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Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

Introduction

One day, during a long walk in the forest, I began crossing the shallow muddy waters of a stream to get on the other side of the shore, where the path continued. Carrying my backpack on the head, I oscillated from one side to the other, trying to maintain my sense of balance and avoid falling into the water with all my possessions. I was intent on doing this when Dina, my Runa host, who had quickly reached the other side of the river and had been attentively observing me from the shore, commented: 'You look like a tapir in the mud!'. Everyone present bursted out laughing, including myself. It was not the first time that my Runa friends paralleled my clumsy movements to those of certain forest animals. The analogies usually sparked hilarity as well as attempts at mocking my ungraceful animal-like movements. Such remarks were not, however, only reserved for the inept anthropologist. Comments and observations like the one I received are a recurrent feature of every day life among the Runa who are perspicacious observers of their own and others' movements.

Based on thirty-six months of fieldwork research among the Runa of Pastaza, an indigenous Kichwa-speaking population living in the Ecuadorian Amazon, this paper explores how moving is a central way in which the Runa experience a relationship of similarity with nonhuman others. Drawing upon anthropological and philosophical works on movement as well as research in developmental psychology and the neurosciences on the dynamic nature of intersubjectivity, in this paper I will suggest that movement and self-movement - understood here as the self-awareness of one's movements - constitute an important means through which the Runa come to perceive nonhumans as human-like.

Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

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The issue of how movement participates in the creation of relationships of similarity with nonhuman others is particularly salient for Amazonian anthropology which has consistently shown how indigenous people from this region of the world endow nonhuman entities with the capacity of thinking and leading human-like lives (Descola 2012; Fausto 2007; Kohn 2013; Lima 1996). This particular way of relating to nonhumans has been magisterially summarised by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) in his well-known model of Amazonian sociality. Building upon extensive regional ethnography, he suggests that 'the body' is conceived by indigenous Amazonian people as a set of 'dispositions or capacities which render the body of every species unique: what it eats, how it moves, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary' (1998:478). Difference and similarity are thus conceived in corporeal terms: the difference between a human and an animal depends upon the specific habitus or amalgam of substances unique to each species (Descola 2013; Santos Granero 2012). In Amazonian lived worlds, what instead both humans and nonhumans equally share is the possession of a soul or interiority, which takes the form of a human perspective. The Amazonian cosmos could be thus conceived as being populated by a vast array of beings which differ from each other in their bodily form but which all share the same 'internal human form' (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471). This common human interiority is what enables processes of metamorphosis and transformation which so often populate Amazonian worlds.

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In his original theorisation of perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro included 'movements' in the set of dispositions which characterise the making of a body. Yet, in Amazonian ethnography, the body is seldom explored as a body-in-movement. This means that we know little of the ways indigenous people move, the ways they think about movement, how they purposely enact certain movements with specific

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3 ends and the ways in which such movements might constitute meaningful ways to
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5 mark difference or resemblance between subjects. Even less we know about the
6
7 ways in which movement may participate in creating relationships with nonhumans.
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10 How, for example, is movement involved in episodes of transformation or
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12 perspective-taking which so frequently appear in the Amazonian ethnographic
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14 literature?
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18 In this paper I seek to advance an analysis of movement and, in particular, self-
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20 movement among the Runa so as to offer a fresh perspective through which to look
21
22 at human-nonhuman relationships. Through an analysis of a bodily condition known
23
24 as *paju*, I will first describe how the Runa develop an awareness of their own
25
26 movements in relation to those of nonhuman others. Then, building upon an
27
28 ethnographic example from the realm of pottery-making, I will show how self-
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30 movement - understood as the awareness of one's own movement - allows Runa
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32 people (and here, more specifically, Runa women) to align themselves to a
33
34 nonhuman entity known as the Grandmother of Clay. Movement becomes a common
35
36 'form' (Kohn 2013): a pattern which both human and nonhumans share and which
37
38 enables them to affect each other.
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46 **The anthropology of moving selves**

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49 Despite the renovated interest on the body and the senses in anthropological theory
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51 (Csordas 2002; Pink 2009) ethnographic research on movement is still in its infancy.
52
53 This is striking if one considers that 'no [human being] perceives except on condition
54
55 of being a self of movement' (Merleau Ponty 1968: 257). This omission may be due
56
57 to the fleeting character of movement or to its being something so embedded in our
58
59 daily lives to often go unnoticed (Sheets-Johnstone: xix). One of the earliest
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Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

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3 anthropological writers to acknowledge movement as a subject worthy of theoretical
4
5 attention was Marcel Mauss (1985[1936]) who, in a now famous essay, suggested
6
7 first, that all bodily techniques have a degree of motricity and secondly, that the way
8
9 one moves, just like other bodily techniques, is socially determined.

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11
12 Movement has also been a fundamental subject of enquiry in the
13
14 phenomenologically inspired works of Tim Ingold (2000; 2011) and Brenda Farnell
15
16 (2012) who have both called for the centrality of the moving body within social theory.
17
18 In her work on dance, Farnell suggests we need to attend to the kinaesthetic
19
20 character of bodies and, in so doing, look at the ways in which meaning is created
21
22 through movement and gesture. She proposes to see bodily movement as a sensory
23
24 modality in itself and therefore, 'as a potential resource for meaning-making or
25
26 semiosis' (2012:121). In her view, movements are not pre-reflective and pre-
27
28 conceptual ways of inhabiting the world but rather a fundamental way in which
29
30 people produce meaning. Like Farnell, Ingold also forcefully suggests to
31
32 acknowledge the fundamental relationship between movement and perception.
33
34 Inspired by James Gibson's psychology of perception (1979), Ingold argues that
35
36 'locomotion, not cognition, must be the starting point for the study of perceptual
37
38 activity' (Ingold 2011:46). For Ingold, perception is intrinsically linked to the body as it
39
40 moves and interacts within a given environment. It is by virtue of our sensorimotor
41
42 capacities as they are deployed within the environment in the pursuit of activity that
43
44 we perceive. In this view, moving is, quite literally, knowing. As Ingold stresses, this
45
46 does not mean 'that you know by means of movement but that knowing *is*
47
48 movement' (Ingold 2013:1, my emphasis).

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51 A similar argument has been advanced by philosopher Maxine Sheets-
52
53 Johnstone (1999) in her work on movement and self movement. Like Ingold and
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3 Farnell, Sheets-Johnstone suggests that movement should not be considered as a
4 way of gathering knowledge about the environment, but rather as a specific kind of
5 knowledge in itself. Drawing upon the work of developmental psychologists, she
6
7
8 argues that the awareness of one's movements we are all born with is our 'primal
9
10 sensibility' (136). Sheets-Johnstone's shift from movement to 'kineasthetic
11
12 consciousness' (130) which she understands as a 'dynamic sense-making of the
13
14 world' (128), is important. To say that by moving one acquires knowledge about the
15
16 world, she argues, operates within a 'naturalistic' account of the world whereby
17
18 movement is merely a mechanism to acquire information. Commenting on Gibson's
19
20 theorization of ecological perception, she argues that, while Gibson acknowledges
21
22 the importance of locomotion as *a means* to perceive, he nevertheless sees the real
23
24 business of perception as occurring through other senses, the visual, the auditory
25
26 and the olfactory. By conflating kineasthesia — proprioception — with other sensorial
27
28 modalities, Gibson readily misses 'the qualitative structure of movement' (205) and
29
30 does not do justice to 'the experience of movement - self-movement' (266). Instead,
31
32 she prompts us to understand self-movement as a way of knowing in itself thereby
33
34 shifting our attention upon some of the processes which take place during movement
35
36 itself. One of these is the process by which we perceive others as 'like' us.
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46 Sheets-Johnstone's work draws directly upon research done on infants'
47 imitative behaviour by developmental psychologist Andrew Meltzoff (2007). In a path-
48 breaking study conducted with infants, Meltzoff observed that since a few days after
49 birth, babies are able to imitate adults' gestures. The experiments led Meltzoff to
50 develop the 'Like me' hypothesis which suggests that infants, when seeing other
51 people's movements (for example, tongue protrusion), compare them with their own
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53 felt movements. The comparison between seen acts and the experience of one's own
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3 movements is what allows infants to attribute intentionality to others and thus to
4
5 recognise them as 'like me'. This finding, as Sheets-Johnstone readily points out, has
6
7 major philosophical implications in so far as it posits self-movement as the very
8
9 foundation for knowing about the self and others.
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13 I think this observation has major implications for anthropology too. Given the
14
15 discipline's interest in human-nonhuman relationships - expressed by the so called
16
17 nonhuman turn (Grusin 2015) and the renewed discussion around 'animism' (Harvey
18
19 2005) - an analysis of how movement plays out in the perception and understanding
20
21 of other beings' animacy could offer a refreshing perspective to these debates. The
22
23 close relationship between movement and animism has already been pointed out by
24
25 Tim Ingold (2011) in his work on life. Arguing that scholars of animism mistakenly
26
27 conceptualise animacy as a substance to be infused in entities or substances, Ingold
28
29 suggests that such view does not account for many phenomena, such as
30
31 meteorological events, which are perceived as 'alive' by some indigenous people. He
32
33 suggests instead an intrinsic relationship between life and movement and the
34
35 'primacy' of this latter in animist ontologies (2011:72).
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42 Ingold's account does not specifically address the nexus between self-
43
44 movement and others' movements cogently pointed out by Sheets-Johnstone as
45
46 being foundational for cognition. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the self-
47
48 awareness which emerge from moving comes from Rane Willerslev's (2007)
49
50 ethnography of hunting practices among the indigenous Yukaghir of Siberia.
51
52 Willerslev describes how, to hunt an elk, Yukaghir hunters seek to temporally act as if
53
54 they were elks themselves. They do so by wearing elk skin covered skis, which
55
56 imitate the sound of the moving animal. Most importantly, however, the hunter begins
57
58 to move like the elk, swinging slowly from side to side. During this imitation process,
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3 the hunter comes to grasp two perspectives at the same time. If, on the one hand, he
4
5 perceives himself as a subject who sees the animal as an object, on the other, he is
6
7 also aware of himself as an 'object' in the eyes of the subject-elk. The movement
8
9 allows the hunter to see himself both as object and subject simultaneously. It is this
10
11 double perspective which enables Yukaghir hunters to perceive elks as subjects
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13 possessing a human-like perspective.
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17 Willerslev's account of the dynamic and embodied dimension of perspective-
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19 taking is particularly apposite to the argument I will be developing here. In the
20
21 following pages, I will show how, similarly to the Yukaghir, the Runa recognise
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23 movement as a fundamental instance where the similar nature of humans and
24
25 nonhumans is revealed.
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32 **Runa ways of moving**

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34 For the Runa the way one moves is extremely important.¹ People readily notice the
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36 improper movements someone might perform when serving manioc beer or holding a
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38 machete. People also closely observe the movements of animals they encounter in
39
40 the forest and are able to reproduce such movements accurately. They can imitate
41
42 the particular gait of a capybara as well as the dance of certain birds in the sky. The
43
44 importance of movements for the Runa becomes most obvious in the case of a
45
46 special bodily condition called *paju*. The term *paju* is used by the Runa of Pastaza
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48 with two different meanings, one denoting a state of 'illness' and another which has
49
50 connotations of potency. During my fieldwork, the Runa mentioned instances of *paju*
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52 on a daily basis and often did so in the most disparate occasions. Yet, despite its
53
54 multifarious manifestations, all instances of *paju* are underlain by a common
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characteristic: an attention to movement. Let me explain this with an ethnographic example.

One day, my host grandmother, her granddaughter Maria and I came home from the garden, carrying three baskets full of peeled manioc. Tired of the work and sweaty for the tropical heat, Maria, who was then six year old, rushed to bathe herself in the nearby river, leaving her basket full of manioc lying on the kitchen floor. Upon return, her grandmother severely scolded her. Did she wanted to get *paju*? What did she think of, when she left the basket with the manioc inside? If she left the basket like that, in the future, when about to give birth, she would not be able to push the baby out. The baby would get stuck, like the manioc was stuck inside the basket on the kitchen floor. '*Tas tas tas*, empty the basket now', the grandmother intimated Maria. The little girl quickly grabbed the basket and turned it up side down, emptying its content on the floor.

In this episode, Maria's grandmother was referring to what is known by the Runa as the basket's *paju* (*ashanga paju*). Many analogies run through the basket *paju*. The first one refers to the alignment between manioc and children. Both manioc and children are considered by the Runa as female creations and possessions and are addressed in maternal terms.² Furthermore, both grow 'inside' (*ukui*), respectively in the earth (*allpai*) and in the womb (*huicsai*). The second analogy concerns the uterus and basket (*ashanga*). The two objects serve to contain and carry precious things (manioc and children). Moreover the Runa claim that their ancestors have created the first basket copying the shape of a bird's nest (*tasi*). The bird's nest, in turn, has uterine connotations: for instance, the coming out of a child and a mother from the postpartum seclusion, understood as a kind of social birth, is described by the Runa as 'coming out of the nest' (*Huahua tasimanda llukshishca*). The third

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3 analogy in the *paju* described above concerns the passage between interior and
4 exterior (inside and outside the basket/uterus). This last analogy however contains a
5 further analogical relationship between the vertical position of the baby in the uterus
6 and that of the manioc inside the basket. Runa women always place manioc roots
7 upright in the basket so that they jointly form an interlocking whole. Similarly, a fetus
8 is conceived by the Runa to be 'upright', in a vertical position, in his mother's womb.
9 This analogy thus creates a parallel between the movement of expulsion of the
10 manioc from the basket and the movement of expulsion of the baby from the womb.
11 In the basket's *paju*, several alignments between single entities (the manioc and the
12 baby, the basket and the uterus) become expressed and materialised through a
13 movement: the emptying of a basket. The relationships of similarity between basket
14 and uterus, between manioc and children become visible only through the movement
15 of turning upside down the basket. But there is more: in the basket's *paju*, it is not
16 only single entities which become aligned, but, importantly, also their movements.
17 What children and manioc share in this case of *paju* is not only a static formal
18 resemblance but, importantly, the *movement* of being upright and then expelled from
19 a receptacle. Underlying the basket's *paju* is thus a perceptual awareness of the
20 *dynamic* resemblances between different entities.

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The basket's *paju* considered so far is an example of *paju* understood by the
Runa as 'illness'. However, illness is a slightly misleading term since the Runa have a
specific term for illness and disease which is conceptually and semantically distinct
from *paju*. *Ungui* - the Kichwa word for illness - is thought to be caused by an evil
wind or a shamanic attack and requires the complex intervention of a specialist,
usually a shaman or healer. On the contrary, most instances of *paju* cannot be
healed and their origins are accidental. You simply happen, as the Runa say, to 'get'

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paju (*paju chimbanga*). Children are particularly susceptible of falling into the condition of *paju* because they do not know yet how to properly ‘move’ around.

The mindlessness of one’s movements has, for the Runa, real and dangerous effects. To make another example: one afternoon I was sitting with my friend Sabina, aged about twelve, washing clothes with her paternal aunt Gloria. Sabina’s mother, who just had a baby, instead of helping us to wash the clothes, stood nearby chatting with us. After a while, she returned home. When she disappeared in the bush, Gloria explained to Sabina: ‘Your mother cannot wash clothes. You see, when you wring the water out, like that [*doing the movement of wringing*], the baby also starts moving like that, and then it can become very dangerous. He might even die’. The *paju* described here builds upon a parallel between the wringing out of water and the twisting of a baby body. It represents a case of couvade *paju*, in so far as the improper movements of the mother cause the replication of movements in the baby’s body. Here, the enactment of a movement has adverse consequences as it can be replicated by another subject with dreadful consequences.

I wish to explore now on *paju*’s other meaning, which I have glossed as ‘potency’. In this context, *paju* refers to the capacity of people to manipulate their own movements in order to affect others, generally nonhuman bodies. For example, after the planting of a poisonous root used in fishing, *barbasco* (*Lonchocarpus sp.*), young boys are explicitly instructed not to stand up for a long time. This would cause the plant to sink deep down in the earth, just like the body is standing vertically on the earth. Instead, boys are told to go to lay down in bed. In this way, the *barbasco* will grow horizontally, just like the body of its grower. This sequence of movements too is referred as *paju*, but rather than denoting a state caused by the improper sequences of movements, here it refers to the cunning manipulation of one’s movements to

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3 affect the movements of others. An even more explicit example of this *paju* as
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5 potency was revealed to me during a hunting trip in the company of my *compadre*
6
7 and his seven years old son. As my *compadre* suddenly spotted a pregnant capuchin
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9 monkey up on a tree, he quickly broke a stick, handed it to his seven years old son
10
11 and instructed him to insert it under his belt. The boy quickly obeyed and then both
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13 disappeared to chase the monkey. Later on, on our way home, my *compadre*
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15 explained to his son the logic beyond his gesture:
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22 You insert it upright in their belt. You do this and the mother monkey will drop the
23
24 baby down. The baby monkey will fall down, just like that [*making a vertical*
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26 *movement*] Just like the stick you put under your belt.
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33 In this example, my *compadre* paralleled the vertical movement of placing a stick
34
35 under the belt to the vertical fall of the little monkey. Again, in this case, the analogy
36
37 set in motion by *paju* is not that between two single entities, the monkey and the
38
39 stick, but rather between two movements: the vertical placing of the stick and the
40
41 vertical fall of the monkey. As we have seen from this and the previous ethnographic
42
43 examples, all instances of *paju* are underscored by two fundamental assumptions:
44
45 first, that humans and nonhumans share certain similar movements and secondly,
46
47 that one's body movements can affect and be affected by the movements of
48
49 nonhumans.
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54 These two propositions strongly recall Eduardo Kohn's (2013) recent work on
55
56 'forms'. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted among the Ávila Runa,
57
58 Kohn stresses that all life has semiotic possibilities and that, as such, trans-species
59
60 engagements is made possible by the very semiotic forms entities share. Forms are

1 Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

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3 understood by Kohn as self-emergent phenomena which result from constraints on
4
5 possibility (159). For instance, Kohn describes how in his dreams, he began to
6
7 perceive the forest as a domestic place, just like the Runa claim this is what it looks
8
9 like from the point of view of the forest masters. He suggests that what makes
10
11 Amazonian forest ecologies and human economies to be aligned in dreams 'is the
12
13 pattern or form that such systems share' (157). In this example, the pattern concerns
14
15 the specific way in which both ecological and economic wealth is accumulated,
16
17 resources scattered and distributed and so forth. For Kohn, it is precisely because of
18
19 the isomorphic correspondences of form which exist in the world that human and
20
21 nonhumans can communicate and impinge upon each other's lives.³
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27 Kohn's argument is too complex to do it full justice in this short piece. Yet, his
28
29 mention of form is important here as, in the cases of *paju* considered so far,
30
31 movement could be considered exactly as one of the 'forms' described by Kohn.
32
33 Movements are instances which emerge from specific 'constraints on possibility': the
34
35 receptacle shape of the uterus and the basket from which the contained comes out,
36
37 the vertical position of a stick and the vertical fall down from a branch. As such, 'the
38
39 forms' of movement are limited and recurrent: furthermore, as the Runa
40
41 acknowledge, they do not pertain to the human realm only but 'propagate in the
42
43 world' (Kohn 2013:157) across species boundaries. The basket and the uterus, the
44
45 stick and the baby monkey: these different entities become aligned through their
46
47 shared form: movement. Instances of *paju* thus reveal 'form': the potentiality for
48
49 certain movements to be shared by all entities in the world. Built upon the
50
51 acknowledgement of such shared forms, *paju* effectively works as to sustain Runa
52
53 awareness of them through daily practice. It does so, I suggest, in multiple ways.
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3 First, to inhabit a landscape in which *paju* is felt as an inherent presence
4
5 requires you to develop a self-awareness of movements. I could feel this on my own
6
7 skin as my Runa hosts kept warning me about my clumsy movements and giving me
8
9 instructions on how to properly move around. They gently but firmly reminded me
10
11 and their children about the potential resemblances of my own movements with those
12
13 of a multiplicity of nonhuman beings. My hosts' efforts had the consequence of
14
15 making me grow aware of the way I moved around. But not only: since I was
16
17 constantly reminded that the way one moves has important consequences for one's
18
19 self and others, proprioception came together with the awareness of one's body
20
21 relationship to others. From the point of view of someone who learns about *paju*, for
22
23 example a child or an anthropologist, the continuous emphasis upon the connection
24
25 between human and nonhuman movements has the effect of making one receptive
26
27 of the perceptual resemblances between humans and nonhumans. Through an
28
29 'education of attention' (Ingold 2001), Runa people effectively come to perceive both
30
31 as sharing some common movements. They become mindful of the 'rhythmicity of
32
33 the body', as André Leroi-Gourhan (1993: 282) defined it, perceptive to the recurrent
34
35 regularities of movements which they share with nonhumans. Having shown how the
36
37 Runa acknowledge and exploit similarities through movement, in the next section I
38
39 will suggest that it is through a particular dimension of movement - self-movement -
40
41 that Runa people take the perspective of nonhuman others and, in the process,
42
43 reconstitute themselves and others as 'alike'.
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56 **Moving alike**

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58 The Runa are well known over the region for their fine pottery-making skills.⁴ A
59
60 female-only occupation, pottery making occupies a large amount of time in daily

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3 lives. This fine process is learnt either from an early age, by observing female kin
4
5 making pots or at the time of marriage, after a quick but intense apprenticeship with
6
7 female in-laws. Runa potters unanimously stress, however, that the most powerful
8
9 means through which pottery knowledge is acquired, is the encounter with the
10
11 Grandmother of Clay (*mangallpa apamama*) also known as the 'owner of clay'.
12
13 Among the Runa, as elsewhere in Amazonia (Fausto 2012), many entities, from
14
15 rivers to animals and underground caves, have their spiritual owner (in Kichwa, *amu*).
16
17 The Grandmother of Clay is described as an old small woman, covered with mud or
18
19 ashes (*ushpa cushni tica*). She usually appears in a myth which describes how she
20
21 helps a young Runa woman to learn to make pottery. The following version was told
22
23 by Rosa, a Runa woman in her fifties, as we were making pottery in her house:
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33 It was time of jista (Runa festival).⁵ A man had become a ceremonial helper
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35 (*ayurante*). His wife didn't know anything about pottery making and she was very
36
37 worried. She begged other women to tell her where she could find clay but the
38
39 women refused. One day, when the women went off to gather clay she followed
40
41 them. The women took the best clay and left other pieces of clay thrown on the soil.
42
43 After the women went home, she came out and saw an old woman standing near the
44
45 clay deposit. The grandmother was very upset and said: 'Why do you waste clay like
46
47 that?'. The woman told the grandmother that the other women didn't want to help her.
48
49 The grandmother then gave her the clay leftovers, tapped her hands with *huihuishcu*
50
51 [a special nutshell] and told her to go home to weave her pottery. The woman went
52
53 home and, all of a sudden, she began making beautiful pottery. Her pottery never
54
55 cracked when fired and she was able to give her husband many vessels for the
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Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

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2
3 festival, while the pottery of the envious women cracked and they had nothing to give
4
5 to their husbands.
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10 Rosa confided in me that, like the girl in the story, she too had encountered the
11
12 Grandmother of Clay in a dream. Many other research participants described similar
13
14 dreams in which the Grandmother of Clay tapped their hands with *huihuishcu*, a
15
16 polished shell of the *pilchi* fruit (*Crescentia cujete*) used as a tool in pottery-making.
17
18 Potters repeatedly described such dream encounters as turning points in their lives,
19
20 moments in which they truly become knowledgeable (*yachayuj*) in pottery matters.
21
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24

25 I would like now to draw attention to the movement of ‘tapping’ which appears
26
27 as central in Rosa’s story and indeed, in all dream narratives I heard during my
28
29 fieldwork. The gesture of tapping is performed by the mythical grandmother to the
30
31 hands of the woman-dreamer. It consists of a soft movement executed with the
32
33 *huihuishcu* on the back of the hands. Through this movement, the Grandmother of
34
35 Clay transmits her knowledge to the dreamer. Such gesture is not solely the
36
37 prerogative of the Grandmother of Clay. The sight of an old woman tapping the hands
38
39 of their granddaughters with *huihuishcu* is a common occurrence in any Runa
40
41 villages. Elderly women refer to this activity as one of ‘straightening’ women’s hands
42
43 (*allichina*, literally ‘making them good’).
44
45
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48

49 The gesture of tapping women’s hands movement replicates another one: the
50
51 tapping which occurs during the technical process of pottery-making. Runa pottery is
52
53 entirely hand coiled. During pottery-making, coils are positioned around a circular
54
55 clay base one on top of the other and pressed together. Coil after coil, the pot begins
56
57 to acquire a cylindrical shape. The soft surface of the pot is continuously smoothed
58
59 by the expert use of *huihuishcu*. On the outer surface of the pot, *huihuishcu* is used
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Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

1
2
3 vertically, to scrape away the excess clay, whilst on the inside, it is moved circularly
4
5 so as to create the characteristic 'belly' of pots. After smoothing the surface and
6
7 removing excess clay, Runa potters gently begin tapping the pot with the nutshell.
8
9 This continuous tapping – a gesture which potters automatically execute at the right
10
11 moment - ensures that the pot reaches a harmonious shape. With this movement,
12
13 the woman 'straightens' the pot as well as giving it balance. It is a technically efficient
14
15 movement in so far as it gives the pot the stability and symmetry which would
16
17 otherwise lack. It is also a highly formalized gesture, virtually identical among all
18
19 Runa potters.
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23
24

25 What does this small gesture tell us? First, it is worth noticing that, through a
26
27 movement of the body – the gesture of tapping - two entities previously separated
28
29 are momentarily aligned. This is case of the soft clay and of girls' hands who both
30
31 become 'subject' to the tapping with *huihuishcu*. Through this gesture, grandmothers
32
33 initiate an analogy between female bodies and clay.⁶ The analogy is further
34
35 corroborated by the term used to describe both actions, *allichina*, 'to straighten up',
36
37 and by other linguistic elements, for example, the names used to refer to parts of
38
39 pots which parallel human body parts (e.g. the 'belly' of a pot is called with the same
40
41 term, *huicsa*, to indicate the human belly). It is however, the movement of tapping
42
43 which materially brings to light the relatedness of the two single entities.
44
45
46
47
48

49 More importantly, through this gesture, grandmothers align themselves to the
50
51 mythical Owner of Clay. Grandmothers become 'alike' the Grandmother of Clay. The
52
53 relationship of similarity is expressed by the Runa using the suffix *-shina*, which can
54
55 be translated as 'alike'. What does this 'alike' refer to? What does it mean to say that,
56
57 through the gesture of tapping, the Grandmother of Clay and grandmothers become
58
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60

Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

1
2
3 'alike'? I suggest that 'aliqueness' here refers to the imaginative perspective-taking
4
5
6 which takes place through the movement of tapping.
7

8 Writing about movement and the development of empathy, neuroscientist
9
10 Vittorio Gallese (2003) notices how, when observing other people's movements, we
11
12 draw upon our own kinaesthetic experiences to infer what the other may be feeling.
13
14 This dynamic imagination, argues Gallese, is the enabling foundation of empathy,
15
16 understood by him as the capacity of perspective-taking.⁷ I believe that, in the case
17
18 of tapping, a similar imaginative perspective-taking stance is happening. In
19
20 replicating a mythical movement, that of the Grandmother of Clay, Runa women put
21
22 themselves, although temporarily, into the Grandmother of Clay's shoes. In the
23
24 awareness of their own felt movements, Runa women grasp the human like nature of
25
26 the Grandmother of Clay.⁸ They imagine what is like to be her.
27
28
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30
31

32 It could be objected, the situation here looks far more complicated than the case
33
34 of imitation described by Gallese. In the case of tapping there is no direct 'other'
35
36 whose actions are being observed and imitated. The Grandmother of Clay does not
37
38 stand next to the women potters as a tangible individual to be imitated: the
39
40 Grandmother of Clay is, after all, a spirit. However, I do not think that the nonhuman
41
42 nature of the Grandmother should invalidate the claim. A recent number of
43
44 ethnographic works in the anthropology of religion have suggested (Blanes and
45
46 Espírito Santo 2013) to treat spirits as real entities - or at least, as 'methodologically
47
48 real' (Bubandt 2009) - in so far as their presence has tangible consequences upon
49
50 human lives. As Jon Bialecki has recently observed, a spiritual or intangible entity
51
52 must be conceived 'as being equivalent to all other objects in its potentiality of both
53
54 affecting and being affected by all other objects, human and otherwise, with which it
55
56 becomes entwined' (2014:41). Considering the Grandmother of Clay as a real entity
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1 Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

2
3 which exerts a considerable agency upon clay, the process of pottery making and
4
5 women potters allows us to conceive of tapping not as *any* movement but rather as
6
7 *her* unique ancestral movement, the movement through which she first bestowed
8
9 Runa women with the gift of knowledge. This also allows us to understand tapping as
10
11 a way in which the nature of Runa grandmothers and the mythical Grandmother are
12
13 mutually reconstituted as 'alike'. Through this dynamic perspective-taking not only
14
15 does the Runa potter become like the Grandmother of Clay but this latter too is
16
17 simultaneously re-constituted, in daily practice, as a human-like entity, as an entity
18
19 sharing some human form. However, Runa women are not projecting their own felt
20
21 movements onto those of the Grandmother, performing a kind of anthropomorphic
22
23 projection onto nonhuman others. As noticed by philosopher Christoph Hoerl, we
24
25 should not assume that knowledge 'from the inside' corresponds to 'knowledge
26
27 pertaining to me only' (Hoerl 2002:9). Any imitation is underscored by the subtle
28
29 acknowledgement that 'what we are doing is something [others] are capable of doing
30
31 themselves' (11). Instead than merely 'imputing' a humanity to nonhumans, the Runa
32
33 seem to continuously face, through every day movement, the 'unlike and yet so
34
35 alike' (Brunois 2005: 372) nature of human and nonhuman worlds.
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46 **Conclusions**

47
48 In this article, I have argued that moving is a fundamental way in which Runa people
49
50 establish relationships with nonhuman others. Drawing upon my ethnographic
51
52 research among the Runa, I have shown how, through moving, Runa people align
53
54 themselves with nonhumans and thus come to perceive themselves and others as
55
56 'alike'. This happens through a variety of ways. *Paju*, I suggested, represents
57
58 perhaps the most conspicuous instance where such relationships of similarity are
59
60

Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

1
2
3 both revealed and reasserted through movement. The potential ubiquity of *paju* in
4
5 Runa lives is a constant reminder of intra-species similarity and the potential intrinsic
6
7 to it. Whether such likeness constitutes a benefit or a threat depends ultimately on
8
9 the context, the will and knowledge of those who participate to the encounter. In the
10
11 second section, I explored the meaning of a seemingly unimportant gesture - a
12
13 gesture as minute as the movement of a polished shell on clay - showing how,
14
15 through this, Runa potters come to perceive their bodies as alike those of
16
17 nonhumans. In both cases, the Runa acknowledge that humans and nonhumans
18
19 share specific patterns of movements and that such similarity enables them to affect
20
21 each other.
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27 Having read up to this point, one could legitimately ask: is this
28
29 acknowledgement the consequence or the cause of Runa animistic way of life? In
30
31 other words, do such instances of dynamic perspective-taking constitute the
32
33 foundations of Runa ways of relating to the nonhuman world? In the aforementioned
34
35 ethnography, Willerslev suggests that the human-animal encounters which take place
36
37 during hunting could be identified as a possible locus of the emergence of Yukaghir
38
39 animist attitude (2007: 27). My aim in this paper is more modest. I do not claim such
40
41 mimetic movements to constitute the *origins* of Runa animism, yet I believe that it is
42
43 through everyday movements that others - be they the Grandmother of Clay or a
44
45 capuchin monkey - *continue* to be perceived as 'like' us.
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51 The form of 'likeness' I have described here is hard to pin down. Movements
52
53 come and go and they sometimes only last a few seconds yet such fleeting
54
55 similarities may have larger implications for understanding how relationships with
56
57 nonhumans are sustained through every day practice. The question is central in
58
59 Amazonian anthropology where human-nonhuman relationships, bodily
60

Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

transformation and alterity figure as central research themes and yet the moving body has been rarely taken into account. The focus on movement not only questions, as already pointed out by Jean-Pierre Warnier (2001), the analytical boundaries between subjects and objects but also prompts questions about the qualities of animacy itself. What is the relationship between movement and animacy? In what ways can movement help us to think about the ways in which others can be like us while simultaneously *not* being us? In this paper I have begun to address these issues by exploring the ways in which the Runa, through movement, come to discover the similar nature of others.

Notes

¹ It is worth noticing that there is no Kichwa word for ‘movement’ as such. Rather than an abstract concept of movement, Runa speakers use onomatopoeic and sound symbols (Nuckolls 1996) to refer to very specific movements (e.g. twisting, going in circles).

² For an analysis of the connections between manioc and children as well as idioms of female ownership see Guzmán-Gallegos (1997) and Mezzenzana (2015).

³ ‘Form’ has also emerged as a central concept in research on indigenous Lowland South America art, for instance, in Elsje Lagrou’s (2007) path-breaking work on Cashinahua designs and Paolo Fortis’s (2013) investigation of Kuna art and wood carving.

⁴ For a detailed ethnographic account of Runa pottery-making see Whitten and Whitten (2008).

1 Movement and human-nonhuman relationships

2
3 ⁵ Ceremonial festivals (*jista*) among the Canelos Runa consist of reciprocal visits to
4
5 the ceremonial houses, with exchange of food and manioc beer. For detailed
6
7 ethnographic accounts of the festival see Guzmán-Gallegos (1997), Mezzenzana
8
9 (2014), Reeve (1988) and Whitten (1976).
10
11

12 ⁶ It is no coincidence that it is elders (*rucuguna*) who know well how to move their
13
14 bodies which engage in the practice of tapping other people's hands. Young people
15
16 need instead to be 'straightened up' and made hard through continuous practice. The
17
18 learning of pottery making could be conceived as one of such moments of
19
20 'straightening up' whereby the body is taught about its proper movements and its
21
22 place in relation to other entities.
23
24
25

26 ⁷ Empathy here is not to be understood in its popular usage, as the inherently
27
28 positive ability of sharing the feelings of others but, rather, as a 'neutral capacity' of
29
30 taking another's perspective (de Waal 2009:211).
31
32

33 ⁸ Nuckolls similarly argued that, through the use of specific words which mimic
34
35 natural sounds, the Runa are able to focus on the action described in the narrative
36
37 and 'to project into an experience' (Nuckolls 1996: 76). She further suggests that, by
38
39 enacting natural sounds, the Runa are effectively able to take up the perspective of
40
41 nonhuman agents and express their subjective point of view while fostering an
42
43 empathetic relationship with them (Nuckolls and Swanson forthcoming).
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