Relational Care contra Nihilism

An Exploration alongside Amazonian Kichwa Thinking

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Abstract:

This article engages the Nietzschean problem of nihilism from a "cross-cultural", comparative vantage-point. In Nietzsche's diagnosis of the "sickness" of nihilism, the measure of that illness is taken with reference to a particular conception of health – rooted in Nietzsche's relational ontology of the will to power. Here, instead, I wish to take the possible nature and entailments of relationality as an open question to be pursued in conversation with Indigenous American and especially Amazonian Kichwa thinking. Doing so, I argue, allows for a distinctive kind of gloss on how we might think about what is impoverishing *in* nihilism, and also opens distinctive horizons for exploring what it might mean to live otherwise, to pursue health. To explore how this may be so, I focus on the question of power and how power is experienced as relating to the self – both within nihilism and within Kichwa relational thought and practice. Drawing on classical and recent explorations of nihilism's symptoms, I try to show how orienting ourselves in conversation with Kichwa relationality yields a kind of medicine – a possibility and an invitation for worlding-otherwise – that is adeptly suited to the illness we must grapple with today in the shadow of interrelated social and ecological breakdowns.

Keywords: nihilism; Nietzsche; relationality; Amazonian perspectivism; human-nonhuman relations; ecological crisis

Introduction

Nietzsche identifies nihilism as a sickness, at the same time reimagining the philosopher as a kind of physician – whose role must be to assess the "total health of a people, time, race, or of humanity,"[2] diagnosing the illness and tracing its symptomology while simultaneously bringing forth the appropriate cure. The sickness called nihilism, following Nietzsche, afflicts what we might

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[2] NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, §2, p. 35.

call dominant modernity (as an outgrowth of modern Western trajectories and processes) in its inner constitution, character, and logic. This process brings a certain kind of wasteland or "unworld"[3] into being, and the course of this illness today seems nowhere near abating. Arguably at stake here, most fundamentally, is an impoverishment and "erosion of relationships" between (certain kinds of) human beings and nonhuman beings, the earth, and indeed existence as a whole.[4] This is an impoverishment, as Heidegger saw, evinced in the anthropocentric reduction of all that is into so many fungible resources, the constitution of human beings as the purported technological masters of a mute earth, as banal subjects of consumerism, and so on. Accordingly, from this point of view, we might suggest that nihilism lies at the core of the crises of the "Anthropocene" and its *ontic* wastelands – constituting the relational conditions and mobilizing orientations that have produced climate change and catastrophic biodiversity loss. (And it also, I will argue, has to do with our intransigence in grappling with these.) At the same time, nihilism creates wastelands "within", in the impoverishment of ourselves *as* selves, and accordingly in collective and communal life as this is predominantly constituted. The task, in healing such a deep-seated affliction, becomes one of transfiguration: a cure must entail a transformation of relationships and how we practice existence amongst others (human and nonhuman); a transformation of evaluative orientations; and a constitution of ourselves and our communities differently. As Nietzsche saw, in a certain sense what nihilism's cure requires can be thought in terms of an *intensification* of relationships[5] that is also made possible through a reorientation towards what we might call the relational weave of existence.

Although I wish to follow this invitation from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others into this work of diagnosis and healing, I do so here in ways that are also not reducible to the precise coordinates of these thinkers. On the one hand, my interest in nihilism stems more from a desire to respond to the present moment than to do so only through the proxy of Heidegger's or Nietzsche's responses to *their* milieus. The symptomology of the disease has arguably shifted since their times. On the other hand, I want to come to the question of nihilism – how we might think about "what" it annihilates, what an orienting vision of "health" might possibly look like – from a vantage point that brings in and tries to think alongside philosophical provocations that come from beyond the Western tradition. In particular, I will be trying to think with/alongside Indigenous American traditions of thought – most especially, because this is the context I have spent the most time trying to learn from, those of Amazonian Kichwa people.[6] In so doing I will draw out and build on some

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[3] GEVORKYAN and SEGOVIA, "Post-Heideggerian Drifts," p. 7.

[4] Cf. IGVNATOV, "The Earth as Gift-Giving Ancestor," p. 55.

[5] Ibid, p. 55.

[6] My anecdotes in this regard stem from my time at the Andes and Amazon Fieldschool in Napo Province, Ecuador, directed by Tod Swanson (Arizona State University).

of the ways Nietzschean and Kichwa thinking are *inter-resonant* even while being *divergent* in important ways.

Both Nietzsche and Heidegger, if in different ways, ground their work as cultural physicians in a *relational* alternative to dominant thinking. But then, Kichwa (like other Indigenous American) thinking is also particularly notable for its adeptness at relational thinking, for its rootedness in relational ontologies and profundity in practicing existence relationally.[7] Precisely how relationality and its implications are to be conceived, however, necessarily becomes an open question here. Accordingly, in what follows I wish to limn some respects in which Kichwa thought invites different ways of approaching core questions that constitute the diagnostic of nihilism and orient possible responses to it. Moreover, I want to suggest that how Kichwa thinking inflects a relational counterdiscourse offers especially well-suited points of orientation and contrast given the evolving contemporary symptomology of nihilism itself.[8] As I will try to show, Kichwa thinking invites an "affirmative" (in a broadly Nietzschean sense) and relational ethic of existence that moreover ties the transformative enhancement of the self *to* an attunement to what Grimaldo Rengifo Vasquez calls the "broader conversation"[9] of selves constituting the time-spaces of local territories/ecologies. At the same time, the character of self-cultivation as it is practiced in Kichwa traditions, and within Kichwa understandings of the relational existential milieu, produces a constitution of the self and affective patternings that contrast richly with those conceptual-affective complexes remaindered by nihilism and with which the philosophical physician must grapple today.

As a way in to this discussion, I will focus on the question of *power* or *strength* as it relates to the self. For Nietzsche, of course, this is a core question and starting-point for refracting a typology of dispositions towards existence. On the one hand there are power projects of fundamentally reactive or "weak"/"slavish" selfhood, of *ressentiment* and the creation of nihilistic values. On many fronts we can connect these projects with what Heidegger theorizes as the willful technological self in a mode of command over a world made small.[10] If Nietzsche's philosophical

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[7] I have explored this both sides of this comparison more fully in REDDEKOP, "Thinking Across Worlds."

[8] To make such an argument, of course, entails breaking with the supposition that a cure or alternative philosophy must find its bearing by going back in Western philosophy to a point where a certain kind of originary insight into existence/*physis* emerged but was subsequently covered over – a point that, for both Nietzsche and Heidegger, we find by attending to the Pre-Socratic (or perhaps "Pre-Platonic") philosophers. My approach here does not negate the value of this critical procedure but rather tries to build upon it in a way that, we might say, is also oriented to cross-cultural learning within spaces of encounter in a pluriversal present. In this case, the inquiries of Nietzsche and Heidegger, in dialogue with the Pre-Socratics *about* Western philosophy, help define points of meaningful counterdiscursive orientation (e.g. towards a dynamic, relational, affirmative vision and ethic of existence) that then serve to focus a comparative and cross-cultural questioning *of* such "points".

[9] VASQUEZ, "The Ayllu," p. 105.

[10] In other words, I propose to proceed on the assumption of a fundamental resonance between Nietzsche's "last men", built upon an impoverished experience of self and world, and Heidegger's critique of the "distancelessness" of *Gestell*

hammer (that crucial physician's tool) helps us hear how such experiences of power ring hollow, the question of power also invites us to ask after alternative experiences of the self and existence *qua* the "will to power".

Here, for Nietzsche, existence is conceived as an eternally recurring, agonistic ontogenetic or productive theatre of dynamic force relations, through which selves emerge as epiphenomenal concrescences. We as selves are constituted as internally plural participants in this drama – which is the generative ground of all our most sublime possibilities. This conception proposes a fundamental psycho-physical continuity that undercuts the familiar ontological topography of modernity as this familiarly demarcates inside from outside, and human from nonhuman – since the latter are also only ever manifestations of will to power. But it also presents a kind of selective test; the challenge is to be *up* to such a vision of existence in all its implications, to affirm and take root in it; this becomes the marker of an aristocratic spirit. Accordingly a different orientation towards the world, including the nonhuman, becomes not only possible but normative.[11] Thus, the question of power both structures a symptomology of nihilism (an ability to read its developments and signs, to take measure of its variance from health) and outlines a road to healing. In what follows, I will show some of the ways Kichwa thinking suggests a resonant but also different set of understandings. Accordingly, different possibilities for both diagnosing the impoverishments of nihilism and pursuing a cure become imaginable.

I will therefore try to outline some aspects of Kichwa thinking about power, drawing on the work of ethnographers who have grappled with this question and some resonant examples from my own fieldwork, and then try to put these to work towards a diagnosis and healing of nihilism. In this, I focus on three "aspects" of Kichwa thinking about power: i) how it relates to the cultivation of the self through relations that extend beyond the human; ii) how, because power is gained within a field of social *relationships*, it is bound up in a fundamental way with love, conviviality, and vulnerability; and iii) how, because of the way Kichwa cosmology understands the constitution of the relational time-space of existence, the land can be understood as an immanent source of law or normativity. Accordingly, the cultivation and empowerment of the self in relation with this milieu entails internalizing this normativity. As I explore each of these points in turn, I will try to draw out their implications for a reading of nihilism and a pursuit of its cure.

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that annihilates that which is "nearest"; cf. NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 45-47; HEIDEGGER, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 163-165.

[11] MELLAMPHY, *The Three Stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 21-33; NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §12, 16, 17, 19, 23, p. 43-54; IGNATOV, "The Earth as Gift-Giving Ancestor," p. 60.

On power and its manifestations

A number of words refer us to something like "power" in Kichwa. Norman and Dorothea Whitten mention *ushai*, which nominalizes the verb *ushana*, meaning "to be able to (do something)", including "respond to contingencies in life," whence we might think of power in terms of capacities or abilities.[12] According to Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy, another common word for power (*urza*, which the Whittens suggest is derived from the Spanish *fuerza*[13]) is also used somewhat interchangeably with *kawsai*. *Kawsai* places a locative or nominalizing *–i* suffix (like *ushai*) on *kawsana*, the verb meaning "to live"; accordingly the word is sometimes translated, depending on context, as "way of living", but also "life-force". But what does this mean, and what is thought in this? As in other Indigenous traditions, understandings of "aliveness" or animacy differ from Euro-American ones, which we might gloss, perhaps, as having to do with relative active-ness or an ability to impact others within a relational field.[14] Regina Harrison for example recounts how particular places in a river, such as those intense places where the current strikes the rocks and the water froths into foam, are regarded as places of especial power (*urza*), which women would visit to gather "spiritual and physical force/strength".[15]

With the exception of *urza*, each of the above words nominalizes a *verb*. Resonantly, my suspicion is that "power" as a "something" is encountered as *expressed in* and *as* the distinctive modes of interrelating, moving, thriving, and affecting others that characterizes particular beings within a perspectivist[16], complexly relational, and dynamically interactive world. This would be consistent with a noted association of *kawsai* with *samai* or "breath".[17] The *samai* of plants for example carries their aesthetic qualities – and thus, in a sense, their interactive potencies, the sensuously rich ways they affect others – as expressions of their power. *Samai* circulates; it traverses, enters, and impacts people's bodies in both desirable and undesirable ways, and the *samai* of plants can be deliberately inhaled by smoking or through vapour. The *samai* of the forest can make people sick, but can also strengthen the self when internalized in a limited and situationally appropriate or balancing way, for example when medicinal aromatic plants are used for healing

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[12] WHITTEN and WHITTEN, *Puyo Runa*, p. 59.
[13] Ibid.
[14] INGOLD, *The Perception of the Environment*, p. 95-98; POVINELLI, *Geontologies*, p. 39-40, 122.
[15] HARRISON, Signs, Songs, and Memory in the Andes, p. 163.
[16] VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism."
[17] Which, again, nominalizes the verb samana, to breathe. UZENDOSKI and CALAPUCHA-TAPUY, The Ecology of the Spoken Word, p. 26-31.

during vapor baths.[18] These examples, again, invite us to think of power as something richly *qualitative* – as something pervasive yet always expressed in particular sensuous ways.[19]

Nonetheless and in a way that resonates with Nietzsche, "power" is intensively and unevenly distributed within the cosmos (such that, at least comparatively, it seems to be thinkable in quantitative terms). Within this context, however, selves are understood to be capable of growing and attaining more power – an enhanced relational selfhood or body – *through* their relations. As with Nietzsche, a world composed in this way gives rise to somewhat generalized contexts of agonistic struggle and, as a condition of being up to life under such terms, a certain kind of "aristocratic" or "warrior-like"[20] orientation and valuation. As Michael Uzendoski has shown in careful detail, many core formative processes of cultivating the traditional Kichwa self accordingly have as their goal the creation of a self that is strong (*shinzhi* – another term associated with being powerful).[21]

How else does something like strength or power show up phenomenologically? Certainly this is understood to be manifest in fighting, with an ability to triumph in contest over others. This kind of interpretation is articulated frequently in everyday contexts. [22] *Yachaks* (shamans), who are emblematic examples of powerful people, whose power is gathered through their relations with the land and its multitude of beings, will use that power to heal but also to regularly vie and fight with one another under visionary conditions in a way that proves and tests their strength. Other species are also analogous participants in this field. Power relations are iconically manifest in predatory relations.[23] A lightning strike destroying a tree also displays the action of one powerful being (*Rayo*, the thunder being) against another. Indeed, I have heard traditional people describe old trees especially as *yachaks* – and thus, as powerful selves with the ability to harm but also to cure – a quality evinced in their ability to give medicines (rich with sensuous particularity).[24] It is furthermore the case that powerful beings sometimes seem to simply

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[18] See REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land," p. 701.

[19] A point that also resonates with my discussion below of beauty as a manifestation of power. This connection here between quanta of "power" (implicit in the notion of gaining or having more power than another) with qualia (e.g., aesthetic qualities, modes of moving or relating, etc.) also bears a resonance with Nietzsche, for whom what is experienced as qualitative difference can also be expressed in terms of different quanta of force in relation with one another. See NIETZSCHE, The Will to Power, p. 563, 564, 565, 304-305.

[20] See UZENDOSKI, The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador, p. 157.

[21] Ibid.

[22] See e.g. Clara Santi's song, in which a declaration of being *shinzhi* is followed by: "Who can defeat me? I am the woman who stands hitting harder than anyone." REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land," p. 684.

[23] UZENDOSKI, The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador, p. 157.

[24] C.f., an identical description of other medicinal plants in UZENDOSKI and CALAPUCHA-TAPUY, *The Ecology of the Spoken Word*, p. 26-27. This *ambivalence* of medicine (which manifests the power of the being giving it) as curing/harming, is also expressed in the word for medicine itself, *ambi* – which, like the *pharmakon* of the Greeks, means both *poison* and *medicine*.

counteract or hold each other in check in a kind of agonistic sense. For example, the *Wayusa* tree is thought to be able to render poisonous snakes (who are themselves dangerous, powerful beings) soft, unable to climb or strike – denying these snakes permission to act in these ways although they might want to.

These examples convey a certain image of the tropical rainforest and the kinds of relations that prevail amongst the selves composing it. Such an image resonates with Nietzsche's depiction of the world and its beings as dynamic configurations of will to power, where force is always in relation to other forces. But much as Nietzsche challenges us to see how emotions like love, generosity, and respect can also flow from an abundance of strength, as an outflowing or gifting[25], there is in Kichwa thinking a similar phenomenological diversity in the ways strength is manifest. For example, strength is also associated with beauty and attractiveness.[26] A flowering plant might also be a *yachak* – a self whose power is gathered through its relations, through its vine and from tree and earth, and is manifest *in* the beauty and particular aesthetic qualities of its flower.[27] In a similar way, people deliberately use various plants in order to absorb their attractive qualities – an attractiveness that is an expression of their being *shinzhi* in their distinctive way that gathers power from the land.[28]

In a related way, power is also manifest *in* ways of doing and moving that we might think about in terms of art or production. For example, an excellent potter manifests power in making beautiful works, which is a distinctive and iconically feminine way of being *shinzhi*.[29] If we elaborate for a moment on how this is so, we can see how far we are here from more familiar, modern inflections of artistic production. Whereas the anthropocentric framework Heidegger describes in terms of *Gestell*[30] might lead us to think about artistic (or indeed other) production as an expression of power – of the human ability to willfully and monologically[31] (re-)make the world as we see fit – we have here something quite different. Instead, what is involved in this making, and the kind of human that does it, reflects a relational cultivation of the self in which power is gained through relations with others, including across species barriers. Accordingly, it is an art that

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[25] IGNATOV, The Earth as Gift-Giving Ancestor, p. 62.
[26] REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land," p. 695.
[27] UZENDOSKI and CALAPUCHA-TAPUY, *The Ecology of the Spoken Word*, p. 26-27.
[28] REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land," p. 684.
[29] WHITTEN AND WHITTEN, *Puyo Runa*, p. 67.
[30] That is, the way reality is "enframed" as standing-reserve, in terms of constellation that puts beings *qua* calculable, fungible resources at the disposal of the human will. HEIDEGGER, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, p. 21.
[31] MATHEWS, *Reinhabiting Reality*, p. 17; cf. the classic theory of production offered in, say, LOCKE, *Two Treatises of Government*, p. 296-299.

expresses and in turn reinforces, in its power, a dialogical enmeshment of people and land – a point that becomes clearer through the following anecdote.

Learning pottery from Cicadas

One day while walking in the forest with Eulodia, a traditional Kichwa woman from Pastaza, and her young daughter, we came across a number of tubular clay chimneys rising from the forest floor. These structures are made by a species of cicada. While rough and bumpy on the outside, they have at their center a long, perfectly round tunnel whose curved interior sides are made flawlessly smooth by the insects. Eulodia described how these chimneys and the creatures who make them are associated with the skill of making beautiful pottery that women learn from a young age. She used the verb *awana* to describe the skillful way these clay tubes were crafted. *Awana* refers to weaving but is also the typical word to use for the technique of coiling clay used in traditional Kichwa pottery forms.

Eulodia explained how older generations had taught that young girls wanting to grow up to be good potters should learn this skill of *awana* from these insects. Parents or grandparents would take young girls out to the forest, and whenever they would find these cicada tubes it would provide an occasion for this process. Eulodia illustrated with her daughter how elders would break off a piece of the clay and rub it over the child's hands. Breaking off the above-ground portion of this clay tube, she invited her daughter to place each of her fingers in turn into the cicada-hole in the earth, saying each time, "give me your *paju*" (*kan pajuta kuwangui*). Eulodia, herself a master potter, has taught all of her daughters in the art; she said that only one had never done this practice — and she never really developed as fully as a potter.

The term *paju* here is another that is relevant for refracting questions of power and selfhood. Generally it means something like "capacity", a manner of moving and relating in a particular adept way – here, of "weaving" the clay.[32] This *paju* is modelled by the cicada; but it is a way of moving and intersecting with the clay earth that can be learned and mimetically repeated by a human potter. If, as Eduardo Kohn has argued, the forest can be understood as an assemblage of diverse selves in emergent semiotic conversation, co-adaption, and co-attunement with one another, here the development of a human faculty for pottery-making is dependent upon mimetically absorbing to some degree the cicada's semiotic *habitus* – its "living thought" in relation to the

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[32] Cf. MEZZENZANA, "Moving Alike," p. 242.

forest.[33] In Kichwa practice, this entails developing a relationship, approaching the cicada in a manner of learning and asking for a gift, but also learning directly through the hand the feel of the perfect curvature and compact smoothness of the clay. This anecdote, accordingly, offers one example of how a human self can grow and enhance their power *through their relations*, through a process of attentively learning to move like, and thus in a sense to *become* like, other species. A potter who has learned in this way would then later evoke this memory and this capacity in her work. It is striking, moreover, that this is not a learning process that can be abstracted from such direct relationships; as Eulodia emphasizes, it is not a skill that can be learned *only* from human teachers. Accordingly, especially beautiful (we might say *powerful*) pottery *cannot* be *merely* a human creation – its quality derives from an attentive relational enmeshment and is the work of a *relationally composed self*.

This manner of conceiving and performing a mode of making contrasts markedly with an anthropocentric one that construes such processes as fundamentally a relationship between willful, uniquely cultural human beings and passive, fungible natural material. Such a performance of production – following Gevorkyan and Segovia's reading Heidegger's *Gestell*, which describes the interactive horizon of nihilism – tears beings from their relational embeddedness in the earth, their "auto-poetic shining-forth" or self-gathering to enter an "un-world" cut off from any dialogic attunement to the earth.[34] Kichwa pottery-making, instead, is dialogically attuned beyond the human throughout. In addition to what I described above, there are also other local species like mushrooms that model the ideal shape for traditional bowls. Pottery is painted with patterns that reflect a cultivated habit of noticing subtle but beautiful details within the local species, places, and so on. Furthermore, making pottery is itself fundamentally entangled with and learned from the distinctive way one nonhuman being also "builds" – the way, we might say, the cicada itself "worlds" and gathers the clay given forth by the earth. If what is distinctive of non-technological artisanal production, for Gevorkyan and Segovia, is the "earthly translucence" of such production, the way it is grounded in an attunement and engagement with the auto-poetic shining-forth of things in particular locales, here we have I think something resonant that also adds something further.[35] The human maker in this context is arguably *herself* already also translucent, in her own constitution and activity, to the modes of being and making of other (nonhuman) beings. Such a

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[33] KOHN, How Forests Think, p. 74.
[34] GEVORKYAN and SEGOVIA, "Earth and World(s)," p. 60-61. I have explored the dynamic of rendering-fungible compared with Kichwa ways of thinking about the embeddedness of beings within local relationships more fully in REDDEKOP, "Against ontological capture," p. 10.
[35] GEVORKYAN and SEGOVIA, "Earth and World(s)," p. 60-61.

potter is dialogically attuned to the local earth in a way that is also mediated by the attunement and response of the insect to that earth.

This difference reflects, of course, fundamentally different conceptions of the self – as relationally composed on the one hand, and as atomistically bounded, stable, and self-authoring on the other. It also corresponds to radically different imaginaries concerning what it means to experience and exercise power – in one, examining something like "power" invites us to trace the ways selves are constituted as what they are and in the ways they can act *through* relations (including especially attentive relations across species barriers). In the other, power belongs properly and already *to us* as the kind of (relatively stable, bounded, atom-like) beings that we are, rather regardless of the relations we have. This latter conception of a self-power relation is not only part of the dynamics generative *of* our current ecological wastelands, but promotes a sort of philosophical insulation from it. For example, our sense of power as technological masters of the earth scarcely decreases as we imagine scaling up to geoengineering, for example, in the face of climate change. Insofar as we continue to imagine that our lives will simply continue largely unchanged through technological fixes while the world burns, we simply redouble an accustomed (and increasingly dubious) existential vocation to keep an increasingly hostile world ordered and in hand. This supposes that while our ecological nestedness withers away, we ourselves *as selves* can remain essentially unaffected.

Kichwa relationality, I think, leads us elsewhere. It would rather seem obvious that the decay of ecosystems would be intrinsically linked to an *impoverishment of the relational self*, since the self is composed and empowered *in and through* (and relative to) such emplaced relations. And if for Nietzsche a noble and affirmative valuation esteems what is difficult and rarified and refined[36], here we see how a relational refinement of the self and the self's capacities is contingent upon attentive and receptive relations *with* other species and their beautiful and adept ways of intersecting with others. Vibrant ecologies, in other words, provide the context through which the self *may learn* refinement, may gain an abundance of power, may undertake difficult things and experience in a rarified way by learning (for example) to move like these other strange, yet elegant selves. By contrast, the technological mode of dominating a nature from which we are separate would necessarily *begin* from a place of immense impoverishment, even though dominant modern imaginaries leave us ill-equipped to notice or express this.[37]

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[36] E.g. NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §260, p. 195.
[37] MATHEWS, *Reinhabiting Reality*, p. 7-23.

Conviviality and the inter-space of relationships

Many of the examples listed earlier may seem fairly consistent with a Nietzschean viewpoint that understands power within a kind of agonistic cosmological backdrop. Even beauty and attractiveness might be an outflowing of abundance that stands in competitive relation to the attractiveness of others. However, while Kichwa relationality certainly allows for such contexts of struggle, these form part of a broader relational milieu that is not, I think, reducible to such dynamics. We already glimpse this, indeed, in the example of the cicada being asked for a *gift* – since this helps us see how strength is gathered through relations that are not merely *impersonal*, but rather *relationships* in the mode of social and family contexts.[38] This is because Kichwa thinking construes the spectrum of possible and meaningful social/familial relations differently from modern Western thought – as comprising nonhuman beings, local land and waters and so on. This in turn reflects a distinctive way of thinking about other species and species difference itself. Within this interactive terrain, enhancing and growing the self is dependent on the ability to *have* good relationships, to draw others into them and sustain them, and to be able to give and receive love within such relationships.[39] As in other relationships, this entails an adaptive attentiveness and empathizing. It also entails being vulnerable, and eliciting concern and care from others. Accordingly, in Uzendoski's account, an overarching cosmological sense here is that "the flow of life is a delicate balance between conviviality and predation . . . [such that] to be a 'loving' person is to possess or have access to powers that allow for fighting off enemies, spirits, and other predatory forces."[40]

I wish to explore this point within the present context not only because it allows for a fuller understanding of Kichwa relationality and the ways it connects the empowerment of the self with practices of relating and constituting community with local ecologies. As a window in to thinking about power alongside Kichwa thought, exploring this point also allows us to see how power is here associable with patternings of feeling and affective energies that contrast markedly with those increasingly symptomatic of contexts structured by the late modern nihilism. This contrast, I claim, allows for a kind of diagnostic comparison that resonates with Nietzsche's

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[38] Although this in turn suggests a general interpretation of what it is to be an agent or self-in-interaction, that differs from the view of the self that emerges from Christian philosophies of personhood and subsequent modern theories of subjectivity. See INGOLD, *The Perception of the Environment*, p. 103-105.

[39] Cf. UZENDOSKI, *The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador*, p. 161. It is therefore not only that love itself may be thought of as an outpouring of one's own abundance (as Nietzsche invites us to see), but that it is also the prior *condition* of that abundance. This reflects, I think, a sense that the self is properly relational and mutliple (i.e., already enfolded and composed through a multiplicity/network of relations *with relatives* human and nonhuman) as a condition of survival and growth from infancy.

[40] Ibid., p. 55, 157.

typological contrast between slavish and aristocratic values; but in doing so, it allows an orienting vision of relative health to be associated with vulnerability, with conviviality and a capacity to care and empathize with others (including across species lines), with emotional openness and relational curiosity. This counterpoint accordingly allows for a distinctive reading of the impoverishments nihilism wreaks upon the self even *in* the ways it experiences itself as powerful.

To flesh out, first of all, the Kichwa side of this comparison, I turn to the following anecdote.

- *Becoming family with sloths*

In one conversation, two traditional Kichwa people from Pastaza in Ecuador described a pattern of becoming family or *ayllu*[41] with local animals as part of a process of gaining powers from them. For the purposes of this discussion they used the example of sloths. In this, they were not claiming to recount a specific relation either of them had had; rather they were endeavouring to convey a pattern that forms part of what would be commonly thought to be possible. In Kichwa thinking, sloths are associated with old people – they have white hair, and they are slow moving. But they are also very strong. They are said not to die easily, but instead remain strong into old age. One reason for wanting to develop a relationship with sloths, then, is to have one's body become like theirs in this way, to acquire their *paju* for living a long and good life and remaining strong while aging.

Receiving this gift requires establishing a convivial and communicative relationship with sloths – of a kind that is difficult across the boundaries of species difference. Accordingly, such a relationship must be developed under circumstances that lessen that communicative difficulty – namely, through dream.[42] In my interlocutors' narrative, this dream would typically be precipitated by meeting a sloth while out in the forest and asking it for a dream. Having gone to sleep at home, the sloth might then appear in one's dream, and do so as a person of the same gender as the dreamer. Meeting one another in this way in the dream and embracing, a male dreamer and male sloth-person could become as brothers; a woman and female sloth-person could become as sisters. As a result, a specific kind of affectionate and empathetic bond or interpersonal inter-resonance, the same kind as between same-gendered siblings, could develop between the dreamer

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[41] *Ayllu* is the Kichwa term for a kind of maximally extended familial network of relatives. As this example shows, this network is not limited to humans but comprises local land and water, and animal and plant species. See VASQUEZ, "The Ayllu," p. 90-93.

[42] Cf. KOHN, "How dogs dream," p. 12; MEZZENZANA, "Moving Alike," p. 248.

and the sloth-person. The sloth might then point out its thick, white hair, saying, "See my thick hair, and my head which has become all white. You will get old looking like me."

Practices like this one are not exclusive to relations with sloths; rather, this anecdote merely offers a glimpse into the range of relationships that traditional Kichwa people cultivate with a great many species. Such practices work to engender feelings of empathetic warmth and company amongst the many nonhuman beings comprising the land. The resulting bonds and feelings are maintained over time and are often bound up with subsequent obligations to that particular kind of being. In this example, we see how establishing such a convivial inter-resonance is what opens onto the next possibility – of one's body mimetically adjusting and becoming like another's, growing the strength of a relational self *through* this relation. It suggests a relationship between emotional and empathetic openness and this kind of relational, transformative adaptation and learning – a pattern that holds generally across a range of contexts.

This kind of relationship is predicated on what has been called a "perspectivist"[43] way of understanding and relating to plants, animals, and other nonhuman beings as being *runa* or people "like us" – selves one can empathize with, who are assumed to have (from their own point of view) the same complexity of inner life and emotion and so on that we have. Nonetheless, it is clear that these other nonhuman selves are also *different* by virtue of their bodies and thus their modes of seeing, interacting, eating, moving, and so on. Such differences create privacy and space by creating barriers *to* empathy and easy communication. Practices of becoming like sloths or becoming like cicadas, accordingly, play along these species' barriers – opening limited windows across them.

The general contours of such perspectivist ontologies have been described at length elsewhere.[44] Here I want to want to emphasize one aspect of the way species barriers are thought about and engaged, which becomes conspicuous when we consider a crucial traditional source for "thinking with" *about* species – namely, origin stories. This is the relation between emotions and transformation. Generally, origin stories detail how each species was, in "beginning times", fully human. Everyone lived the same way, ate the same food, married each other, and so on. Each story then recounts a process through which normal relationships broke down into anger, disinterest, and heartbreak, resulting in a withdrawal of species into their present forms.[45] This withdrawal creates *distance* (and privacy) in a range of ways – emotionally, communicatively, sexually, spatially, and

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[43] VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism."
[44] VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,"; KOHN, *How Forests Think*; DESCOLA, *Beyond Nature and Culture*; INGOLD, *The Perception of the Environment*; SWANSON and REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land."
[45] See SWANSON and REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land"; SWANSON and REDDEKOP, "Feeling with the Land."

temporally. While members within a given species now continue to more transparently understand one another, species barriers render such communication opaque, muting empathy and attraction. Each species, through its withdrawal, is also attracted to new intersections: ways of eating and dwelling and moving that are not ours but are co-adapted in their own unique ways within the crowded world of the tropical rainforest.

If anger acts here as a kind of transformational force that creates distance and opacity, it also creates a moody legacy and relational terrain into which humans now find ourselves, we might say, already thrown.[46] In the above example of the sloth, the dreamer would be playing along the emotional terrain of this barrier, working to lessen a little this distance and opacity through a kind of opposite emotional act – the cultivation of conviviality and empathy.

What stands out about this example in the present context is the way it illustrates how, *because* of the way Kichwa thinking construes the relationality of the self but also the relational terrain in which the self is enmeshed, the process of cultivating/empowering the self is *already* dependent upon an adeptness with a particular kind of social, interactive repertoire. In the case of human-nonhuman relations, this is a repertoire that modern Western thought might typically suppose in advance to be inappropriate, owing to (its particular way of thinking about) essential differences between other species and humans. Here, however, because sloths (like other plants and animals) are transformed people "like us", the operative assumption becomes that a much richer continuum of social relations could be possible with them – although this is something, ultimately, to be explored through experience.[47] It becomes reasonable to expect to draw upon a full range of social/relational faculties in such relations; a kind of emotional empathetic curiosity is thus brought to prominence as valuable *in* a questioning appreciation of the mysterious differences of other species and attempts to learn from them. Consonantly, a necessary component of maturity in Kichwa thinking, and a condition of growing the relational self, is to be *shunguyuk* – a person "with heart".[48]

Developing such loving relationships is however about more than one-sided empathizing; it is also about eliciting love and care, to induce what is called *yakichina* in others. *Yakichina* is an emotional act that causes another (whether a human relative or a nonhuman one) to

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[46] SWANSON, "Singing to Estranged Lovers"; LAGROU, "Homesickness and the Cashinahua Self," p. 152.

[47] This is a point that risks being lost, I think, in some discussions about Amazonian perspectivism: although there is an implicit idea that other species are "like us" and see different "things" in structurally identical ways to us (e.g., jaguars see blood as manioc beer), the point is not then that *we* actually know what a jaguar really sees like (outside, perhaps, of special transformative circumstances like drinking *ayawaska*). What seems most crucial is rather a distinctive horizon for relating and questioning and so on as a result.

[48] For a discussion of the meaning attached to the heart or *shungu* as a kind of "social eye" and locus of "bodily feeling and perception", see UZENDOSKI, *The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador*, p. 41.

feel compassion for the subject. In a way that is resonant with Indigenous thinking more broadly in Amazonia, such feelings of compassion are linked to the apprehension of another as someone who, as a relational self, *should be part of a rich network of relatives*, and yet in a particular circumstance is paradoxically alone.[49] Accordingly, there is a profound sense of vulnerability and precarity at the heart of the relational self. And indeed, habitual performances *of* this vulnerability become an important part of the growing of the relational self through relations.

- *… versus the affectivities of an ontologically atomistic nihilism*

Here we can return to my central contrast, between the respective entailments of Kichwa relational conceptualizations of the self and power, and those characteristic of the late modern constellation. If by virtue of how the latter philosophically conceives the human relative to other beings, it already promotes a certain empathetic "bruteness and blindness" toward the nonhuman (to say nothing of the poetic folds of our dwelling more generally)[50], the former (we have seen) does the opposite. Indeed, from a relational perspective, what seems entrenched in the modern *Gestell* is a generalized condition of something rather like the "soul blindness" described by Kohn, in which selves are stunted and debilitated through an "inability to see beyond oneself or one's kind."[51]

It may be said, of course, that this kind of empathetic insulation has been an important part of the way modern Western science has traditionally constituted its form of knowing the world in such a way as to render it calculable. Nonetheless, human selves within the constellation of *Gestell* are not for this reason any less steeped in particular distinctive patternings of affectivity – a point that becomes especially conspicuous when we consider the symptomology of how these selves appear to be breaking down through the ongoing churnings of nihilism. For what nihilism seems to yield here, in its more extreme but also in a sense most revealing forms, is a will to power *qua* brutish and even stupid domination – that presumes modern science (as the condition of its habituated ethos of technological world-mastery) and yet devalues it, ossifying and narrowing a crude, egoistic experience of the self, and spiraling within an affective repertoire of rancor and rage. Such a modality of power stands in extreme contrast (and indeed, to borrow a Nietzschean idiom, *smells* foul) when compared to anything like the experience of power discussed above – which

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[49] SWANSON and REDDEKOP, "Feeling with the Land"; GOW, "Helpless," p. 47-49.

[50] MATHEWS, Reinhabiting Reality, p. 15; HEIDEGGER, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 112-115.

[51] KOHN, How Forests Think, p. 117. Or, again, we may draw on Peter Gow's notion that Piro people, as relational selves like the Kichwa, "are in love with their multiple other selves" – something outside the comprehension of this dominant modality. GOW, "Helpless," p. 48.

requires curiosity and sensitivity, the cultivation of empathy and loving relationships, etc., as the *condition* of how the relational self experiences strength.

In thinking through the symptomology of nihilism in this way, and the interwovenness of particular affective energies *with* modernity's dominant construals of existence and humanity's worldly vocation, Nietzsche offers helpful openings. In particular, Nietzsche saw how the affectivity of the will within nihilism is bound up with *ressentiment* – a kind of seething vengefulness arising from *thwarted* stength. For Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is rooted in a primordial experience of *powerlessness*, an inability to act, having to endure suffering experienced as wrong. This sense of impotence festers into a will to revenge that craves an object – someone to blame, someone we can punish for our suffering. But it also becomes creative – inventing, for Nietzsche, the classic values and metaphysics of Western civilization, its many forms of sublimation, the atomistically bounded and self-responsible doer-subject.[52]

Wendy Brown's recent political sociology of nihilism and its effects within contemporary America develops this point further. Drawing on Marcuse, Brown argues that as nihilism erodes the classic values of Western modernity, a distinctive effect of *repressive desublimation* occurs. That is, the earlier demands of classical values are relaxed (in part as we sink into lives of consumerism and trivial pleasures and stimuli), and contemporary subjectivities are "libidinally unbound", "released from more general expectations of social conscience and social comprehension."[53] Where we are left, for Brown, is not only in a culture that normalizes a species of "stupid" and "manipulable" construals of freedom, unmoored from the need for justification, but one in which the rancor and rage of *ressentiment* shines forth ever less "dressed up" in its erstwhile raimant of sublime values. Brown argues, indeed, that a significant hallmark of our (Trump and post-Trump) era is the constitution of a kind of humanity seemingly "without a project other than revenge", incapable of even wanting to understand or respond to the unfolding gravity of our time, actively choosing to will nothing (for example, by hastening ecological and social breakdowns) than not will at all.[54] The wreaking of the will upon others – most especially any who would interfere with our use and enjoyment of the world *qua Gestell*[55], or who might expect us to care about others, the environment, whatever – becomes a permissible and preoccupying end in itself. In other words, one place nihilism leaves us is with the breaking down of a particular kind of atomistically-

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[52] NIETZSCHE, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, p. 166-176, 179.
[53] BROWN, In the Ruins of Neoliberalism, p. 167.
[54] Ibid, p. 167-177.
[55] It is interesting here that whereas the classical image of *Gestell* is one that precisely challenges humanity to understand the world as calculable, it is as though today this functions for many as a kind of presumed backdrop of mastery even while the demands on intellection it had levied are relaxed. Science as such is, for example, often and loudly devalued, and yoked ever more tightly to market logics and instrumental application.

constituted self into a suicidally world-destroying will to power, whose core affective gestures are of anger and rage. The experience of power motivating this self seems to be so often simply the unleashing of that rage in brutal if apparently pointless projects of vengeful domination.

Relatedly, Brown describes these more nihilistic and rancorous quarters of our dominant sociopolitical milieu as also characterized by reaction-formations that produce and normalize "defended egos". These are forms of selfhood that are, in a sense, ossified – in which the ego defends itself from all vulnerability, including that created by self-reflexivity – in a way that produces affects including rigidity, arrogance, and aggression.[56] This dynamic dovetails closely with Brown's account of nihilistic desublimation.

Of course, when Nietzsche invites us to see what is contemptible, what *smells bad* within dominant modernity, he does so with reference to a kind of aristocratic ideal type that also, perhaps, has its drawbacks – those "blond beasts" and "birds of prey" of *The Genealogy of Morals* who exemplify a kind of naïve, self-assertive and self-glorifying but terrible strength.[57] Not least, this may allow us to naturalize a particular conception of power as domination, of what strength looks like, rather than interrogate it in comparative context. If, instead, our reference point for the healthy or "aristocratic" were the kind of valuation of becoming *shinzhi* in Kichwa contexts, a different kind of diagnosis of nihilism and curative vision becomes thinkable.

One way this is so concerns the relationship between vulnerability and strength. Nietzsche's story roots *ressentiment* in experiences of weakness and powerlessness – in other words, a wound of vulnerability that festers. In the power-project that results, that carries forward that *ressentiment*, we would seem to encounter a vision of strength that, when it is able to manifest baldly *as* a power project, actively and continually *disavows* and *purges* that vulnerability (even, paradoxically, while nursing a perpetual sense of injury). Indeed, this would seem to shine forth today in the production of defended egos, redoubling on an ethos of mastering a world it is no longer even necessary to try to understand, and unwilling to rethink such an ethos even in the face of planetary ruin. But if our counterpoint here is Kichwa thinking, what stands in contrast with this slavish *ressentiment* is not strength that never experienced vulnerability (like Nietzsche's birds of prey), but instead a kind of strength that *as* relational is existentially *rooted* in (and precisely need not disavow) vulnerability. Furthermore, this is a strength that, *because* of the way it is relationally gathered, nests human selves within a much broader ecology of selves, and entails cultivating a capacity for empathetic questioning across the difference of species barriers. It is bound up not *only*

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[56] BROWN, Walled States, Waning Sovereignty, p. 140-141.
[57] NIETZSCHE, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, p. 174-179.

with an admiration of the self, but an admiration and care for the network of emplaced relations that *composes* the self.[58] It is bound up accordingly with love and the valuation of conviviality.

Such a point of comparison holds up a distinctive kind of mirror to the affective energies and patternings lurking within the technological self enthused to make the world small for its use and enjoyment, and which nihilism remainders in an increasingly rancorous form. It is not, of course, that affects like resentment, rage, vengefulness, etc., are unknown in Kichwa (or any other human) culture.[59] But the overall philosophical and evaluative context in which such affects are experienced and inflected – or might stand to be grappled with – also differs. One entailment of power and selfhood being thought and gathered in this relational way is that, in the range of affects associated with cultivating and experiencing power, vengeful registers are also counterbalanced by convivial ones and by a range of associated sensitivities. We retain, accordingly, a distinctive way of sensing what is odious and impoverished *in* precisely what so many imagine as strength – and in a way that moreover centers as fundamental a plane of social enmeshment beyond the human.

On the question of law

A final question I wish to explore here, and to cast in comparative perspective, is the relationship of powerful selves to something like "law" or "normativity". Once again, this helps flesh out a little further aspects of Kichwa relational thinking and, indeed, round out somewhat my focus on the cultivation/empowerment of the relational self and its ramifications. For my purposes here, Kichwa (and other Indigenous) thinking on this point moreover serves as a striking contrast with both where late modern nihilism *and* a more classically Nietzschean critique would seem to leave us. At stake in the latter difference is a relational grounding for critique that is arguably even more aptly suited to disrupting an anthropocentric imaginary that produces both "internal" wastelands and "external" ecological ones. Let us now turn to see how this might be so.

- *Emplaced normativity[60] and appropriate responsiveness*

Particularly since the loss of neo-Aristotelian natural hierarchies and the advent of modern subjectivism, our dominant Western thought has tended to imagine that norms and indeed laws in

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[58] See GOW, "Helpless," p. 48.

[59] Consider, for example, the discourse on envy as an obvious motivation for hostility from others (including enemy shamans), which forms a pervasive theme within shamanic healing; or how in traditional contexts illnesses and deaths would often be blamed on shamans, who could thereby be attacked out of revenge. See TAUSSIG, Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man, p. 394-395; SWANSON and REDDEKOP "Feeling with the Land."

[60] Glen Coulthard uses a similar term, "grounded normativity", to describe much the same kind of orientation that concerns me here. See COULTHARD, *Red Skin White Masks*, p. 60.

any proper sense are things that are invented and decided solely by human beings. Nature – as intrinsically meaningless or indifferent – cannot tell us how to live, and so *we* must decide this for ourselves.[61] The other obvious alternative has been to locate a source of law not in humanity but in God – which produces well-rehearsed anxieties for subject-positions committed to the secular limits of human finitude. But both of these possibilities, Nietzsche invites us to see, are precisely caught by advent of nihilism: the Death of God, the devaluation of values, and the insufficiency of the "human" to make up that loss.[62]

In Kichwa (and other Indigenous) thinking, by contrast, something like law [63] or normativity already arguably resides *in the land* and in the interrelations between beings that comprise it. That this so follows from the distinctly relational, perspectivist conceptions of existence characteristic of Indigenous thinking. Accordingly and on its own terms, it is also not reducible to these predicaments of modern thought at all. As we have seen, it is not that Kichwa thinking offers any kind of romanticized view of the world as devoid of struggle. Rather, such moments are enfolded within a broader contextual view that observes a kind of dynamic and appropriate order within the relational time-space of existence, which is always observed and participated in from some*where*, i.e., specific territories in which relations have emerged into particular configurations and to which specific possibilities of dynamic balance belong.

Some of the flavour of this normativity emerges if we return to the example of species' origin stories. As I argued above, these stories recount the emergence of the present world in terms of a creation of relational distance – in space and time. This distancing resolves situations that had become untenable. In some stories, behaviours that would be inappropriate or destructive for humans to do (such as eating manioc plantings before they are ripe) find an appropriate place or niche within the whole *through* this transformation (it is appropriate to what agoutis do, but not people). Kichwa origin stories, to my understanding, do not therefore carry a sense of Edenic nostalgia for primordial one-ness, but a sense that this distance created by species differentiation, this complex relational time-space that is accordingly opened up and ordered in a certain way, *is* already *good*, *is* already a relational arrangement that is appropriate and makes co-existence and productive relations possible.

This kind of conception must I think be related to another, which is resonant throughout Indigenous America – that approached from a relational point of view, beings within this time-

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[61] For Nietzsche's own iteration of this theme, see NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §9, p. 39.

[62] NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, §125, p. 181.

[63] Following work by a number of Indigenous legal and political scholars especially in Canada, including John Borrows, Sarah Morales, Val Napoleon, Kiera Ladner, Aaron Mills, and Heidi Stark, amongst others.

space are understood to be fundamentally interconnected, co-adapted, and interdependent. Each participant has a role in the dynamic renewal and regeneration of the whole.[64] Living a good life, accordingly, requires a constant attunement to the complexity and flow of this "wider conversation" and doing one's part to keep up relations of nurturance within it. In other words, it requires that one's own participation both be harmonized or adjusted *to* this conversation, alive to im/balances that arise within it, and attuned to fostering its renewal through dynamic harmonizing within it.[65]

Tod Swanson, relatedly, cites the Páez thinker Manuel Quintin Lame, who describes how the animal "choirs of the forest" offers of a model of the moral life because each singer develops an appropriate sense of *timing* in relation to the dynamic whole: when to sing so as to be audible, when to be silent, and so on. The goal is accordingly to develop a kind of character that is responsive to – because it also internalizes and is shaped by – the complex cycles of pattern and timing that compose existence in particular territories: rhythms of seasons, weather, flowering and fruiting cycles, animal movements, and so on. One learns, accordingly, a kind of relationally appropriate way of living that is shaped by this whole and moves elegantly in relation to it, perhaps rather like a well-attuned dancing partner.[66]

Much this kind of background understanding informs, I think, ways in which the land is a source of law for Indigenous thinking, such that modes and structures of governance are *taught* by and *learned* from the land – points emphasized by Indigenous scholars in other contexts.[67] That is, individuals and communities, roles and relations in governance and so on, are constituted with a view to *fitting into* the land and being shaped by it.[68] One learns ways of acting that are appropriately attuned *to* a given relational milieu in part *from* those nonhuman beings whose intersections already compose the relational conversation of a territory's time-space. It has been argued that the kind of law that emerges here includes principles of reasoning and decision-making, standards and criteria for judgment, and so on.[69] This might lead us to think of this normativity as

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[64] VASQUEZ, "The Ayllu," 96. Cf. CAJETE, *Native Science*, p. 64-74.

[65] VASQUEZ, "The Ayllu," p. 100, 104-109. This is a point, moreover, that brings the issues I am discussing into continuity with, for example, the particular practices that make up modes of Indigenous stewardship of particular territories, insofar as the fundamental problem of how to live is bound up with that of how to have good relationships with all the "circle of life" within a territory (LADNER, "Governing Within an Ecological Context," p. 125), and how to live in such a way as to affirm and "promote more life". See SIMPSON, *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back*, p. 141; MCGREGOR, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge."

[66] SWANSON, "Weathered Character," p. 280. See also SWANSON and REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land," p. 683.

[67] BORROWS, *Law's Indigenous Ethics*, p. 5; LADNER, "Governing Within an Ecological Context," p. 135.

[68] LIGHTFOOT and MACDONALD, "Treaty Relations Between Indigenous Peoples," p. 30; LADNER, "Governing Within an Ecological Context."

[69] The way this is so is connected both to the storied nature of the land (including origin stories and specific lessons that follow from these), but also an ability to read dynamic relations as they transpire. C.f. BORROWS, *Law's Indigenous Ethics*; MORALES, "a' 'lhatham," p. 153.

inhering in the discursive domain of the verbally and thematically articulable – as lessons one might draw out and apply in deliberation. This certainly is one way this is manifest; but I think we can also see this kind of law living simply in the embodied registers of everyday valuations around movement and what it means to be a well-cultivated self.

This brings us back, by way of a somewhat long circle, to the examples of the relational empowerment of the self discussed above. The central point here is that considered within this broader context, such processes of growing the capacities of the self through mimetically becoming like the land, absorbing the *pajus* of other beings, etc., envision gaining in strength in a way that is not, I think, dissociable from internalizing and adjusting to this broader, emplaced normativity. That is to say, part of what is involved here is learning modes of being that are *effective* within a given relational time-space *because* they are also appropriate *to* it and modelled through the species differentations composing that time-space.

This helps us, arguably, understand another use of the word *paju* – to refer to sickness. Francesca Mezzenzana argues that *paju* in this sense refers to a contagion of movements that can also be *dangerous*.[70] She accordingly connects the notion of *paju* to a broad concern to cultivate proprioception and coordination, honing attentiveness to the way one's movements affect others and the way patterns of movement circulate, are mimetically repeated, and have effects within the busy, crowded, and interactive space of the rainforest.[71] Moving in a bad way in this sense would be an undisciplined becoming-other that is ultimately unsuited to an appropriate participation in the broader conversation. This kind of idea, as Mezzenzana points out, resonates with a characteristic of Kichwa culture noted by herself and other ethnographers: that traditional Kichwa people place a good deal of value on learning how to move in an attuned and coordinated way through the land, rather than clumsily.[72] Uzendoski similarly notes how, when he first arrived in a Napo Kichwa community, women would make fun of him as he stumbled and tripped awkwardly while walking in the forest. This directly reflects a goal in Kichwa child rearing and pedagogy of helping "soft" (*chuclu*, *api*) babies develop "hard", "taut" (*tingli*) bodies that are strong but also precise in their movements in a way that fits the local terrain and ecological conversation. By contrast, European foreigners tend to be viewed as clumsy, having "soft", undisciplined bodies like babies.[73]

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[70] Mezzenzana gives the example of mishandling manioc, understood to be dangerous because of analogies/connections understood to exist between the relational position and movements of manioc and babies in the womb. See MEZZENZANA, "Moving Alike," p. 242-3.

[71] Ibid, p. 245.

[72] Ibid, p. 238. Cf. KOHN, *How Forests Think*, p. 65.

[73] UZENDOSKI, The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador, p. 26.

This context, I hope, helps to suggest how practices like learning how to make pottery or aging well, in mimetic dialogue with the land, form part of such a broader participation in emplaced normativity *at the same time* as enhancing and empowering the self. In this, these are but two examples of a much more pervasive mode of learning skill from the land.[74]

- *Denaturalizing the self-law-power triad within nihilism*

To return to my central comparison: it is my claim that such ways of thinking about law as emplaced normativity, in relation to power and the self, provide a direct challenge and alternative to the way these elements are habitually construed and related within late modern nihilism. But they also offer a different vantage-point than the counterpoint offered by Nietzsche.

Ladner argues that modern conceptions of law, governance, and political life, have been developed within an essentially anthropocentric "context of inquiry".[75] And indeed, we are familiar with the central tenets of the dominant modern story in Hobbes or elsewhere: cut off from nature, human beings must author law for and from out of ourselves through acts of will. Although Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power undercuts the human-nature divide, he will also, in a vein perhaps not-entirely-dissonant with modern understandings, analyze law and attitudes toward law primarily as an expression of moral typology within the human domain. For example, a noble interpretation views law *as a weapon* within *struggle*: "a battle waged against the reactive emotions by the active and aggressive, who have employed part of their strength to curb the excesses of reactive pathos and bring about a compromise."[76].

A slavish redefinition of law by contrast might gloss it as antithetical to struggle *as such* and a weapon *against* it. On Nietzsche's reading, the latter view evinces a certain dissimulation, since this kind of interpretation itself is necessarily a power-ploy in its own right, part of the "slave revolt" in morals that nonetheless disavows the power project at its core. In both of these cases, it will be noted, Nietzsche is thinking of law as a kind of verbalized code, articulated by human agents. In either case, law becomes a weapon, a kind of force that acts on the (human) social body – whether to limit "reactive pathos" or to construe the strong as evil (in falsely neutral terms).

In Wendy Brown's reading of nihilism in contemporary America, the fallout of nihilism's desublimations brings the triad of self-law-power into especial salience. For Brown, current right-wing populism evinces how erstwhile "sublime" values (e.g., the idea of an

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[74] A point explored more fully in SWANSON and REDDEKOP, "Looking Like the Land."
[75] LADNER, "Governing Within an Ecological Context," p. 126.
[76] NIETZSCHE, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, p. 207.

aspirationally universal and neutral law typical of liberalism) are eroded as a function of being explicitly weaponized within a context of partisan struggle. This weaponization marshals devalued values into service within a set of power projects that manifest increasingly baldly and are increasingly unmoored from justification.[77] The idea, accordingly, that law should simply serve one's own (even private) interests, should be part of a power project, should simply be an instrument in wreaking the will in revenge against others, becomes entirely accepted even while it is rhetorically wrapped in appeals to fairness and neutrality that cannot but ring increasingly hollow. On the other hand, that same populism can only understand anything like law that does not come from its partisan "side" *as* an externally imposed restraint and oppressive force (from "elites", etc.) to be resented and festively thrown off – as an illegitimate impediment on the will's ability to do whatever it wants. In the context of nihilism's most accelerated desublimations, there can be no meaningful relation of law to a broader reference point like ecological limits – since indeed there is no need to understand the world, only a right to dominate it. Concerns over ecological devastation are merely reducible to a set of "strictures" and "rules of feeling" imposed by others (environmentalists, etc.) to control one's life and the unbound freedom of the technological will.[78] Where nihilism seems to leave us, then, is with a kind of commonsensical understanding of the relation between selves, law and power that is perhaps a (slavishly) distorted version of how Nietzsche casts the problem in *The Genealogy of Morals*. That is, law is reduced *to* a geography of (human) wills who author it, as a part of power-plays (inflected here as domination, wreaking the will, a particularly vacant and unmoored mode of experiencing "freedom", etc.) that can only ever be that of one such will or another.

Of course, it is not as though Nietzsche does not provide ample resources for seeing something odious here (as Brown's critique shows). And indeed, Nietzsche will counter the energies and dispositions wrought by nihilism with an exhortation to be "faithful to the earth".[79] And yet, here the ground for his inflection of an affirmative and aristocratic spirit – the psycho-physical continuity of the self *with* nature *qua* the will to power – reflects a more Heraclitean notion that locates an immanent logic of strife within the world as the principle by which all things come into being.[80] The test of the aristocratic spirit is then to be *up to* experiencing that agonism or contest *as justice itself* – thus locating a kind of lawfulness within the cosmos from which to take orientation. And yet, doing so also involves admitting that, insofar as we are also expressions of

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[77] BROWN, In the Ruins of Neoliberalism, p. 173.
[78] See ibid., p. 169-173.
[79] NIETZSCHE, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 42.
[80] MELLAMPHY, The Three Stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche, p. 12.

will to power, living for us involves a "tyrannical drive" or wanting to be different from the ultimately indifferent prodigality of nature itself.[81]

By contrast, if our point of comparison is Kichwa thinking, I think we arrive somewhere quite different. The affective energies and patterns remaindered by nihilism do not appear any less impoverished or slavish. The subjectivistic solipsism of the breaking-down technological will is especially notable in that it imagines a kind of strength for itself in utter indifference to the world beyond the human. But then, here we are invited to contrast this with a sense of law or normativity beyond the human that is also not reducible to an agonistic principle.[82] Instead, there is a normativity of balance and appropriateness within the interconnected time-space of local ecologies. And cultivating an adeptness *in* being appropriately and effectively fitted within such a milieu, growing and tending the power and health of the self, *is* itself part of the same process as internalizing, being moulded and transformed by that emplaced normativity. Accordingly to experience a more robust (and not impoverished) form of empowerment is to experience "law" not merely as an external constraining force (let alone a weapon) but as a kind of appropriate relationality composing and guiding the ongoing dynamic adjustments of an adequately thoughtful and attentive self. Caring for the self, in this case, is not dissociable from caring for and tending the broader network of relations in which one is nested. We have also seen how locating a "tyrannical drive" or a force of ruling, commanding[83], self-assertion, etc., within the self is here also denaturalized as an obvious or primary manifestation of what power does or where we might see it at work – referring us for example to an ability to relate across such extreme communicative boundaries as those between species. Kichwa thinking, furthermore, helps us fuse a critique of nihilism's impoverishments *to* the broader and oblivious destructiveness underlying the ecological crisis itself. This is so precisely insofar as, for a relational self, such wastelands "without" are intrinsically and compellingly linked to wastelands "within", just as ecological vibrancy is intrinsically linked to the vibrancy of "life-force" within the self.

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[81] NIETZSCHE, Beyond Good and Evil, §9, p. 39. See also NIETZSCHE, The Pre-Platonic Philosophers, p. 64: "This is one of the most magnificent notions: strife as the continuous working out of a unified, lawful, reasonable justice, a notion that was produced from the deepest fundaments of the Greek being. . . Contests – but above all the immanent lawfulness in their decisions over contests – distinguished the Greeks."

[82] Accordingly, an orientation towards and valuation of power here precisely does not overlap with an orientation to the will to power "as anarchic experiential intensifier" – because the overall context, while dynamic and relational, is not anarchic. See GEVORKYAN and SEGOVIA, "Post-Heideggerian Drifts," p. 15.

[83] In this case, the contrast in political metaphors used by Nietzsche, for whom the body is itself a "social structure" of power-relations (NIETZSCHE, Beyond Good and Evil, §19, p. 48), and those available from Indigenous American contexts, is notable and likely consequential: since, as has often been pointed out, the latter do not tend to resemble states (even while differing significantly across the Americas), and have often been described as minimizing relations of coercion or hierarchical command. The model of ayllu relationality would instead be an apt contrast in the present context. Cf. LADNER, "Governing Within an Ecological Context"; KING, "The erasure of Indigenous thought in foreign policy"; VASQUEZ, "The Ayllu."

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to develop a dialogue with Nietzsche and Nietzschean thought around the question of nihilism. By what means and with reference to what kind of alternative might we take measure of it *as* a sickness, and take orientation in our work as philosophical physicians in search of healing? Here, I take from Nietzsche (with, admittedly, some liberties) a conception of nihilism as ultimately about the fallout of a philosophical trajectory predicated on a rejection or turning-away from existence – thought about in ontologically relational terms. I have tried to indicate some of the ways that, if we open the question of what such relationality might mean to dialogue with Amazonian Kichwa thought, a different kind of diagnosis of the sickness and imagining of health suggests itself.

In the ethnographic examples I have offered to substantiate my reading of Kichwa thought, it may be that elements will strike some audiences as difficult to "believe", as lying outside the pale of what is generally thought to be possible. As I have tried somewhat to indicate and have argued at length elsewhere[84], such boundaries may be significantly stretched through a process of beginning to experimentally "think with" *relational* ontological assumptions rather than e.g., substantivist or atomistic ones that tend to inform dominant Western conceptions of the world. Still, the example of educating the body so as to be able to age better through a relationship with sloths, for instance, may conform less to a vision of the plausible from "Western critical theory" vantage points than, say, learning how to make pottery from cicadas. My argument here, however, is not intended to hang especially on anyone accepting all such "beliefs" as their own.[85] What interests me is indeed less a matter of specific "beliefs" than the question of how those kinds of claims we call beliefs are bound up with particular modes of exploring and interacting and puzzling, different kinds of practices that become thinkable in the context of relational assumptions about existence. I am interested, in other words, with the ways these examples point us to different kinds of interactive and investigative horizons many are so rarely willing to try to explore on their own terms. Accordingly, a question posed by Anatoli Ignatov is apt:

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[84] REDDEKOP, "Against Ontological Capture."
[85] And indeed, a risk here is so often that focusing on and isolating such "beliefs" ultimately also tend to convert them into so many propositional truth-claims in abstraction from the full nuance of their context, and the dimensions of embodied, inquisitive, interactive exploration and puzzling about existence and relationships in which they more properly live and breathe.

> If animism and perspectivism are not only sets of beliefs but also modes of perception immanent to relations with earthen beings and forces, are they something that we do? If so, does that mean we can't understand them unless we do them?[86]

If we linger, therefore, less with an enumeration of "beliefs" than with trying to explore and learn from this doing, what emerges is perhaps rather a more exploratory invitation to re-worlding that foregrounds different modes of attunement and participation within the interactive fields of emplaced existence. And such explorations can begin, arguably, from *wherever we are*.

Such modes of doing as I have described are, I have tried to show, bound up with and enabled by relational ways of conceiving self and world. They are bound up with and valorized by connected ways of thinking about, perceiving, and experiencing power, in contrast with which the kind of "strength" imagined by nihilism and the technological will seems on many fronts impoverished indeed. Part of what is notable here is that in such a relational conception of self and power, something like what Foucault called the "care of the self" – that is to say, the cultivation and intentional transformation of the self through practices[87] – is here bound up with an attentiveness beyond the human, with practicing both care of others within a broader inter-conversant network of selves, *and* with a kind of internalizing attunement towards what I have called emplaced normativity. All of this, I have tried to show, is quite unthinkable within the usual terms of late modernity but emerges into possibility when that accustomed ontological and philosophical terrain is disrupted. While affirming, in a somewhat Nietzschean way, a warrior-like ethos valuing strength and acknowledging a dynamism of struggle as an existential condition, such an affirmation is also inflected and contextualized in a way that leads us somewhere quite different. As I have tried to show, this is also a practice of strength that directly denaturalizes and counters many of the habituated understandings and affective patternings left by nihilism. It moreover does so, I think, in a way that may be especially effective in helping us grapple with nihilism in a way that binds that effort to a healing of both land and people – a task of no minor importance today.

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[86] IGNATOV, "The Earth as Gift-Giving Ancestor," p. 55.
[87] FOUCAULT, The Hermeneutics of the Subject, p. 11.

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