

Decolonizing More-Than-Human Scholarship, Building Collaboration

by **Julie Velásquez Runk** | University of Georgia | julievr@uga.edu

Near Panama's forest frontier in 2012, a months-long standoff ended with the killings of an indigenous Wounaan village authority, Aquilino Opuá, and a mestizo rosewood logger, Ezequiel Batista (Polanco 2012). Then, in 2014, as Chinese-market demand peaked during Panama's lame-duck logging season, virtually all cocobolo rosewood was logged from Wounaan lands. Through conversations with residents, and local and national authorities of the Wounaan Podpa Nam Pömaam (Wounaan National Congress), I extended my more than fourteen-year partnership with Wounaan on the clash between the dead wood of commerce and the living wood of indigenous thought. More than that, the cocobolo loss became symbolic of cultural loss—religious traditions, land, economy, language, ethics—centuries in the making, but felt with seeming logistic force during Panama's rocketing economic growth. In Wounaan villagers' and authorities' political resurgence they reinvigorated traditional ritual, questioned loggers and missionization, and doubled down on land rights efforts. The rosewood example illustrates how more-than-human scholarship is partial in the absence of political economy and lived, emplaced relationality.

That rosewood work also is the most recent in a series of manuscripts born of frustration. During the 2010–2014 Proyecto Tradición Oral Wounaan (PTOW), Chenier Carpio Opuá, Doris Cheucarama Membache, Rito Ismare Peña, hapk'lan¹ Tonny Membora Peña, Chindío Peña Ismare, and hapk'lan Toño Peña Conquista and I repeatedly discussed how their stories related to more-than-humanism and ontology, or the nature of being. Many words and texts on those topics seemed to renew an emphasis on indigenous alterity without

addressing historical or political changes, a pattern familiar from centuries of colonial representations. Then, with Bruno Latour's 2013 talk at the American Anthropological Association meetings, ontology became known to English-speaking students and colleagues who had not read indigenous scholarship or the Spanish, Portuguese, and French literature that had been circulating for decades. Like a number of scholars (e.g., Bessire and Bond 2014; Hunt 2014; Ramos 2012; Sundberg 2014; Todd 2016), we were wary of a new colonialism that "the ontological turn" was creating. Ironically, this was happening at a time when there was a greater awareness of decolonizing scholarship and community-based research.

Chenier, Doris, Rito, Chindío, and, before their 2016 deaths, hapk'lan Tonny and hapk'lan Toño, developed a strategy to address such essentializations: to collaboratively publish about ontology. Here, I describe concerns about the more-than-human literature and indicate the rationale for our publications, drawing out where the two intersect. I follow the preferences of Wounaan authorities, reflecting their egalitarianism, that we not name individuals in quotes or as sources as information, with exceptions for authorities and artists. I also show how we have steadily moved into multimedia and multimodal scholarship with a greater focus on Wounaan audiences. I conclude with suggestions for furthering collaborations and decolonizing the academy. I have been reluctant to write about these topics, because I resist speaking for my coauthors who are rightly the experts here. However, there remains a persistent neglect of collaborative and nontextual alternatives to scholarship. With a body of work behind us, it seems that the decolonial (re)turn (Todd

¹ The Wounaan meu honorific for the deceased.

2018; Walcott 2016) is an apt time for addressing these topics from my position of privilege within the academy.

Essentializing Ontology

Referring to “Amerindian” beliefs as if they were the same; archaeological interpretations removed from local indigenous populations; hunting metaphors that often overlooked women and other genders; and, in the case of neighboring Emberá and Wounaan, the iconography of shamanic curing staffs that purportedly differed from that understood by their shamans and communities—these were some of what we heard or read about ontology that generated our frustrations.

We clearly were not the first to recognize the essentializing and colonizing potential of research and, specifically, more-than-human scholarship. A rich literature now addresses these concerns (e.g., Cajete 2000; Deloria 1969; Lassiter 2005; Smith 2002), with prominent articles on ontology having hundreds of citations (e.g., Todd 2016). Additionally, authors of Latin American ethnography have steadily disrupted essentializing. These include many, many works by indigenous scholars that are often locally published and difficult to find in a literature search (e.g., Equipo Técnico de la EBI Guna 2011; Peña 1997), as well as other key works on gender (Conklin 2001; Suárez Navaz and Hernández 2008), Afro-descendant communities (McKnight and Garofalo 2008), agency of objects (Santos-Granero 2009), embodiment (Rival 2002; Tola, Medrano, and Cardin 2013), exchange among Afro-descendant and indigenous communities (Losonczy 1997), music (Hill and Chaumeil 2011), morality (Londoño Sulkin 2005), land (Escobar 2015), politics (Bessire 2014), coproduction (Leyva and Speed 2015; Rappaport 2008), and collaboratively authored volumes by shamans and academics on Yanomami (Kopenawa 2013) and Emberá shamanism (Domicó, Hoyos, and Turbay 2002). As a US-based scholar, what surprised me in the popularity of the ontological turn was the omission of decades (and it would be easy to argue for centuries) of scholarship. That genealogical rupture further alienated indigenous knowledge and scholarship, compounding historic colonialism in which indigenous scholars often went unnamed

or unacknowledged (Bruchac 2018; Deloria 1969; Simpson 2017; Todd 2016). Also unnoticed in much of the literature is that the academy’s mainstreaming of indigenous thought is far beyond the social sciences’ more-than-humanism, ontology, and multispecies ethnography, and includes literature’s ecological turn, history’s posthumanism, art’s new materialism, and even engineering’s internet of things.

Crafting Collaborative More-than-Human Publications

In the PTOW, community and academic linguists and anthropologists and authorities of the Wounaan Podpa Nám Pömaam and Fundación para el Desarrollo del Pueblo Wounaan worked on a corpus of 60 years of audio recordings of Wounaan oral traditions or stories. In addition to the aforementioned scholars, our team also included Ron Binder, Bryan James Gordon, Elizabeth (Liz) Lapovsky Kennedy, Chivio Membora Peña, and Roy Teucama Barrigón. We digitized the stories, transcribed and translated a subset, and developed a grammatical sketch, bilingual dictionary, and alphabet cards and multiple curricular materials for Wounaan classrooms (Velásquez Runk and Carpio Opua 2018). The digitized stories have been repatriated to Wounaan authorities in Panama and Colombia and are archived under their control in three countries.

As we worked, we frequently circled back to symbolism, difficult-to-translate terms, Christian vocabulary, morality, and historical and cultural change, some of which became our conference presentations. We continually conversed about differences from the more numerous Emberá, with whom Wounaan are confused. Upon visiting Panama’s Biblioteca Nacional in 2012, a highly positioned staff member asked “So, you are Emberá-Wounaan?” “No,” Chindío replied, “we are Wounaan.” After that day, we embraced a strategy to make Wounaan’s world of many worlds (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018) better known: we decided to present and publish on select aspects for Panamanian and international communities. This was not an entirely new approach; successive Wounaan authorities had requested that I do so. Internationally, we were aided by Ernst Halbmayer

and Mònica Martínez Mauri, who convened meetings to recognize the Isthmo-Colombian area of lower Central America and northern South America as a cultural area distinct from Mesoamerica, the Andes, and Amazonia.

We first countered a pervasive idea about human-animal metamorphosis in archaeological talks, museum exhibits, and shamanism (Velásquez Runk, Peña Conquista, and Peña Ismare 2016; Velásquez Runk, Peña Ismare, and Peña Conquista 2019). Together Chindío, ηαρκ'λλη Toño, and I discussed the many ways Wounaan culture incorporates animals as part of everyday more-than-human conviviality, rather than just predation, and the often underacknowledged morality. We addressed two registers of ontology: stories and the ritual of p'oo nām, in which virtuous characteristics of plants, animals, and things are passed to (mostly) newborns through the navel. We wanted to counter what seemed to be an overemphasis on animals in the ontology literature and also to use practice, rather than oral traditions alone, to indicate embodied, practiced, emplaced knowledge that has changed over time.

We next worked on the musical haaihi jëeu nām ritual with the k'ugwiu (Peña Ismare, Ismare Peña, Carpio Opuā, and Velásquez Runk 2019; Peña Ismare, Velásquez Runk, Ismare Peña, and Carpio Opuā 2020). The ritual is to pray/petition to Hëwandam, recognizing that he is the creator of everything that exists and that one must obediently enact what he imparted. Wounaan identify it as key to who they are and how that performed religiosity distinguishes them from Emberá. Wounaan had long prohibited outsiders from seeing the ritual. However, in 2015, after the illegal rosewood logging, Wounaan authorities began a press campaign about their persistent land rights struggles. As I watched national and international press take video of haaihi jëeu nām it was obvious that times had changed, but we were motivated to write by some press references to “Emberá-Wounaan.” Increasingly uneasy about being first author on our publications, I approached Chindío, who we cited at length from his volume on music (Peña 1997). I expressed my discomfort with the convention, now often stated by journals for collaborative authorship, under which I had been socialized that the lead

be able to speak to all aspects of a manuscript. Chindío also was uncomfortable being first. We agreed to be co-lead authors with our names listed in alphabetical order, followed by those of Rito, who is a flautist and now often convenes the ritual for congresses, and Chenier, who is from a family of prominent dancers and musicians.

We are orienting our publications for Wounaan audiences in three ongoing projects. Chenier, Rito, Doris, and I are combining bird guide training, ethno-ornithology, and forest restoration. The first grant's principal publication was an illustrated, brochure-size, quad-fold on birds in Wounaan meu, which we laminated for schoolchildren's outdoor use during the rainy season (Equipo Cultural Wounaan 2019). For the second grant, the donor required that we make a book. We have had many conversations about what that means, as well as how not to replicate an outsider gaze of birds as separate from other beings and lived place. We are now making an illustrated trilingual children's book that also is a digital audio book in Wounaan meu. That project, along with the multimedia rosewood work and a photo archive that Liz and I are developing in the Mukurtu platform, are on the agenda for discussion in a first Technical Committee meeting.

Collaborative Suggestions

Over the years, presentation and publication on more-than-human themes has become an integral part of Wounaan political resurgence. However, it is not the only way, and I want to be very clear that publications alone will not make structural change. Wounaan authorities also work with their communities and allies in public awareness campaigns, with project grants, and through government agencies, that together with research and publications have gained Wounaan stature and, very slowly, greater sovereignty and rights recognitions.

As Chenier and I (2018) have written regarding the PTOW, collaboration is process. When asked how to do decolonial research on more-than-human or other topics, I focus on what we identified as to why the PTOW worked even during a period of difficulty: trust in the collaborative process and

one another, flexibility in making changes, and regular and open lines of communication. We also noted that it is temporally and financially intensive to embrace work as process, especially given the economic precarity of many Wounaan. It means nontextual ways of working, taking advantage of new means—such as the relatively recent ease of audio and video—to address worlding. But, more fundamentally, it begins with recognizing privilege, a willingness not to be the expert, and to ask, rather than to tell. And in writing this, by no means am I saying that I have done everything right. I still cringe at missteps and things I misunderstood, did not understand, or wrote, and one of the many benefits of getting older is reflecting and learning to make revisions and to do things differently.

To create decolonial work and a decolonizing academy, structural adjustments and incentives need to be made to foster collaboration as process. This means financially supporting community-based research, longer time periods for grants and crafting publications, valuing nonacademic leadership and authors, investing in relationships and institutional strengthening beyond the academy, facilitating nontextual ways of publishing, and including community-based publications for promotion and tenure, and, more fundamentally, to incentivize academics to redistribute their privilege, including financial privilege (Hunt 2014; Kidman 2019; Latulippe and Klenk 2020; Velásquez Runk 2014). Otherwise, we are not working on a world of many worlds, but colonizing worlds, again.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful for the wonderful scholars, friends, and collaborators of Panama's Wounaan Podpa Nɔm Pömaam and the Fundación para el Desarrollo Wounaan. I am particularly grateful for the continued work with Chenier Carpio Opuá, Doris Cheucarama Membache, Rito Ismare Peña, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, and Chindío Peña Ismare. I will always miss the insightful, embodied conversations with hap'ɔm Tonny Membora Peña and hap'ɔm Toño Peña Conquista. I am deeply appreciative of Walker DePuy, Linda Kosen, and Kristen Morrow for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Special thanks to funders: the National Humanities Center, National

Science Foundation grants #BCS 0966520 and 0966046, United Nations Development Program, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Willson Center for Humanities and Arts.

References

- Bessire, Lucas. 2014. *Behold the Black Caiman: A Chronicle of Ayoreo Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bessire, Lucas, and David Bond. 2014. "Ontological Anthropology and the Deferral of Critique." *American Ethnologist* 41 (3): 440-456.
- Bruchac, Margaret M. 2018. *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Cajete, Gregory. 2000. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers.
- Conklin, Beth A. 2001. "Women's Blood, Warriors' Blood, and the Conquest of Vitality in Amazonia." In *Gender in Amazonia and Melanesia: An Exploration of the Comparative Method*, edited by Thomas Gregor and Donald Tuzin, 141-174. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De la Cadena, Marisol, and Mario Blaser, eds. 2018. *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Deloria, Vine. 1969. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Domicó, José Joaquín, Juan José Hoyos, and Sandra Turbay. 2002. *Janyama: Un aprendiz de jaibaná*. Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia.
- Equipo Cultural Wounaan. 2019. *Nemchaain Laraam, T'ɔmɔm K'aurtarrau*. Panama City: Wounaan Podpa Nam Pömaam.
- Equipo Técnico de la EBI Guna. 2011. *Nan garburba obuloged igar: Propuesta curricular de la EBI Guna*. Panama City, Panama: Editorial Sibauste, S.A.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2015. "Territorios de diferencia: La ontología política de los 'derechos al territorio.'" *Cuadernos de Antropología Social*, no. 41: 25-38.
- Hill, Jonathan D., and Jean-Pierre Chaumeil, eds. 2011. *Burst of Breath: Indigenous Ritual Wind Instruments in Lowland South America*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hunt, Sarah. 2014. "Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept." *Cultural Geographies* 21 (1): 27-32.
- Kidman, Joanna. 2019. "Whither Decolonisation? Indigenous Scholars and the Problem of Inclusion in the Neoliberal University." *Journal of Sociology*, March 21, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319835958>.
- Kopenawa, Davi. 2013. *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lassiter, Luke Eric. 2005. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Latulippe, Nicole, and Nicole Klenk. 2020. "Making Room and Moving Over: Knowledge Co-production, Indigenous Knowledge Sovereignty and the Politics of Global Environmental Change Decision-Making." *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 42: 7-24.

- Leyva, Xóchitl, and Shannon Speed. 2015. "Hacia la investigación descolonizada: Nuestra experiencia de co-labor." In *Prácticas otras de conocimiento(s): Entre crisis, entre guerras*. San Cristóbal de Las Casas: Cooperativa Retos.
- Londoño Sulkin, Carlos D. 2005. "Inhuman Beings: Morality and Perspectivism among Muinane People (Colombian Amazon)." *Ethnos* 70 (1): 7-30.
- Losonczy, Anne-Marie. 1997. *Les saints et la forêt: Rituel, société et figures de l'échange avec les indiens Emberá chez les Négro-Colombiens du Chocó*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- McKnight, Kathryn Jo, and Leo J. Garofalo. 2008. *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550-1812*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Peña, C. 1997. *Maach wounaanau nem sirnaa hau nām dai jemk'a nāmpa k'īrpierr (La música de los wounaan y las ceremonias asociadas con cada estilo)*. Panamá: Iglesia Evangélica Unida.
- Peña Ismare, Chindío, Rito Ismare Peña, Chenier Carpio Opuá, and Julie Velásquez Runk. 2019. "El ritual wounaan de haaihi jëeu nām con el k'ugwiu." In *II Congreso de Antropología e Historia*. Ciudad de Panamá.
- Peña Ismare, Chindío, Julie Velásquez Runk, Rito Ismare Peña, and Chenier Carpio Opuá. 2020. "The Wounaan haaihi jëeu nām ritual with the k'ugwiu: Reinforcing benevolence and preventing calamity." In *Amerindian Socio-Cosmologies between the Andes, Amazonia, and Mesoamerica: Towards an Anthropological Understanding of the Isthmo-Colombian Area*, edited by Ernst Halbmayer. Oxfordshire: Routledge Press.
- Polanco, R. 2012. "Dos muertos y tres heridos." *La Prensa* (Panama City).
- Ramos, Alcida Rita. 2012. "The Politics of Perspectivism." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 481-494.
- Rappaport, Joanne. 2008. "Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation." *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1: 1-31.
- Rival, Laura. 2002. *Trekking through History: The Huarorani of Amazonian Ecuador*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Santos-Granero, Fernando, ed. 2009. *The Occult Life of Things: Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2017. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2002. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Suárez Navaz, Lilliana, and Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, eds. 2008. *Descolonizando el feminismo: Teorías y prácticas desde los márgenes*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra.
- Sundberg, Juanita. 2014. "Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies." *Cultural Geographies* 21 (1): 33-47.
- Todd, Zoe. 2016. "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29 (1): 4-22.
- Todd, Zoe. 2018. "The Decolonial Turn 2.0: The Reckoning." *Anthro(dendum)* (blog), June 15, 2018. <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/06/15/the-decolonial-turn-2-0-the-reckoning/>.
- Tola, Florencia, Celeste Medrano, and Lorena Cardin, eds. 2013. *Cran Chaco: Ontologías, poder, afectividad*. Buenos Aires: Asociación Civil Rumbo Sur.
- Velásquez Runk, Julie. 2014. "Enriching Indigenous Knowledge Scholarship via Collaborative Methodologies: Beyond the High Tide's Few Hours." *Ecology and Society* 19 (4), article 37.
- Velásquez Runk, Julie, and Chenier Carpio Opuá. 2018. "The Collaborative Process in a Wounaan meu Language Documentation Project." In *Insights from Practices in Community-Based Research: From Theory to Practice Around the Globe*, edited by Shannon T. Bischoff and Carmen Jany, 246-265. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Velásquez Runk, Julie, Toño Peña Conquista, and Chindío Peña Ismare. 2016. "Transferencia de y transformación a animales entre wounaan." In *I Congreso de Antropología e Historia de Panamá*. Ciudad de Panamá.
- Velásquez Runk, Julie, Chindío Peña Ismare, and Toño Peña Conquista. 2019. "Animal Transference and Transformation among Wounaan." *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 24 (1): 32-51.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. 2016. *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies*. London, Ontario: Insomniac Press. //