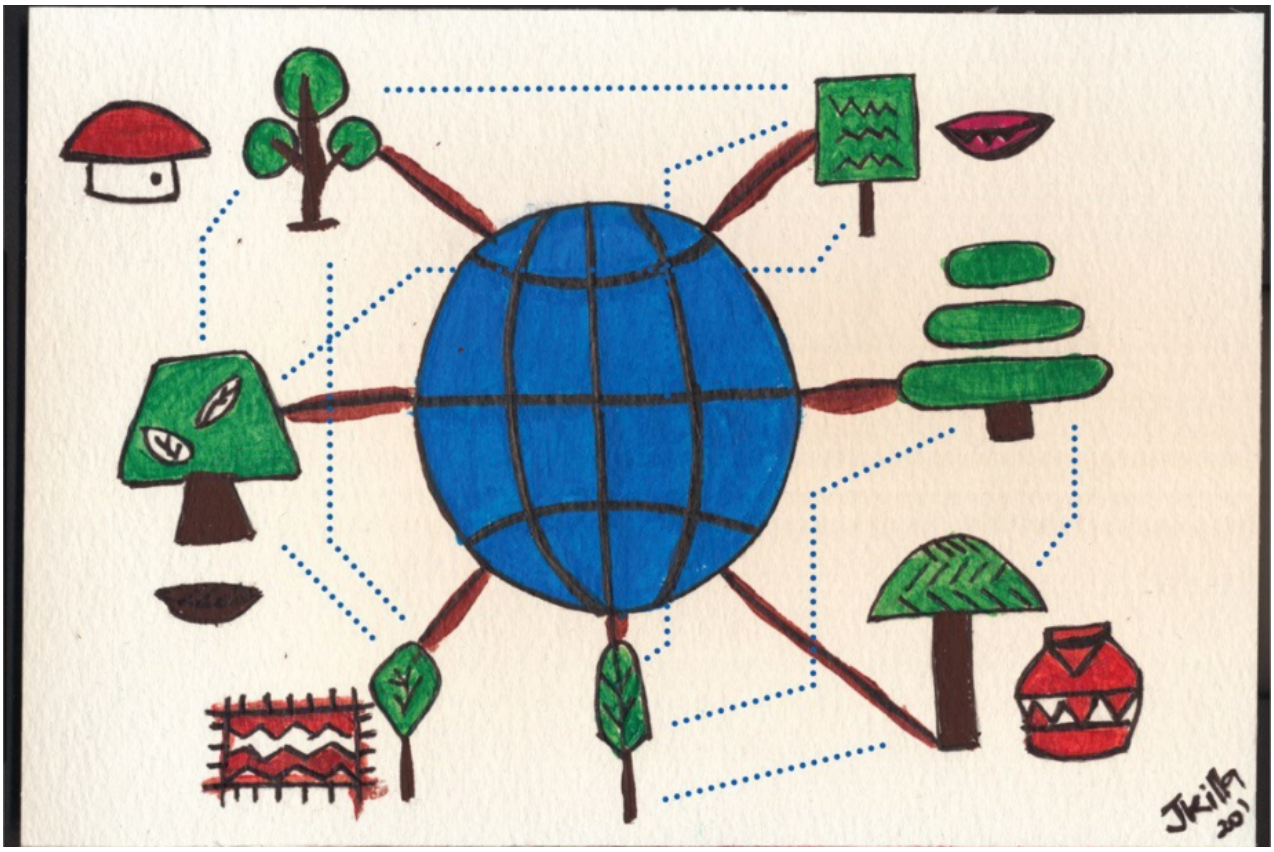
Jenny García Ruales

Hearing, Seeing, Smelling, Touching, Tasting

Anthropological Reflections on a Digital Encounter with a Forest during the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic



Digital Ethnographies of Environmental Encounters. Drawing by Jenny García Ruales (Jkilla).

My planned encounter with a particular forest, the *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) in the Ecuadorian Amazon, has been transformed. While figuring out how to connect digitally with my non-human interlocutor, who in this case is not just the forest as an assemblage but a multiplicity of species, I also reflect on some aspects of what

decolonial knowledge production means in the context of the pandemic.

In his 2018 article, "*Cowboy anthropology*": *nos limites da autoridade etnográfica*", the Amazonian anthropologist Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida addresses the question of how Anthropology as a discipline has evolved over the years and how the heterogeneous narratives of the role of anthropologists relate to their social engagement. For this purpose, he draws on a range of historical evidence of different anthropological classifications and, in doing so, reveals two main aspects that are contradicting and complementing each other: serving power structures and shifting attention to ways-of-being-living-knowing of human groups with their environment. A key aspect of the article is the constant shifts in Anthropology, in particular, the constant repositioning of how we approach our subjects and our fieldwork as such (Wagner Berno de Almeida 2018: 9). The global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic re-shapes our role as anthropologists once again as it forces us to practice a virtual form of ethnography that calls into question other forms of negotiations in digital social interactions and makes us aware of the importance of reflecting on our *Handlungen* (actions).

Interpreting Possible Ways of a Non-Colonial Anthropology

To me, Anthropology in times of digitization means, first of all, pursuing an approach that seeks not to increase the health risks of our interlocutors. Encounters with indigenous communities in the Amazon had significant impacts (Macdonald 2020) and belong to the controversial part of the history of Anthropology. Doing non-colonial Anthropology in times of the pandemic means to make use of our positionality, resources, and privileges by calling for emergency funds and reporting about the situations that our interlocutors are facing when relying on their own indigenous readings of the pandemic. A collaborative process of translation is essential here, in which anthropologists familiarize themselves with indigenous

languages, communicate narratives of *medios comunitarios* (communitarian media contrasting the state media), or produce material such as infographics explaining SARS-CoV-2 or health prevention measures. Meanwhile, despite the global health emergency, illegal mining, oil extraction, and deforestation are still taking place in the Amazon (ISA & Yanomami 2020), thus local proposals for protecting territories need to be supported.

One example of this kind of involvement was started by the SARS-CoV-2 task force of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA). (Doing) decolonial Anthropology implies engaging in a dialogue of knowledge (De Sousa Santos 2018: 229), exchanging expertise and perspectives, sharing views and ways-of-being physically and virtually under the umbrella of solidary academia. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic offers us with vivid cases relying on both local knowledge and interdisciplinarity that exemplify what a dialogue of knowledge means:

The multilingual educational micro-series "Yo me quedo en mi comunidad" (I stay in my community), jointly developed by bilingual educators, communicators, and anthropologists, seeks to strengthen health prevention in the Amazon by using information collected in indigenous communities. Importantly, the [health] recommendations are offered in different indigenous languages and tailored to the ways-of-living of the communities, contrary to the standard information provided by the state, which are solely applicable to urban zones.

Humans are not the only protagonists in this dialogue of knowledges. The leaves of *matico* and the barks of the *quina* tree have been companion species used by the Peruvian Amazon communities of the Shipibo-Konibo and the Yanesha to alleviate symptoms of SARS-CoV-2. In "*Plantas del bosque socorren a la ciudad*" (Plants of the forest help the city), the anthropologist Luisa Elvira Belaunde (2020) points out the importance of acknowledging herbal knowledge, the respect for autonomy, and ancestral wisdom. She highlights how long-existing plant-human relationships of care and kinship in the Amazon basin are being reinforced or new relationships are

built. In this sense, a plant-human ethnography can contribute significantly to symmetric forms of producing knowledge in the context of the pandemic.

Another amazing example of knowledge production in the pandemic pursuing a non-colonial Anthropology is the publication *Pandemia e Territorio* (Wagner et al. 2020) by the project Nova Cartografia Social da Amazonia[1] This publication relies on social research relations, where the information and data were gradually received from social movements representing indigenous peoples, Palenqueros and Cimarrones communities. The book conceives the inverted idea of an obituary, an inverted biography with *living information* about the dead. The official information only spoke of "100 Indians" who died of SARS-CoV-2, ignoring their ethnicity and other details on who these persons were (personal conversation with Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida). The collaborative obituary highlights the challenges of social organization in the Amazonian territories during the pandemic and addresses specific local elements, such as new forms of producing and bartering food and building knowledge. The book makes visible how the pandemic has changed the forms of resistance and gives ethnographic details of the death numbers. Such examples of committed scholarship illustrate an Anthropology of Anthropology in times of digitization.

Decolonizing the Internet

In the digital age, the internet is an advocacy and resource tool that connects us with our interlocutors. The internet as a medium sheds light on the digitization of the subjects. Many indigenous communities nowadays have social media accounts where they express their identity in different forms and have become digital subjects. Within this digitalization current stream there are epistemological effects on our (digitized) research subjects and doing research **with** them requires asking for their permission and community consent.

Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida's (2018) insights remain useful with regard to our possibilities and limits when doing Anthropology in this context. In our digital age, Anthropology can contribute a critical approach to the ways in which images of indigenous actors are reproduced. The Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, in his good intention to raise funds for indigenous communities affected by the virus in Brazil, portrayed indigenous Amazonians as prehistoric, thus reinforcing images of the noble savage and perpetuating stereotypes. Despite this criticism, the Amazonian anthropologist Carlos Londoño Sulkin (2020) still sees some merit in Salgado's *Handlung*:

> „*This is frustrating when there's a brutal crisis, a time during which our limited ability to reach people with the knowledge that we have carefully produced translates into an inability to rally great forces. We can start small fundraisers, press minor levers, read and reply critically to the news, and hope these have an effect. In the meantime, let the superstars do their thing. Welcome it when it helps. And let us do the slower, scholarly work of trying to inject complexity and nuance into public knowledge of the matters at hand.*" (Londoño Sulkin 2020)

These examples point to the importance of rethinking once again the shifts that Anthropology is undergoing. We have to be *creative* anthropologists and start more than ever engaging in a dialogue of knowledge with different kinds of actors, which also includes other-than-human-actors. A digital encounter with the Living Forest means to reflect on the ethics, the research design, and the ethnographic mode of representation. A possible answer to my question raised in the beginning – how to facilitate an all-senses-encounter with the different worlds in the Living Forest as an environmental-legal anthropologist – could be collaboration: I am in conversations with an inspiring photograph, storyteller, and artist who digitally documented the Living Forest, in his work Secret Sarayaku. Through this transmedia project and

lively images, I can hear and see the Living Forest and the multispecies entanglements under (un)normal circumstances.

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Footnote

[1] For more information on the project and the new social cartography methodology see: http://novacartografiasocial.com.br/

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