The Non-Relational Forest:
Trees, Oil Palms and the Limits to Relational Ontology in Lowland Ecuador
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'I am unsure if I will ever be able to get to know them', Delfín said, as we were sitting in the late afternoon on the porch outside his house overlooking the Aguarico river. The same morning, we had visited a new plantation of African oil palms, which had profoundly transformed the forested territory of the Sieko-pai. Delfín, an elderly inti-ba-ikë (shaman-leader) of the community, was concerned, and spoke of the alteration of the landscape as an invasion of other beings that it would be difficult for him to know and relate to.

My interest in this particular plantation and its story was sparked by the news coverage about how an Indigenous people in lowland Ecuador, the Sieko-pai, had clear-cut part of their forest to engage in commercial palm oil production as subcontractors to a neighbouring plantation company (El Universo 2011). I had previously conducted fieldwork among the Sieko-pai – on their actual and virtual strategies to govern oil exploitation within their territory (Krøijer 2003, 2017, 2018) – but the news stories compelled me to explore ‘the political life of trees’; that is, how people relate to trees, and the forms of politics that this might engender. The history of the plantation was surprising not only because the Sieko-pai had decided to fell their own forest, but also because the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment accused them of violating ‘the rights of nature’. A few years earlier, the indigenous movement in Ecuador had pressed for nature rights, which were integrated into the Ecuadorian Constitution in 2008, but with the felling of the forest the same set of rights was turned against part of the population who had first pressed for them. In public, the Sieko-pai’s new
plantation landscape constituted a break with the picture painted of indigenous peoples as ‘natural’ stewards of the tropical forest, but it also offered an entry point into understanding the role of trees in Amerindian cosmology.

Over the past decade, several works have been written about plantation economies, among others Greg Grandin’s book on the rise and fall of automobile magnate Henry Ford’s utopian fantasy of a ‘Fordlandia’ modelled on small town monoculture production in the American Midwest. In 1927, Henry Ford bought land in the Brazilian Amazon to grow rubber, extract raw materials for the production of cars and impose scientific management on both nature and local workers. By 1945, this project of taming, ordering and subjecting nature to capital was abandoned, after both plants and people had been devastated by plagues and illnesses, waste and violence (Grandin 2009). Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, among others, have used the term ‘Plantationocene’ to describe such imperialist schemes of monocrop agribusiness that are characterised by land enclosure and alienated forms of production, and which involve processes of domestication, slavery and corporate control over human and non-human beings alike (Tsing 2012; Haraway 2015; Haraway et al. 2016). These authors show how new forms of human mastery and control mark the monocultural landscape of the plantation, even though the same studies also point to how other relations and world-making projects thrive at its margins.

This chapter follows a somewhat different path by describing the forms of alterity that emerge under the shadow of the substitution of a forested agro-ecosystem for a commercial agro-industrial one. By zooming in on Delfín’s relationship to the large ceiba (kapok) tree, which still grows in a few places in the forest around the village of San Pablo Katëtsiaya where he lives, and the African oil palms of the plantation, I come to describe two figures of alterity: First, the spirit of the ceiba, the yëi-watí, which is an incorporated ‘other’ and subject to both control and care. And second, the oil palm plantation that is experienced as po’say’yo (empty), characterised by beings that escape human attempts at relating to, knowing and ‘owning’ them (see Fausto 2008; Brightman, Fausto and Grotti 2016). The tropical forest where the ceiba towers is not an external and stable ‘nature’ – in accordance with a ‘Western’ distinction between nature and culture – but is seen as ‘culture’ and full of relations between various forms

Analytically, this work thus investigates the limits of a relational ontology that has underpinned most studies of the entanglements of nature and culture and multi-species relations over the past decade (see for example Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2010, 2015; Tsing 2015). In only elucidating the relational fabric of the forest, or attending exclusively to multispecies relations, for example, this work could easily have overlooked non-relations, namely how capitalist relations of exploitation reconfigure not only what a tree is, but also what a nature could be. When using the term ‘nature’ in this sense, I am referring to new environmental alterities, or the realm of dangerous beings and potential affines that are not (yet) susceptible to encompassment and incorporation. Delfín’s concern over the new beings of the oil palm plantation is a case in point.

In this article, I take my point of departure in conversations between 2014 and 2016 with the shaman-leader Delfín, his grandson Hernán, who studied forest management at the university in Quito, and other members of the village of San Pablo Katëtsiaya, including Esaias, who was the main person in the community promoting oil palm cultivation. I contrast their thoughts about large slow-growing trees with their concerns and experiences regarding the new plantation landscape. Among the Sieko-pai, large slow-growing trees such as the ceiba are seen as ‘persons’ holding ‘capabilities’ of their own – capacities which can be controlled by an able shaman. The new oil palm trees growing on the plantation are unknown ‘others’, a non-immanent forest, which (might) have other owners. Following this line of thought, the plantation is not the ‘mono-culture’ conventionally depicted in the literature (see Tsing 2012), but an environmental alterity or indeed nature, in the modern sense of the term, that is, a wild and uncontrolled realm that escapes human attempts at knowing and owning it, in the way that shamans usually relate to their auxiliary spirits.

In developing this point, I build on Viveiros de Castro’s theorisation of Amerindian cosmology (1998) and on work on affinity and alterity, adoptive filiation and ownership in Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 2001, Fausto 2007, 2008; Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016). While the body of scholarship on
Amazonia has mainly focused on jaguars and pets, orphans and marriage alliances, the roles of plants and trees in a transformational cosmos have received significantly less attention. With this work, I will begin to make up for this omission while retaining the overall approach with its potential for understanding contemporary environmental conflicts. In the following, I first explain in further detail how the Sieko-pai became palm oil cultivators and outline the controversy it produced, before delving further into the cosmology of trees in this new context. This is my point of departure for unfolding a new form of environmental alterity, at stake in an epoch often referred to as the Anthropocene.

COMING TO AN END

The Sieko-pai belong to the Western Tucano linguistic group, historically dwelling between the Napo and Putumayo Rivers in what is today the Amazonian border zone between Ecuador, Peru and Colombia. The Ecuadorian Secoya – or Sieko-pai, as they have auto-denominated themselves for the past ten years – have been described in the ethnographic literature as able horticulturalists and as a group having ‘a flexible adaptation strategy’ to their forested environment (Vickers 1981, 1989a; Krøijer 2017). Today they live in four communities along the Aguarico river, in an area that since the early 1970s has been marked by the expansion of the extractive frontier. Oil extraction was not the only economic activity launched at this time to develop and modernise this supposedly unproductive part of the country: in 1978 the company Palmeras del Ecuador was given a 9,850-ha title on land that the Sieko-pai considered to be their community hunting grounds.

The Sieko-pai first came to live on the Aguarico river by escaping brute enslavement during the rubber boom south of the Putumayo, after which they settled far up blackwater tributaries of the Putumayo and Napo Rivers, with only footpaths connecting the distant settlements. Conditions of continued debt peonage under an abusive patron on the Huajoya River led two families, their children and a few young people including Delfín, to flee the area in 1942. The Sieko-pai settled on the Cuyabeno River and at Sokorá on the Aguarico
River, intermarrying with Siona families (Vickers 1989a). While dwelling here, the Siona and Secoya were ‘contacted’ in the 1950s by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), who were sent on a civilising mission by the Ecuadorian state. Around the same time, the state launched its comprehensive colonisation policy of *tierras baldias* (empty lands), which urged poor peasant families, including indigenous people from the highlands, to take up life in these supposedly backward and unproductive parts of the country (Wasserstrom and Southgate 2013). This colonisation process also entailed a deliberate strategy of racial mestizaje, blending ‘white civilisation’ and ‘Indian savagery’ (Whitten 1981: 1), if not brushing aside the presence of people living there altogether. The missionaries convinced the Sieko-pai to move up the Aguarico River in 1973, to San Pablo Katëtsiaya, where, as Delfin and other elders later explained, the territory at first seemed not only abundant, but also endless.

During the first years in San Pablo, few were interested in working for money. In the 1970s some found temporary work within the booming oil sector, but even many years later work for the plantation company was considered too demanding and unrewarding. But *colonos* (settlers) also followed the oil, which caused struggles over territorial control. After a lengthy process to obtain territorial rights, which also fostered a stronger attachment to the growing indigenous movement, the Secoya gained the right to 42,614 ha on the Aguarico River in 1990 (NASIEPAI 2014). By then they were already surrounded by the *Palmeras del Ecuador* to the west, oil wells and *colono* communities to the north and west, and other indigenous groups to the south. Contamination depleted the fish resources, and illegal colonisation, overhunting and steep population growth all contributed to a new sense of enclosure and land scarcity. The Sieko-pai’s decision to clear-cut part of their forested territory to engage in commercial palm oil production should be understood in the context of these historical antecedents, though they do not fully explain all the ways in which the territory became a matter of concern after the forest was felled.

Former president of the Secoya organisation, Esaías, who had headed the territorial claim since the 1970s, was now one of the people taking the lead in the new palm oil venture. When I visited him again, in 2014, he appeared from behind a palm tree holding a string trimmer, which, he explained, he used for
weeding in the plantation. He agreed to sit down in the shadow below his house to tell me about the political controversy that arose after the felling of the forest: ‘I called for a meeting to discuss the cultivation of oil palms’, he began; ‘I said, “We need to have something to live from when there are no more trees. The forest will come to an end.”’ Even though views had been divided among the families, he had managed to convince everybody that 20 families should be allowed to cultivate oil palms on part of the collectively owned land.

Esaias was a well-rounded man around the age of fifty-five, clad in one of his many bright coloured tunics that have given the Sieko-pai their name as ‘the people of multiple colours’ (sieko-pai). I had first met him in 2000, when I was conducting fieldwork in San Pablo Katëtsiaya, and he was the president of the Secoya Organisation Organización Indígena Secoya del Ecuador (OISE), struggling to defend the land from a new round of exploration for oil (Krøijer 2003, 2018). Esaias and his brother were educated at SIL’s Pentecostal missionary school, but also co-founded the first Siona-Secoya organisation to secure collective territorial rights in the face of rapid colonisation of their land.\(^2\) Now, almost 40 years later, Esaias stated that his main concern is with ‘the economy’. He had developed ‘friendly relations’ with the gerente (CEO) of the plantation company, and with his assistance the 20 families managed to get a loan from the public lending institution Corporación Nacional Financiera, in order to clear the land and purchase African oil palm seedlings, machinery and pesticides. With the clear-cutting of the land to plant oil palms, Esaias’s own prediction of the forest ‘coming to an end’ became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Sieko-pai’s decision to plant oil palms on their territory went against policies in Ecuador and beyond that seek to incentivise forest conservation, and constitutional provisions ascribing ecosystem rights to forests. The Ecuadorian Ministry of the Environment did not, therefore, take the felling of primary forest lightly, and in 2011, the 20 families were fined US $375,000 ‘for destructive action in highly vulnerable ecosystems’. This fine for an indigenous group allegedly violating ‘the rights of nature’ – a set of rights pressed for and won by the indigenous movement in the 2008 constitutional reform process under the newly elected President Rafael Correa (Acosta 2010; Gudynas 2015) – made national news. According to the constitution, nature rights entail that, ecosystems, such
as primary forests, hold the right to exist and flourish (art. 10: 71–74). These new rights were interpreted as a legal continuity of Amerindian cosmology and a reaction against a modern dichotomisation of nature and culture (see for example de la Cadena 2015).

In the media, the Sieko-pai’s actions were represented as highly surprising, and in an interview, members of Ecuadorian NGO Acción Ecológica described the Sieko-pai’s oil palm venture as yet another sad example of an indigenous group giving in to capitalism and abandoning their noble role as custodians of the tropical forest. Even though the wider implications of the new legislation are still unclear – including how the state will administer its duty to prevent harm, enforce the law and restore damaged ecosystems – the case shows how the forestry law and the ‘rights of nature’ were turned against a local community. At the same time, the plantation company’s involvement in the felling of the forest and securing the bank loan went unnoticed. The public debate demonstrated that the Sieko-pai – somewhat contrary to their own view on the matter – were represented by the state and NGOs alike as external to the ecological system holding rights, and they were even described as standing against it.

The Sieko-pai publicly refused to pay the fine, a sum that was equivalent to the cost of regenerating the forest cleared from their land, but they did participate in a meeting with the Ministry. Esaias explained: ‘We told them that we have tried to be flexible, but that we refuse to pay the fine, because we also need something to live from.’ In the face of their refusal, he continued, the Ministry tried to compel them to adopt one of two courses of action to raise the necessary funds: they could either join the Socio Bosque programme with forests still standing on their land, and pay the fine from the incentive income, or they could use any future compensation from oil companies operating on their land to pay the penalty. The Sieko-pai rejected both options in an assembly of their organisation, arguing that either path would fundamentally undermine their sense of self-determination. Instead of fighting the Ministry directly, however, they opted to bide their time, avoiding open confrontation, and soon learned that the environmental authorities were not taking any further action on the matter. Through this flexible and somewhat evasive strategy, which involved avoiding state interpellation, the Sieko-pai were able to retain a sense
The problematic relationship to the Ecuadorian state did not hinder Esaias’s ongoing friendship with the gerente of the plantation company – who helped with money (putting up collateral for the bank loan) and technical advice, and who acted as a reliable buyer of their new palm oil produce. In Amazonia, friendship is a form of relationship, often maintained with non-relatives for matters of lending, trading and work, guided by notions of mutual trust (Santos-Granero 2007; Killick 2008; Penfield 2016). ‘For the time being we are living peacefully’, Esaias concluded, pointing to the relatively stable income he and a few other families managed to gain from selling palm oil to their new powerful ally. After several failed business attempts in the past – involving different cash crops, transportation and cattle – the palm oil plantation, Esaias felt, had taken his business ventures to a new level. Today he was able to hire colono laborers to help out in the plantation, particularly with the strenuous weeding among the trees.

‘For now, I am only at war with the grass’, he ended our conversation with a smile, which in the situation seemed to indicate that after finishing the fresh juices brought to us by his wife, he would need to get the string trimmer and his workers back up to speed. I only later understood how this comment could also be interpreted as a hint at the unwanted agency of slow-growing trees and at the form of ‘care’ and ownership elicited by a plantation landscape (see Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016).

TREE BEINGS

Not everybody was equally at peace. My hosts, Delfín and his extended family, were among the stern opponents of the palm oil venture. Delfín and his grandson Hernán, who accompanied me during the conversation with Esaias that day, had remained silent and uncommunicative throughout the tour of the plantation and the conversation about it. Even though they were cousins, Esaias and Delfín had chosen two different paths in life, the first being a stern pentecostalist, whereas the second descended from a renowned line of shaman-leaders in the Ecuadorian Amazon. As we were canoeing back home after the visit, Delfín
suggested making a stop in a piece of intact forest behind his own house where we could visit one of the last large ceiba trees in this part of the territory. After walking around it, he explained:

The spirit (wati) of the large ceiba tree is called yëi-wati. If you are near the tree in the early morning or at dusk, you can probably hear some noise: that is the sound of the spirits opening or closing the doors to their home. There are different spirits but they all like to live in the large slow-growing trees such as ceiba or cedro. They live their life much like we do. They are human beings (pai); the shamans can see them through their ceremonies. The shaman goes to visit their home and live with them for extended periods of time. The spirits of the ceiba resemble white people; they wear hats like the Kichwa. When they leave their home, they float through the forest and glide over the mirror of the water surface. They are carrying their babies. Sometimes you can hear them crying. They live like us in their daily activities, but they do not eat like us: they only consume worms, grubs and fungi.

As the quote illustrates, the yëi-wati are persons who, from the bodily point of view, lead human lives. This suggests that at least some trees are part of the same perspectival logic found across lowland Amazonia (see Viveiros de Castro 1998). The forest is full of different beings that all descend from a common condition of humanity – they are all pai (persons) – and the skilled shaman arrives at their spirit houses, lives with them and eats like they do. In this way, and aided by the drinking of yagé (the plant-based hallucinogenic also known as ayahuasca), the shaman comes to know the different beings of the forest. It is a process of knowing that relies on bodily metamorphosis; the shaman first ‘gets to know’ the beings, learns to receive their guidance and master their capabilities.

The beings of the forest are referred to as watí in pai-koka, which, due to the influence of missionaries, has been translated into espiritus (spirits). In the new spirit of evangelism in the 1970s, a time when missionaries from SIL moved into San Pablo, most Sieko-pai converted to Pentecostalism, and the drinking of yagé was prohibited (Payaguaje 1994). In the prolonged repression of ‘pagan beliefs’,
the *watí* were for years mostly talked about as ‘malicious’ spirits or beings, a view that has been reproduced in the scarce anthropological literature on Sieko-pai shamanism (Vickers 1989b).

According to Delfín, this rendering of the *watí* as inherently malicious was not entirely correct. Within the last ten years, he has resumed the drinking of yagé and the transiting of bodily perspectives that his father was so famous for, at the request of middle-class Ecuadorians and international travellers, who use the hallucinogenic brew in their process of spiritual self-discovery. Regardless of this changing context of yagé-drinking, Delfín sided with his father in describing it as a knowledge process, aimed at understanding the world and the composition of the cosmos (Payaguaje 1994; see also Kopenawa and Albert 2013). By ‘getting to know’ these beings and their capabilities through bodily metamorphosis, he and other shamans are able to know who is causing what action, in order to cure illnesses, but also to steer certain social relations.

What was most striking in the account was how the *yëi-watí* appeared to Delfín as white people wearing hats like the *Runa* (Kichwa). After returning home and while we were sitting on the porch outside his house, he explained...
in more detail about the plantations and about how the capabilities of the \textit{watí} are comparable to those of human beings:

The \textit{watí} have power \textit{tutu ke’i} or \textit{tutu ke’watí}, but the power is of the forest. It is like a spider web, thin invisible threads that the spirits leave behind when moving through the forest. If someone then walks through the forest, it can stick like a spider web. We say that is the sweat of the spirit. When the shaman talks to the spirit [in the process of healing] it will say that the sick person ‘has caught my sweat’.

The Sieko-pai use the same word for the power of spirits as the power of human persons. The prefix \textit{tutu ke’} means capability while the suffix ‘i’ or ‘watí’ refers to the bodily form (human persons and spirit beings, respectively). As already alluded to above, these beings may interfere in human lives, but if their capabilities should have any non-incidental effect in the world – beyond inflicting sweat (fever) due to people accidentally crossing their path, for example – the being must stand in relation to a shaman. The shaman becomes the ‘owner’ of spirits and steers the actions of the \textit{watí} by talking to it, convincing it to use its capabilities for desired ends. Apart from being essential to cure illnesses, Delfin said that the \textit{yëi-watí} of the \textit{ceiba} tree can, for example, also influence human physical wellbeing and sense of bodily strength, or even guide persons to find their path in life. In this sense, humans and spirits have interconnected social lives – they are part of the relational fabric of the forest – but they have different bodily capabilities. The power of slow-growing trees thus goes beyond their role both as symbol (see Rival 1993, 1998; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1996) and as index, rather compelling human people to pursue a particular course of action (Kohn 2013). In \textit{How Forests Think} (2013), Kohn situates representation in a broader non-human world and describes the forest as ‘an ecology of selves’ where all beings are capable of creating and interpreting signs (ibid.: 7–9). However, the reduction of individual trees to indexical signs bypasses their agentive complexity (Herrera and Pálsson 2014: 240), especially on the extractive frontier.

The spirit or being of the \textit{ceiba} tree – the appearance of the \textit{yëi-watí} as whites that resemble highland Kichwa (Runa) through the hats they wear – suggests
that the ontological being of the *ceiba* involves a process of ‘bodily’ incorporation of alterity, through which they become relationally controlled and owned. In the colonial taming of the Amazonian frontier, the Runa were brokers in inter-ethnic relations, which included an active role in slave raiding and trading, as workers at the Jesuit missionary *reducciones* along the Napo River, and as the right hand of the rubber patrons during the 1880–1914 rubber boom (Muratorio 1998; Cipolletti 2017). In the eyes of the Sieko-pai, this has always given them a position closer to powerful outsiders and persons superior to themselves in the colonial hierarchy. Over the two generations that have passed since Delfín’s grandfather fled the Algodón River, a tributary of the Putumayo in the heart of the area controlled by the infamous rubber cartel Casa Arana (Taussig 1987; Hvalkof 2000; Santos-Granero and Barclay 2002; Cipolletti 2017), the Runa have become the largest indigenous group in lowland Ecuador, settling primarily along the main rivers. Over several centuries, the Runa were enemies of the Sieko-pai, as well as other small groups of indigenous people in the Ecuadorian lowland, but in the past twenty years they have also become the preferred partner in interethnic marriages (see also High 2015), being seen as more educated and civilised and better at doing business. Several anthropologists before me have described the desire to make marriage arrangements with former enemies (Viveiros de Castro 2001, 2004; High 2015) which, among the Sieko-pai, also implied the incorporation of the Runa into their social world as affinal kin.

Delfín’s description of the *yëi-watí* as Runa and Runa-like thus seems to suggest that their alterity has become incorporated into the spiritual world of the Sieko-pai, in a way analogous to what is done today with Runa affinal kin. The being of the *ceiba* tree encompasses the power of the Sieko-pai’s principal ‘other’, but it is an ‘internal alterity’, so to speak, which is familiar to the old shaman-leader. In a context of colonial memories of oppression, as Michael Taussig has noted, the shamanic visions become a way to restore order (Taussig 1987: 329) and transform exterior power into an animate controllable force. In this sense, the *ceiba* tree is alterity brought under control by becoming incorporated and mastered.

It is important to note that the resulting familiarity, in Delfín’s view, is not the outcome of a historical process. The tree beings have not changed with
time because, as he expressed it in response to my continuous questioning, ‘the watí can transform, but always remain the same’. The key seems to be that their transformability – their change of bodily appearance, hats (!) and capabilities is exactly what effects the continuity of their (superior) power. The shamanic relation to the auxiliary spirits is ‘affinity all the way down’ (Viveiros de Castro 2001), being less a restoration of order on the colonial extractive frontier than an appropriation and control of relations of alterity through logics of master-ownership (Fausto 2008). Throughout Amazonia, master-ownership is a form of relation known from the spirit-masters of animals and plants, and found between warrior and captive, in relation to adopted children and pets, and between shamans and their spirits. It is also an asymmetrical relation that involves both control and care, enclosure or incorporation (ibid.: 323–333).

All this suggests that the substitution of a known cultural forest with an agro-industrial palm oil plantation renders colonial relations ‘visible in a form other than themselves’ (Strathern 1988: 182), namely as various tree species and spirits. The yëi-watí of the ceiba tree suggests that the forest ecology is not only marked by colonial difference and alterity, but that this has quite literally been incorporated by forest beings. As a consequence, the forest is not a stable, external nature that is simply ascribed symbolic or cultural meaning; it is made of transformational, relational entities, which shamans can come to know and control. The ceiba tree is the first figure of environmental alterity – an incorporated and immanent one, but one that inevitably also reopens the question of how to think about the oil palms and their masters.

**OIL PALMS AND EMPTINESS**

Delfín found that the felling of the large slow-growing trees in particular was leaving the territory empty. The resulting poe’say’yo (empty space) was described by most members of the community as ‘a long distance between trees and not many animals to hunt’, for which reason the Sieko-pai found themselves increasingly unable to make a living off and in the forest. In Delfín’s view, however, this emptiness essentially concerned the fact that the tree-spirits were moving
away, as their houses – the large, slow-growing trees – were felled. The new oil palm plantation around the community simply voided the area of social relations that he was able to engage with and control: ‘When we cut the forest and the large trees’, he explained, ‘the spirits have no place to live. They simply go someplace else’.

The emptiness of the forest reminded him of the barrenness that existed in mythical time, prior to the labour of Wi-watí (the spirit of growth) who, in ancient times, had made the Amazon tropical forest ‘come into being’. Our frequent conversations about the current situation within the territory would compel him to relate the story of how the forest (airo), and what we would today call biodiversity, was first created in an encounter between Nañë (the Moon, and primary mover of events in Sieko-pai mythology) and Wi-watí:

In the wind a person appears. Nañë [the moon, creator] recognises it as Wi-watí. Wi-watí is the spirit of growth; when he shouts, plants grow. On arriving, Wi-watí shouts ‘wii-nooo’ with force, and the forest grows. After the first cry, the forest only consists of hardwood trees. The trees are so hard that they are impossible to cut or fell. Nañë burns the forest; he destroys it. Then Wi-watí shouts again, but the same process repeats itself. When Wi-watí shouts for the third time, what we recognise as a forest starts to grow: hard- and soft-wood trees, many different plants and beings. [...] The Amazon forest is limited by the force of Wi-watí’s voice. The place where his voice was not heard is empty, a desert, and the home of other peoples.

The story concerns both the Sieko-pai as a forest people and the practice of shifting cultivation, and it assigns emptiness to the land of ‘others’. Today, this barrenness formerly associated with the land of the other groups, and especially with white people, is emerging within the Sieko-pai’s own territory and due to their own actions. The emptiness of these foreign lands as well as of the oil palm plantation is characterised as being ‘without life’, and hence deprived of tutu ke’ watí (the power and capabilities of spirits), which Delfín and other shamans can relate to.
Analogous to Carlos Fausto’s question in *Feasting on People* (2007) about how people can hunt and eat animals if they know they are persons, one may similarly wonder how the Sieko-pai can fell their trees if they know that they are *pai* (persons)? In light of the understanding that trees hold capabilities of their own, doing away with their potentially dangerous agentive qualities seems to be at least part of the answer, particularly when seen from the perspective of the Pentecostal members of the community. Recalling the eloquent ending of Esaias’s statement during the visit to the oil palm plantation, about how he now only found himself ‘at war with the grass’, the agency of trees was not equally desirable to all community members.

Instead, caring for the plantation crops has become quite a chore for some of the 20 families, who find the weeding both extremely laborious and boring. Few had the same monetary means as Esaias in order to hire workers from the outside, nor his possibilities of cultivating a friendship with the manager of the plantation company. This brought two kinds of alterities and ‘ownership’ into tension. Esaias and his plantation are an index of a relationality dominated by capitalist ownership and exploitation, which through palm oil creates an emptiness (*po’say’yo*) that comes to exist alongside the encompassed alterity of the *yëi-watí*.

At the same time, the planting of oil palms has brought concerns that are more fundamental than questions about future income and the pending environmental fine. Several people in the village expressed the worry that the new oil palms could house alien spirits, or, in other words, that they permitted the entrance into the territory of new and potentially malicious beings. In Delfín’s view, these new trees were unlikely spirit houses, but nonetheless he and others were beset by doubt as to whether they were causing harm. He wondered if he would ever ‘be able to get to know them’. The lack of relations to this empty space of transcendental alterity implied that its powers were uncontrollable for the time being.

In this ambience, people carefully monitored the trees and the extent to which these alien beings were interfering in people’s lives. On the most immediate level, of course, the toxicity of the chemicals used to control the weeds was causing the death of fish in a tributary of the Aguarico River, which for the
past several years has been one of the community’s only sources of freshwater fish. On a more speculative plane, perhaps, which nonetheless thrived in the community, a wave of thefts of outboard motors was ascribed to the actions of economically ambitious others – somebody entering the community from the outside bent on causing harm (see Krøijer 2018). The void left behind by the departing watí made these changes largely outside the shamans’ control and subject of collective concern.

CONCLUSION

Nearly 30 years ago, Rival showed how among the Waorani, people and forests are experienced as holding interconnected social lives (Rival 1993; 2003). Kohn has continued this line of thinking about the tropical forest by defining it as ‘an ecology of selves’ that like human beings are involved in semiotic processes (Kohn 2013). According to the Sieko-pai, the first humans, such as the Wi-watí, were makers of the forests – and the airo (forest) is cultural, not natural, and hence at the core of an Amerindian perspectivist cosmology. A forest is not simply an object for humans to exploit, but rather filled with non-human persons to whom one must relate.

This article contributes to the vast literature on Amerindian groups, cosmology and nature by adding trees to the discussions of Amerindian perspectivism. Here I have outlined two forms of environmental alterity – the Runa-like alterity of the yëi-wati, which can be known and owned through bodily metamorphosis, and the transcendental alterity of the plantation. If we think along the lines suggested by Delfín, the plantation of African oil palms seems to entail the emergence of an empty space within Sieko-pai territory that is filled with unrelated or undomesticated others – invasive species/spirits, if you will, which are beyond human control.

When shamanic knowledge of the ecology is organised around knowing and controlling its transformability, beings that cannot be known and related to come to pose a problem. The process of substitution of forest landscapes, which the oil palm venture entailed, also occasioned a full reversal of the distinction
between nature and culture. If the Amazonian tropical forest is indeed culture, inhabited by different kinds of pai (persons), who perceive themselves as human (see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2012), the new palm oil plantation is alterity, nature in the Western transcendental sense of the term, whose exteriority is a challenge to continued self-determination. It is possible, obviously, that the distant and potential affinity of oil palms and other stranger-items will become encompassed and known in another form.

Historically, Amazonia has been looked upon from Europe as one of the planet’s last wild and unknown places, but the story of the Sieko-pai and their forest suggests that transcendental environmental alterity is best associated with the plantation, its genetically manipulated crops, invasive species and mono-cultural mode of production. From this perspective, terms like the Plantationocene wrongly seem to suggest that plantations are spaces of absolute human mastery. Instead, continued attention to non-relationality – spaces, beings and entities that resist attempts at knowing and relating to them – has the potential to critically engage both the underlying tenets of the literature on the Anthropocene, as well as its assumption that human beings are having a fundamental and equally distributed impact on the planet.

This does not suggest that nature is of the same essence as the renderings of nature found since the Enlightenment in everything from early travellers’ tales romanticising the wild unknown to the colonisation policies of countries like Ecuador, casting Amazonia as uncivilised empty land. In other parts of the world, such as Denmark, people are striving to re-establish wild nature through rewilding initiatives, seeking to orchestrate a space of transcendental alterity outside human control and resurrect an essentialist notion of nature, while new environmental alterities and emptiness are emerging in unexpected ways, even in Amazonia. We should take seriously how these alterities cut against a relational ontology.
NOTES

1 As Whitten has shown, whiteness was, in colonial times, associated with the nobility of Spanish descent, but after independence, it increasingly became a relational and processual term known as *blanqueamiento*, a process associated with civilisation and social mobility. The migrants colonising the empty lands in Amazonia were not necessarily ‘white’ in substantial terms – they were often of Kichwa (Runa) descent – but were identified as such either because of their lighter skin or their superior social and economic status.

2 The organisation OISSE was formed in 1976 and consisted of the members of the Siona and Secoya indigenous peoples, who after 1942–43 intermarried and lived together at the Cuyabeno River. In the 1990s, urged by the emerging indigenous movement promoting identification as indigenous ‘nationalities’, the organisation split in two. The Secoya organisation first took the name OISE, Organización Indígena Secoya de Ecuador, but later changed its name to NASIEPAI, Nacionalidad Sieko-pai (NASIEPAI 2014).


4 This is in line with other recent scholarly work describing indigenous peoples’ perception of their relationship to the state and other powerful outsiders as a predator-prey relationship (Fausto 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2012; Rival 2017). Viveiros de Castro argues that to Amerindian groups, dealing with alien and spirit beings is somehow analogous to dealing with such outsiders, both being dangerous endeavours; supernatural encounters in the forest are ‘a kind of indigenous proto-experience of the State’ (2012: 37). Encounters with jaguars, spirits – and states – involve a fear of being captured under an ‘other’ dominant ‘point of view’. This fear, which corresponds to the fear of being prey to a jaguar that sees you before you see it, demands either ‘incorporation of the other or by the other’ (ibid.). This question of incorporation of the other quite unexpectedly also involved tree beings, as I shall return to in the following sections.

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