, say the world of the spirits experiences night when it is day in the world of the living, and vice versa. This suggests that the light/dark contrast involved in the perception of the body and its shadow may in fact help us to understand the body/soul relation. This brings us to Viveiros de Castro's suggestion (2002a: 419–20; 444) that we can take the relation between soul and body as analogous to the relation between figure and ground explored in Gestalt studies. The author notes that this perspectival reversal is central to Amazonian thought, reminding us of Guss's analysis of Yekuana basketry (Guss 1989), where figure/ground reversal, in light/dark form, is highly elaborated as it is in various textile and body painting patterns. It is worth exploring this point further.

Wari' shamans say that during their process of initiation their eyes become strange. Walking in the forest, they see a peccary. Suddenly it transforms into a deer, then into an agouti, then into a paca. They explain that this oscillation is due to the fact these animals are all human and hence similar to each other. The shaman sees the soul of the animal, which turns him into a lousy hunter, since by seeing the animal as a person he finds himself unable to kill it. The reverse also occurs: the shaman may see a fellow Wari' as animal prey and kill him. The Wari' say that various people killed in jaguar attacks were actually killed by shamans; what the victims saw as a jaguar was actually the shaman's soul. Hence animal or human appearance depends primarily on the eyes of the person who is looking. Naming the appearance's body or soul depends on the way in which the observer perceives its activity: when ordinary, it is said to be a body; when extraordinary (involving what appears from his/her point of view as transformation), it is called soul.

This perspectival oscillation is not limited to shamans. It may befall any person and is taken as a constant risk by the Wari' and other Amazonian peoples. A hunter in the forest meets someone and goes to his or her house, discovering only later that he or she is not a similar, but an animal, a spirit, or someone who has died. Very often this fact is betrayed by observing some peculiarity in the person's form – as in the story of the jaguar kidnapping above – or, more frequently, by suddenly perceiving the strange habits of this person and his or her companions, who may eat worms, claiming they are animal meat, or sleep in trees, claiming they are lying in hammocks, and so on. Perceiving this bizarre behaviour, the hunter finds a way of escaping and returns home. However, if he is capable of seeing the people as perfect similars and perceiving their habits as analogous to his own, he will have been captured by them – meaning he has turned into *their* similar. Should he now wish to return home, he will no longer be recognized by his own people but will be taken for an animal, a dead person, or a spirit. Here commensality plays a central role, not simply because the same food makes similar bodies but because being able to share food is an important sign of perspectival identity. Those who eat together are above all confirming that they share like points of view, which is the opposite to what happens with those who eat each other.

This becomes clear in Wari' funerary cannibalism, where affines and consanguines are differentiated by the inability of the latter to eat one of their

dead, whom they do not see as a corpse, associated by the Wari' with animal prey, but as people – as kin. The essential function of affines eating the corpse in the ritual is to impose their point of view on the dead person's kin, forcing them to recognize the person's death and thereby differentiate themselves from the deceased via a predator-prey opposition, equivalent for the Wari' to the opposition between the living and the dead. Wari' funerary cannibalism is primarily a question of acquiring or imposing a point of view, a perspective. A dead person's consanguines can only adopt this some time later: this occurs in a ritual marking the end of mourning, when the consanguines mourn over roasted animal prey as if it was their dead relative, and, together with the affines who ate the corpse, eat the prey (which, the affines call explicitly 'corpse'). Here there is no idea of a substance, memory, affect, or capacity of the deceased to be incorporated by the eaters – a situation that equally applies to warfare cannibalism, when the victim is eaten so as to mark his or her animal (non-human) nature. The one who eats constitutes him/herself as human (see Vilaça 2000a).

In an article on the Juruna concept of body, Lima raises a series of interesting points and states that the soul is the body seen from another perspective. In her words: 'If a spirit sees me, it only sees an aspect of myself that I am unable to see: my soul, which represents my whole body for it, my whole person ... Body and soul ... are relations or positions, or indeed perspectives' (2002: 12). Precisely the same point can be made in relation to the Wari' with the detail that, from ego's point of view, her own soul – invisible to herself – is also conceived as a quality that, in contrast to the body, identifies it with all other subjects. This quality is connected to a specific property of bodily transformation – namely the capacity to adopt new appearances as a means of acting within new relationships. From the point of view of others, however, the person's soul is an actualization of a body which these other people see in a specific manner, radically distinct (if they are another kind of people) from the way in which the person sees herself.

### On objects

The multiplicity of perspectives does not affect only what people conceive as persons, but also 'non-persons like rocks, water, air or smoke, which appear to possess an existence of their own, a nature irreducible and indifferent to relations' (Lima 2002: 13).

As Viveiros de Castro comments in relation to Casevitz's analysis of Matsigenka cosmology, 'what seems to be happening in Amerindian perspectivism is that substances named by substantives like "fish", "snake", "hammock" or "canoe" are somehow used as if they were relational pointers' (1998b: 51; see also 2002a: 382–7). They can be compared to kinship terms: 'You are a father only because there is another person whose father you are: fatherhood is a relation ... something would be "fish" only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is' (1998b: 51). Hence propositions such as 'people are monkeys to jaguars', examples of which abound in Amazonian ethnographies, are 'of the same nature as a proposition such as: "my uncle is grandfather to my son"' (Lima 2002: 15). So, 'if I am alive, a peacock bass is a fish; if I am dead, a

peacock bass is a corpse. If I am a woman, the brother of my mother is grandfather to my children; if I am a man, he is a cousin to my children' (Lima 2002: 17).

This is precisely what perspectivism is all about. There is no pre-given natural or objective universe (Viveiros de Castro 2002a: 386). Things, like persons, are constituted within relations, as the outcome of the latter. If, however, the relational quality of persons is determined by their soul, does the same apply to objects and things?

Although the Wari' – and various other Amerindian peoples – usually state that things do not possess souls (as a principle of subjectification), I suggest we can claim that they do, at least in an ideal sense. It is a widespread idea in Amazonia that human status is potentially attributable to all things when seen by a carefully trained eye. In other words, the most powerful shamans are those capable of subjectivizing the entire universe, locating human agency in things or their surroundings. Indeed the interest of such objects lies in this agential potential. Consequently, a rock only becomes an object of interest when it is perceived by someone as a spirit, or as a tool, bench, or other object associated with a human. A good example is given by Gow (2001: 208–15) in his analysis of reading among the Piro. A man named Sangama claimed he could read since he could perceive the paper as a woman who spoke to him. As Viveiros de Castro has observed (1998b), knowledge in Amazonia is the symmetrical inverse of our scientific knowledge, which identifies its own procedure as one of maximal and continuous objectification where subjects must be transformed into molecules in order to be known. The same point is highlighted by Marilyn Strathern commenting on Haraway's observations on science: '[W]e imagine that we shall learn more by dismantling those forms – undoing them to see what they are made of, an activity always proliferating, always incomplete' (1992: 86). Confirming this tendency to make room for a wide-ranging process of subjectification, Wari' shamans fail to agree completely on which animals have souls (Vilaça 1992). Likewise, various Wari' mythic accounts suggest that the soul is not a fixed ontological attribute, but a capacity linked to specific relational contexts. Some objects in fact had souls and lost them through various kinds of mishap. For example, one myth tells how the baskets made by women in the past walked by themselves, carrying the heavy loads of maize by hopping along forest trails. One day two women were walking in front of a group of these animated baskets when one of the women turned round and, startled by the comical way in which the baskets walked, burst out laughing. Deeply offended, the baskets resolved never to act in such an extraordinary way again. The Wari' add the explanation that the basket's *jam-* was extinguished. When a Wari' man came to visit me in Rio de Janeiro on his first trip to a big city, he saw a large digger at work and observed, 'Your ancestors were very wise not to laugh at things; that's why they continue to work by themselves'. According to Peter Rivière (pers. comm. 2004), Trio arrows were arrow-people, self-propelling subjects that disliked being maltreated. Indeed, a shaman had to visit them and negotiate their help in the same way shamans deal with animal spirits.

The fact that everything in the world exists only as a perspective also helps explain the general lack of interest in the origin of body substances shown by indigenous Amazonians (see Descola 2001: 103). Perspectival oscillation



means that any fixed determination of substances becomes impossible. The Wari' know that what blood is depends on who is looking. For jaguars, for example, blood is beer.

### Chronically unstable bodies

Let us return to the theme of the body's instability comprising one of its core features. In a fascinating article on the Achuar person, Taylor, taking the context of domestic relations as her initial reference point, observes that subjectivity is 'primarily a matter of refraction; it takes its source in the sense one has of others' perceptions of self' (1996: 206).<sup>18</sup> She goes on to argue that 'if selfhood as person is a state, it is also by nature a highly unstable one, in so far as one's inner landscape is shaped by the understanding one has of others' perceptions of oneself' (1996: 207); 'selfhood is textured by intersubjectivity' (1996: 209). If so, any external imbalance, from death to squabbles, makes the person vulnerable. This vulnerability frequently translates as illness.

It should be clear, then, that the instability that I have been examining here is not merely an outcome of extraordinary encounters in the forest but an intrinsic aspect of the internal relations of the local group or society. Depending on the other's image of oneself for one's own self-image inevitably produces a high degree of vulnerability. Taylor suggests that we must look to understand the means by which one acquires 'a minimally stable subjectivity' (1996: 202), which is an equilibrium necessary, if not for physical survival, then at least for the reproduction of society. For Taylor this stabilization is achieved by means of kinship relations; these allow the construction of stable self-images in surrounding entities through memories of acts of care and affection.

Another way of minimizing the extreme anxiety generated by this vulnerability is through an encounter with an ancestral spirit, *arutam*, which offers the person the image of his or her own future. This leads us back to the typically Amazonian (or Amerindian, as suggested by Lévi-Strauss 1991) dynamic towards alterity (or alteration) as a way of experiencing the other's point of view of the self. In fact, according to Taylor, the capacity acquired during the encounter with the *arutam* 'hinges on a shift of perspectives: by internalizing the point of view of the fierce ghost, the mystic is henceforth able to see all other humans, including his familiars, through the eyes of an enemy' (2002: 464). Likewise, Wari' shamans adopt the point of view of animals to enable others to acquire an indirect experience of alteration, just as, among some Tupi-speaking groups such as the Araweté and Parakanã, warriors adopt the enemy's point of view (Fausto 2001; Viveiros de Castro 1986). We can also comprehend the widespread and well-documented interest in experiencing the Westerners' point of view in similar fashion. As Lima says of the Juruna, their world is a 'type of world in which true knowledge is conditioned not by the removal of the subject but by its appropriation of a position among the many existing out there' (2002: 17).

Hence the vulnerability generated by the instability of bodies is resolved in two ways. The first of these involves the neutralization of the potential for transformation by means of kin-making as well as through healing and



prophylactic procedures. The second involves the maximization of this potential through a continual experiencing of one's own *jam*-/soul from the viewpoint of the other.

It is worth remarking, though, that this involves acquiring a *minimum* of stability and not a complete stability. As Viveiros de Castro has already observed (1996; 1998a; 2002a: 391), metamorphosis is something that haunts the native imagination. Hence, although making kinship is a way of ensuring forms, if we consider that kin are made out of others, there always exists a latent possibility of alteration – that is, of kin revealing themselves to be as they were or as they really are. Alterity, not identity, is the default state in Amazonia (see Viveiros de Castro 2000; 2001). Although the episode with the jaguar-mother recounted above concerns a jaguar metamorphosizing into a mother (and not the inverse), it suggests precisely the jaguarness of mothers and highlights the anxiety concerning relationships that is identified by Taylor. I would also note that the child only saw the jaguar as a mother because it acted as such, inviting her to walk in the forest and taking care of her in just the same way as a mother would a child. The jaguar form emerges at the moment in which the child starts to suspect the behaviour of this mother, who stays much too long in the forest, apparently forgetting her other children left behind in the village. The form (or perception) is defined by the relation, and not vice versa.<sup>19</sup>

One last point – and this brings us back to the literature on the body – concerns the idea that any totalization of the body is impossible. Taylor writes that 'in sum, divided throughout their existence between a multitude of donors or fabricators, these chronically unstable and forever partible body-persons are doomed moreover to a state of intrinsic non-achievement, lacking an adequate conceptual space for their totalization' (1998: 318). This strikes me as a crucial point; it suggests that the split – since positional – character of bodies is one of their central features. This factor differentiates them, for example, from the body formulated in phenomenological approaches, which, although equally the source of all perception, exists as the sum of these perceptions. Merleau-Ponty observes about the object of perception that 'it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given, but in none of which it is given exhaustively' (1964: 15, cited in Csordas 1990: 35). This echoes a similar observation by Haraway, who proposes swapping the relativist view for the recognition of *location* and hence 'accepting the interpretative consequences of being grounded in a particular standpoint – the consequences of relatedness, partial grasp of any situation, and imperfect communication' (1991: 197–8, cited in Csordas 1999: 180). This too suggests the possibility of totalization through the sum of partialities.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, in Amazonian perspectivism the different perspectives do not add up; they are neither complementary nor equivalent. As Lima observes in relation to Juruna cosmology,

[A]lien perspectives are not, in theory, less true than the human perspective ... however, this does not mean they are equivalent or symmetrical, as they appear to us when we reduce this cosmology to a known world. Given that this is above all a lived world, and given that human existence here appears primarily as a human struggle, the relation between two or more perspectives is necessarily asymmetric. Or in other words, one

perspective effectively imposes itself on the other as a perspective with a superior truth value. Hence, this implies a hierarchy that is only ever defined *a posteriori* (2002: 19).

## Conclusion

I began this article by pointing out the asymmetry in the dialogue between the anthropological literature on the body, developed from the 1970s onwards, and the literature on indigenous groups of lowland South America dealing with the same theme. I was surprised that the authors specifically discussing the body have ignored the Americanist texts produced over the last few decades (many of them in English, our 'lingua franca') that highlight the centrality of the notion of the body in the economy of indigenous thought. The Amazonian data present in these ethnographies provide perfect illustrations of the 'mindful bodies' so widely evoked by these authors, especially since these same concepts have been broadly used by Amazonianists looking to engage with this literature in texts directly focused on the theme of the body.

However, there is an important difference in the analyses undertaken by these two sets of texts. The literature of a generalizing kind (with no negative connotation intended) manifests a tendency towards universalization, looking to demonstrate how our own (Euro-American) bodies are, or should be, like those of just about every kind of native – that is, equally 'mindful' and relational. The Amazonian literature, on the other hand, tends to accentuate precisely the difference between bodies. This is not simply a question of distinct discursive strategies since the authors show that we are faced with distinct concepts and that this is the perspective adopted by indigenous peoples (and not only Amazonian groups, as the example of the Canaque chief tells us) who insist on locating the difference between beings in their bodies.

The central issue discussed in this article is internal to tropical Americanism, although it refers to the categories used to think the body borrowed from the generalizing literature (itself heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Bourdieu's theory of practice). I have tried to show that the works on Amazonian groups, closely in tune with this literature, tend to emphasize the processes of making bodies, without giving due importance to the processes of transformation described in this text. I suggest that this is perhaps because they challenge the understanding of the body founded on a biological substrate underlying these analyses. I am not referring to genetic concepts; indeed, these works emphatically demonstrate that substances transmitted through conception are less important than or at most equally important to those acquired and exchanged through social practice, thus asserting that the body is not given at birth but made throughout life. What I refer to here as a biological notion of the body relates above all to its proximity to a notion of humanity defined by the biological concept of species rather than the indigenous concept of the human. Hence although the idea of a body under continual fabrication contains in itself the notion of transformation, when this dimension is explored the ethnographic focus is generally restricted to the universe of those we conceive as humans.

Here we have seen that an appreciation of the indigenous point of view on humanity – which ceases to be a category in becoming a position to be

occupied alternately by different types of beings – produces a radically different analysis in which processes of transformation become pre-eminent and where the instability of the body and the impossibility of its totalization emerge as central dimensions.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I refer specifically to sociological studies. For a review of this literature, see Frank (1990; 1993), Lock & Scheper-Hughes (1987), and especially Lock (1993: 135), who also mentions classical anthropological works on body symbolism such as those of Mary Douglas (1970). Also see Conklin and Morgan (1996); Csordas (1994; 1999); Le Breton (1995); Synnot (1993).

<sup>2</sup> In the words of Anne-Christine Taylor, 'the different ways of treating the body appear as the main tool of indigenous sociology' (1998: 317).

<sup>3</sup> For further developments of this idea, see Vilaça (2000b; 2000c) in relation to the Wari'.

<sup>4</sup> The few Amazonian texts most often quoted in these influential works on the body (e.g. Csordas 1994; Frank 1990; Lock 1993; Lock & Scheper-Hughes 1987) are Gregor (1985), Christine Hugh-Jones (1979), and Terence Turner (1980; 1995). Lock & Scheper-Hughes (1987) also cite Maybury-Lewis (1967) and Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971). Some information on the Bororo and the Yanomami is also included, but with no precise references. Andrew Strathern's book *Body thoughts* (1999) does not mention a single Amazonian work.

<sup>5</sup> A volume of the periodical *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* from 1996 (10: 3) containing several articles on the theme of health, sickness, the body, and personhood in Amazonia is a good example of the discussions about the body in Americanist anthropology over the last few decades.

<sup>6</sup> The Cashinahua studied by Kensinger (1995) and McCallum (1989; 1996; 2001), among other ethnologists, comprise, I think, one of the clearest examples of what the general literature on the body refers to as 'embodied knowledge'.

<sup>7</sup> See Vilaça (1996a; 2000b) for an analysis of the relationship between the Wari' and non-Indians, conceived by the Wari' as different kinds of peoples due to their possession of different bodies. See also Vilaça (1996b; 1997; 2003); and see Kelly Luciani (2003) for the Yanomami case.

<sup>8</sup> For further information on the Wari' body, see Conklin (1996; 2001); Conklin & Morgan (1996).

<sup>9</sup> See Descola (2001: 106) and Leenhardt (1979 [1947]: 26) for a very similar presentation of the Canaque concept of person, *kamo*.

<sup>10</sup> Writing on the Jivaroan Achuar, Taylor (1996: 317) concludes that the human form is no guarantee of humanity. See also Taylor (1998: 317; 2002: 462–4). Leenhardt (1979 [1947]: 27) mentions the same phenomena among the Canaque, remarking on the uncertainty about what kind of person is actually next to you.

<sup>11</sup> See note 19 below. Moraes (2004) reports a very similar event from the Alto Xingu, where two brothers were kidnapped by the deer spirit who pretended to be their cousin.

<sup>12</sup> As Descola demonstrates in his article, the evidence suggests that, in contrast to Gregor and Tuzin's proposal (2001), what counts as 'gender' in Melanesia need not necessarily be translated as 'gender' in Amazonia. The systematic comparison between the two regions, which has proven to be highly productive, primarily implies a search for something close to what Leenhardt (1979 [1947]) called 'deep translation'. Also see Stephen Hugh-Jones (2001) for an

interesting comparative exercise between 'Melanesia' and the Barasana of the Alto Rio Negro, a region where the concept of gender seems to have a different implication to that of most of Amazonia, and Marilyn Strathern (1999; 2002), as examples of how an anthropological comparison between the two regions might appear.

<sup>13</sup> *Jam-* is also the way people act in dreams whose model is the shamanic dream. Shamans apart, the Wari' usually say that they do not dream. While asleep, people are susceptible to having their *jam-* captured by a witch wishing to kill them, or by an animal or dead spirit, with whom they will live. Also see Fausto (2001) on dreams among the Parakanã.

<sup>14</sup> The Barasana say that when a person picks up a baby animal to raise it as a pet, he or she must first cast certain spells in order to change the animal's soul (*usu*) so that it will be able to live among humans. They say that they make them eat words (S. Hugh-Jones, pers. comm. 2004).

<sup>15</sup> See Viveiros de Castro (2000; 2001; 2002a: 444) on the Amazonian dividual. On the specific conception of fractals, see Viveiros de Castro (2002a: 439–40). See also Kelly Luciani (2001) for the same type of comparisons and for an exploration of the notion of fractality in Amazonia.

<sup>16</sup> See Da Matta (1976: 86) on the Apinayé, and Huxley (1980: 212–13) on the Urubu.

<sup>17</sup> Viveiros de Castro differentiates 'between a concept of soul as a *representation of the body* and another concept of soul which does not designate a mere image of the body, but *the other of the body*. Both these ideas exist and co-exist in indigenous cosmologies' (2000: 28, n. 38, original emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> For a further elaboration of these ideas, see also Taylor (2002: 462–4).

<sup>19</sup> I thank one of the journal's anonymous readers for prompting me to clarify this point. It seems tempting to say that rather than being a false mother this jaguar is an ideal mother, since she dedicates herself so much to the child that she forgets the other children. It is because she acted as a hyper-mother that the jaguar was identified as such, which permits us to think that the jaguar is the default state of mothers.

<sup>20</sup> Csordas underlines this point by saying that 'the most fruitful definition of the real is that ... of an indefinite series of perspectival views, none of which exhausts the given objects ... This perspective does not deny that objects are given; as I have emphasized throughout this essay, the body is in the world from the start' (1990: 38).

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## Des corps chroniquement instables : réflexion sur la corporalité en Amazonie

### Résumé

Sur la base d'un matériel ethnographique recueilli chez les Wari' (Rondônia, Brésil), cet article remet en question quelques-uns des présupposés de la littérature anthropologique contemporaine concernant les conceptions indigènes du corps, en étudiant une composante essentielle de la corporalité des peuples amazoniens, peu évoquée dans les études ethnographiques de l'Amazonie : son caractère instable et transformationnel. Cette dimension n'apparaît que lorsque l'analyse suppose un élargissement de la notion d'humanité (signalée pour la première fois à notre attention par Lévy-Bruhl et Leenhardt, entre autres) qui inclurait non seulement les êtres que nous considérons comme humains, mais aussi d'autres entités subjectives telles que les animaux et les esprits. L'élaboration de cette problématique est centrée sur la discussion des relations entre le corps et l'âme, entre humanité et corporalité.

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