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Ontological politics of heritage: forms of humanity and living images in the Amazon

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ABSTRACT

Amid contemporary posthumanist debates, one central target of post-anthropocentric critique is the concept of 'Humanity'. The normative, foundationalist, modern, and Western construction of the Human is often seen as a cornerstone of the radical challenges posed by posthumanist thought, particularly in the Global North. Yet, can alternative conceptualisations of humanity remain productive and offer critical insight into the intersection of practices aimed at 'decentering the human' and heritage-making processes? This article proposes an expanded conception of humanity in which non-human and heritage-making practices converge. Drawing on the Yanomami understanding of culture and their notion of *utupë a* – a 'visible unit of the forest', an image-essence intertwined with soil, vegetation, and life force – it argues that a more-than-human form of humanity can be envisioned through an ontological politics of heritage. This perspectivist ontology is enacted through material and spiritual expressions involving multispecies inheritance and world-making rooted in ecological interconnectivity with the Amazon rainforest. These practices are intertwined with translation mechanisms and cosmopolitical diplomacy, offering a framework for cultivating futurity in a world increasingly shaped by socio-ecological damage.

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What can heritage do, and how might we think about it differently? Heritage, often understood as a cultural practice or the product of a particular community or set of values, is frequently tied to a narrow view of what it means to be human. From a Western perspective, it has been framed through a human-centred lens, as the capacity of a specific kind of being to produce meaningful legacies, overlooking diverse understandings of humanity, particularly those of Indigenous communities.

This article questions the normative notion of the Human – with a capital 'H' – as defined by European modernity and explores how heritage might be reimagined from a broader understanding of humanity, with a lowercase 'h'. While critical heritage studies have challenged universal definitions within Western contexts, this approach extends

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these debates by engaging with Amerindian perspectivism and Amazonian ethnography. Here, heritage is understood not as a fixed object or tradition, but as a relational practice grounded in ontological difference, involving both human and non-human participants in the transmission of knowledge.

This perspective reflects Indigenous critiques of an exclusionary idea of Humanity and draws on Amazonian thought, where humanity may be shared across different forms of existence. From this standpoint, heritage becomes a practice oriented towards shaping possible futures through relations of action, tension and solidarity.

Against this background, the article asks how Amazonian cosmologies – their ways of thinking, living and dreaming – contribute to reimagining the human and, in turn, to alternative understandings of heritage. Rather than presenting new empirical findings, it advances a conceptual argument based on selected ethnographic examples and Indigenous thought, placed in dialogue with post-foundational philosophy and Science and Technology Studies (STS). Through this interdisciplinary engagement, it proposes alternative conceptualisations that unsettle human-centred and object-based frameworks, beginning with the following Yanomami song documented by Bruce Albert:

¡Keakeamuu Keakeamuu a-ëëë!
¡Keakeamuu Keakeamuu a-ëëë!
¡Wixa xina a ka keakeamuu jeakeamuu a-ëëë!
[Up and down, up and down!
The bearded saki's tail goes up and down!]
¡Reiki reiki kë-ëëë!
¡Reiki reiki kë-ëëë!
¡Mora maki uxuhu a ka reiki reiki kë-ëëë!
[Hanging, hanging!
The ripe fruits of the Dacryodes peruviana tree are
hanging, hanging!] (Albert and Kopenawa 2023, 152)[1]

Intimately connected to the vitality of the tropical forest, the Yanomami songs known as *amoã pë* are composed through fleeting perceptions of the movements and sounds observed in the rainforest: rivers, animals, fruits, breezes, among others. As Davi Kopenawa Yanomami – shaman, thinker, and activist – explains, these songs are 'melodic images born from the *amoã hi ki* trees'. For those to whom they hold meaning, these songs are carefully preserved and transmitted. More than mere melodies, they are understood by the Yanomami as images, vital essences deeply connected to the earth and the tropical forest. Although not necessarily visible, these images are, for the Yanomami, inseparable from the very core of all beings. They are sung during communal celebrations and shared from house to house as part of an ongoing process of transmission and renewal (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 58).

There are several key elements embedded in this understanding of the song as an image that emerges from the *amoã hi ki* trees. First, songs are not an expression limited to human action – as conventionally defined – nor are they restricted to what is commonly understood in the West as culture or human history. On the contrary, songs are something that emanates from this specific kind of tree, planted by Omama – the Yanomami demiurge – at the edges of the tropical forest and at the foot of the Sky, according to Yanomami mythology (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 58).

Second, song is an image – a vital essence and a primordial mythical form that connects multiple modes of existence. From this perspective, the image exceeds any purely visual or mental dependency, extending across a broad spectrum of perception in which voice, air, and body assume a central role.

Third and finally, song, as image, is meant to be sung, transmitted, and shared – but only by those who can appreciate them and who choose, as Kopenawa notes, 'to keep these images in their chest'. Can images be sung, embodied within the chest, and brought forth – or even created – by trees? Taking this question as a point of departure, and by offering a compelling example of a heritage practice that involves trees as other-than-human beings – and a different way of conceiving sensory expression and meaning – this article seeks, initially, to question the notion of 'Humanity' as a normative paradigm. Commonly understood as the exclusive agent of heritage-making, this conception is challenged here through a dialogue with posthumanist perspectives and, more specifically, through the lens of Amerindian perspectivism and Amazonian ethnography. In addition, the article analyses the Yanomami conception of the image *utupë a* as a material and spiritual expression of heritage in which multiple forms of existence converge. From this basis, it proposes translation and transduction as mechanisms of cosmopolitical diplomacy – tools for forging future-oriented alliances across ontological and cultural boundaries. Finally, the article outlines the scope of a political ontology of heritage in which alternative ways of conceptualising the human continue to offer productive avenues for rethinking heritage-making processes.

Heritage-making in a more-than-human humanity

Many have been excluded from the dance of Humanity, especially if we begin from its meaning as rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Genesis 2004, 1).[2] This form of exclusion is linked to a particular way of defining the Human and Humanity – as those beings uniquely capable of laughter, thought, symbolic creation, the construction of hierarchies, religions, and forms of magics, the comprehension of Death, the navigation of oceans, and participation in economic relations (Panourgiá 2018, 53). As Neni Panourgiá has clearly articulated, this specific understanding of the Human – or the Anthropos – emerged in the post-antique Western world (Panourgiá 2018, 54). These traits have been regarded as exclusive and exclusionary attributes of a single kind of being – the Anthropos – thereby denying that many other creatures and forms of existence also embody them.

These specific attributes ascribed to the Human have significantly shaped what the French philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer conceptualises as the thesis of human exceptionality (Schaeffer 2009, 21–23), which rests on a radical distinction and separation between the Human being and all other living entities. This exceptionalist framework constitutes a central axis in the debates surrounding critical posthumanism, particularly in modern and contemporary thought within European and North American academia, where it has been increasingly challenged for sustaining essentialist and fixed notions of the Human. Within this context, the perspective of Indigenous thinker and activist Ailton Krenak offers a compelling intervention that reframes the very foundations of the debate.

In his work *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, Krenak underscores the exclusionary logics inherited from a fixed idea of Humanity – an idea responsible for relegating vast human groups and communities to the status of 'quasi-humans' (2021, 35). This is particularly true for Indigenous communities across the Americas and other parts of Planet Earth, who have historically been positioned outside the category of 'Humanity' in its full sense for 'dancing a strange choreography' – a metaphor that signals their divergence from the dominant, normative definition of what it means to be Human (Krenak 2021; Sloterdijk 2009). Jamaican theorist and writer Sylvia Wynter has likewise emphasised, in numerous works, how representations of Humanity are marked by a colonial, racist, and sexist matrix that reduces the category of the Human to a restricted club of privileged forms of existence, led by the figure of Man (Wynter 2003).

An intriguing case that provides a counterpoint in South America is the Andean conception of the human. Unlike perspectivist frameworks, in which any type of existence can, at some point, assume the position of the human, the Andean case entails a specific Quechua notion referring to the 'person'. Runakuna (the plural of runa in Quechua, meaning person) are understood as an assemblage of forms of existence that can include entities such as mountains, rocks, or other elements of the natural world. Anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena translates this notion as 'person' and highlights how, in Andean cosmologies, these runakuna are permanently interconnected with tirakuna – the plural form of tira, meaning 'lands' in Quechua – which she translates as 'earths' (De la Cadena 2018). This Andean perspective provides a stark contrast to Western anthropocentric frameworks: humans are not discrete beings standing apart from nature but are relational entities enmeshed in networks that include nonhuman beings and landscapes.

Within the debates and discussions of Critical Heritage Studies, scholars have highlighted both the limitations and the potential of these critiques of the anthropocentric perspective that underpins the notion of Humanity (Sterling 2020). This becomes evident when we consider heritage-making practices grounded in relational philosophies or flat ontologies, which challenge the hierarchical positioning of the human as the centre of heritage practices. In this regard, while the historical conception of heritage has been 'centered on people', recent debates surrounding the decentring of the human in meaning-making have opened crucial pathways for envisioning alternative approaches and for transforming the very foundations of what we understand as heritage (Harrison 2015; Macdonald 2018; Sterling 2020; Ugwuanyi 2020).

In current posthumanist discourse, the notion of Humanity has become a key site of critique. This focus is well justified: the normative idea of the Human – constructed within a foundationalist, modern, and Western ontology – has become a primary target of critique within the posthumanities (Wolfe 2010). Yet this raises pressing questions: Are there alternative ways of defining humanity? Can the concept still hold critical value, particularly in thinking through the intersections of decentring the human and the processes of heritage-making?

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in his work *Cannibal Metaphysics*,[3] suggests that for Amerindian communities, the predicates of humanity are among the most widely shared constructs in the world (Viveiros de Castro 2010, 27). Likewise, in the interview *La Mirada del Jaguar*, the Brazilian anthropologist explains that for these communities, evolution resembles an 'inverted Darwinism', wherein all beings

were originally people (Viveiros de Castro 2013, 272). This conception aligns with the formulation developed by Tania Stolze Lima (1996) and Viveiros de Castro (2010) himself concerning what has been termed *Amerindian perspectivism* – a concept grounded in ethnographic research conducted in the Amazon. This framework seeks to characterise how, for Indigenous communities in these territories, the world is composed of a multiplicity of perspectives, and how all forms of existence function as centres of intentionality (Lima 1996, 38; Viveiros de Castro 2010, 33).

In this sense, if all forms of life inhabiting the planet – and in particular the Amazonian tropical forest – are imbued with intentionality and are either intensively persons or virtually persons, insofar as they can at any moment reveal themselves as such, then this 'ontological potentiality' (Viveiros de Castro 2010, 37) implies that humanity is a condition extended to a plurality of forms of existence.

Consider for a moment what this implies for a highly Westernised consciousness – and how it challenges our conception of heritage. If humanity is a shared background and is understood as a reflexive or self-reflexive interiority, then for Amazonian indigenous communities, this reflexivity is the most evenly distributed trait among all beings. Unlike the Western view, which – according to Viveiros de Castro – centres on an anthropocentric effort to construct the human as non-given (as the very being of the non-given), in many indigenous contexts of South America, there exists an anthropomorphic presupposition: humanity is inherent – in other words, the human is the given (Viveiros de Castro 2010, 51). This contrast between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism provides a critical framework for rethinking the challenges of decentring the human in current definitions of heritage.

According to Viveiros de Castro, a person – or any entity – can be considered human in different ways depending on the context. One might be recognised as human in the conventional Western sense, but in other relational or cultural positions, that same entity could be seen more like an animal or another kind of being. The key idea is that any entity can have a point of view and shift between these positions, meaning humanity is not fixed but relational and fluid (Viveiros de Castro 2013, 45). The key point is not to define who or what counts as human, since everything is human, but rather when one occupies the position of being human. This focus on positionality, situationality, and variability highlights that, for Amazonian cosmologies, the concept of the human is vastly different from the onto-theological definition of humanity in the Western world.

Before examining the tensions involved in approaching heritage in a non-anthropocentric way, it is useful to briefly consider debates on 'the Human' within the posthuman condition (Braidotti 2013), particularly where they appear to resonate with Amerindian thought. From a poststructuralist perspective, 'the Human' is not an inherent or objective reality, but a historical construct (Foucault 2000). In Western contexts, this construct has become normative, closely tied to the figure of the subject and used to distinguish 'us' from 'others', underpinning hierarchical structures of existence and agency.

Historically, 'the Human' and Humanity have also functioned to marginalise forms of existence that do not conform to this dominant model – positioning the human as separate from and superior to nature and broader ecologies (Descola 2013). As Braidotti (2013, 2019) argues, 'the Human' is not a neutral or universal category but

one that grants access to privileges and rights, while producing exclusions. In this sense, the term is inherently discriminatory, structuring divisions both among humans and between human and non-human forms of existence. As she notes, the concept is increasingly destabilised and open to contested redefinitions of what counts as human (Braidotti 2013, 16).

In contrast to the conventional notion of 'Humanity' within the philosophical posthumanist debate, we find the concept of animism,[4] which has been also crucial to discussions of the human condition – or the notion of humanity – at various points in recent history. As Anselm Franke notes, 'Animism designates a cosmos in which everything is alive and communicating and potentially possesses the qualities of being "a person" or, at the very least, an agent of some kind' (2018, 39). While animism was once associated with a 'primitive' understanding of the world (e.g. Tylor 2010), more recent interpretations emphasise processes of becoming rather than fixed identities (Franke 2018, 40). In this sense, animism reflects a way in which Western thought has engaged with Indigenous understandings of humanity. Although post-humanist perspectives challenge exclusionary notions of the human, this article argues that Amerindian perspectivism offers a different approach: rather than displacing humanism, it reworks it from an alternative standpoint, opening more inclusive and productive ways of thinking about humanity. This raises key questions for heritage: can it be conceived through a more-than-human understanding of humanity?

Even within ethnographic studies of non-Western contexts, heritage often remains tied to a limited, human-centred definition, associated with attributes such as language, rationality and symbolic capacity. Yet some approaches challenge this restriction by recognising forms of existence that exceed a single model of the human (Virtanen 2019). Rethinking heritage in this way becomes both a challenge and a response-ability (Haraway 2012), requiring the humanities to unsettle assumptions of human exceptionalism.

Such shifts are evident across anthropology, cultural geography and Indigenous studies. Beyond Amazonian contexts, research in North American Indigenous and settler-colonial settings highlights more-than-human relations of kinship, cooperation and alliance, showing how social and political life emerges through relations that exceed the human (e.g. Larsen and Johnson 2017). Together, these perspectives support a relational understanding of inheritance and coexistence that challenges fixed definitions of the Human.

Here, I wish to argue that we can continue to think productively about the notion of humanity in the context of heritage practices, so long as that notion is not reserved for particular forms of existence. Instead, it should recognise that all beings inhabiting the planet potentially possess the capacity to act as key agents in heritage-making. This is what I propose to call a form of heritage-making within an other-than-human humanity.[5] Such an approach is powerfully and evocatively present in certain material and spiritual expressions rooted in the Amazonian territories of South America.

A key contribution to understanding how heritage is articulated within Amazonian cosmologies – while challenging human-exceptionalist assumptions – can be found in Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino's analysis of Amazonian shamanic poetics, based on his ethnographic work with the Marubo people. In *Oniska*, Cesarino shows that personhood,

often linked to an exceptionalist notion of humanity, extends beyond humans to include animals, plants and spirits (2011, 35). Marubo personhood is not a fixed identity, but a dynamic and recursive process shaped by multiple histories (44).

In this sense, humanity – or personhood – is an extended and relational condition which, through what Cesarino calls a 'shamanic aesthetics', enables engagement with difference and multiplicity. While expressed in Marubo chants, this aesthetic resonates more broadly across Amazonian ontologies. These perspectives offer a framework for understanding how perceptual forms – images, chants and spiritual practices – participate in heritage-making.

A related example is the Yanomami concept of image, *utupë a*, which illustrates how decentring normative definitions of the human reshapes heritage. Here, the perceptual – understood as a medial, spiritual and vital condition shared across beings – supports what Caitlin DeSilvey describes as 'the socially embedded, future-oriented process through which the past is brought into the present to shape environments and [ways of doing]' (DeSilvey, Harrison, and Sterling 2020, 289). From this perspective, heritage emerges as a relational process, embodied in images enacted through chants, choreographies and shamanic practices.

Living images as a form of inheritance: about the notion of *utupë a*

From a Yanomami perspective of expanded humanity, it is unsurprising that what is inherited – what is transmitted across generations and valued for collective survival – often originates from other-than-human forms of existence. Yanomami imaging practices, including the guidance of vital forest images by shamans and the presence of *xapiri* spirits, constitute inherited forms of knowledge and connection linked to animals, dreams, songs and choreographies. These practices challenge narrow definitions of the heritage subject, showing how multiple forms of existence sustain traditions and generate value beyond the centrality of the Anthropos. From this standpoint, inheritance and tradition are not confined to a fixed category of 'human beings', but are shared across coexisting forms of life, particularly within Amazonian contexts. This is explored through the notion of *utupë a*.

In the work co-authored with Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, Bruce Albert notes that *utupë a* has often been translated as 'image'. However, it cannot be reduced to representation or to a 'mental image'. Rather, *utupa pë* – the plural form – are direct perceptions of an external reality, understood as fully tangible (Albert and Kopenawa 2023, 82). Significantly, this concept of *utupa pë* is frequently used to describe primordial beings or the spirits of the rainforest, known as *xapiri pë*. These spirits are often described by shamans with striking aesthetic precision.6 As Albert asserts, seeing these direct perceptions, or *utupa pë*, is more than a visual experience, it is a way of knowing (2023, 82). Shamans access these *utupa pë* through specific choreographies and songs, each associated with a particular primordial being. These performances take place during both individual and collective ceremonies, which serve purposes such as healing, cosmological interpretation, and ecological intervention (Arregui 2019). This understanding of *utupa pë* highlights how the Yanomami notion of 'image' differs fundamentally from Western concepts. Albert further explains that for the Yanomami, *utupë a* first refers to reflections in water, shadows, and even echoes – a kind of 'image of sound' (2023, 82). It

also encompasses the 'spectral value' of the human-animal beings from the beginning of time, which shamanic practices aim to restore and reanimate. Finally, *utupë a* denotes the image-essence of any entity – a vital component of personhood (Tsing et al. 2018). This 'image-value' is seen as an internal, corporeal, miniature image where a being's life force resides.

Understood as living images, *utupë pë* express the interiority or essence of beings in the tropical forest. They are also linked to an archaic humanity and possess a paradoxical nature: simultaneously non-iconic and non-visible. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro notes, they are inaccessible to any 'empirical exercise of vision' (Viveiros de Castro 2007, 160). Thus, while images are conventionally defined through visibility, in the Yanomami conception they exceed representation and become the very condition of the beings they express.

This dual material and transcendent dimension have led Bruce Albert to describe them as events that are at once visual and ontological, corporeal and cosmological (2023, 83). Such events not only unsettle Western notions of the image but also challenge the idea of the human as the sole producer of images. As living images, they animate beings and appear as 'direct perceptions of an exterior reality that is tangible' (82). Their relation to shamanism is central. Shamans can conduct these inherited images and 'call forth' the *xapiri pë*, primordial image-beings that inhabit the shaman's body during trance and render the invisible present (83; Viveiros de Castro 2007). These images manifest materially in ritual practices, becoming audible in *amoã pë* songs and visible in choreographies associated with the spirits.

From this perspective, heritage-making is not grounded in human consciousness alone but in the vital forces of the forest, sustained by these living images. What is recognised as heritage emerges through practices that render such images perceptible (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). The notion of *utupë a*, as both material and spiritual, thus points to a form of heritage in which multiple forms of existence converge. It aligns with understandings of heritage as 'a series of activities … concerned with assembling … future worlds' (Harrison et al. 2020, 4), while emphasising a multispecies relationality oriented towards ancestry and the inherited presence of the xapiri spirits (Bird Rose 2012; Krenak 2024).

Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino identifies a comparable relation between images and songs in his analysis of Marubo shamanic drawings, showing how Amerindian pictographic traditions translate verbal schemas – those structuring chants – into graphic forms (Cesarino, Fausto, and Severi 2015, 110). Crucially, these compositions are not individual creations but draw on shared repertoires transmitted between humans and non-human entities, such as the yovevo spirits. This knowledge is actualised through shamanic dreaming, where kinship relations are formed and formulas circulate across domains, encompassing chants, pharmacopeia, names, graphic motifs and ritual sequences. What emerges is a distributed and relational mode of knowledge production grounded in exchanges between visible and invisible realms. As ethnographic accounts suggest, the invisible is not marginal but central, often functioning as a form of protection that resists external appropriation (Smith 2020, 346).

Dreaming, in this context, becomes a key practice for assembling and shaping possible worlds. For the Yanomami, it is a central source of knowledge through which distant beings and places are encountered, and a space of contact with image-life and the *xapiri*

spirits (Kelly Luciani 2017; Limulja 2022). As Ailton Krenak argues, dreams are also transformative, unsettling the fixed form of the Human and opening onto 'other visions of unbounded life' (2021, 34).

Following Krenak, dreaming can be understood as a practice of inheritance and tradition into which one is initiated. Alongside singing, dancing and shamanic practice, it expands heritage beyond human-centred action, revealing inheritance as the active continuation and transformation of what is passed down. In this sense, heritage emerges as a future-oriented practice, deeply entangled with spirits, animals and other beings of the forest.

Translation and transduction as mechanisms of cosmopolitical diplomacy

Diplomacy constitutes one of the most significant mechanisms of negotiation. It is through diplomacy that mediation becomes possible, and, in a certain sense, it embodies acts of translation understood as forms of connecting different modes of world-making. Diplomacy also assumes the presence of ontological disagreement, or what Marisol de la Cadena has referred to as the 'ontological conflict' (De la Cadena et al. 2019, 38). This conflict emerges as a case of misrecognition by equivocation, in the terms of Viveiros de Castro, and reveals precisely how communication between different forms of existence – or different beings – always operates through a translation that is partial, never absolute or total (De la Cadena et al. 2019). Translation, in this sense, is a fragile mechanism that does not renounce difference in favour of totality but rather assumes that it is never possible to synthesise, replicate, or reproduce point by point that which one attempts to translate (Derrida 1996).

This understanding of translation has been central to Amazonian ethnography, particularly in the work of Manuela Carneiro da Cunha. She conceives shamanic translation not as the transfer of fixed meanings, but as a process that renders perceptible the relations through which sense is produced across multiple forms of existence. Translation thus involves a reordering that gives coherence to new perceptual worlds, rather than simply moving information between domains (Carneiro da Cunha 1998; Faleiros 2019). In this sense, it operates as a practice of world-making, a perspective that is especially relevant for understanding the Yanomami case.

From a critical heritage studies perspective, translation plays a key role in how Yanomami living images are made present and transmitted. While *utupa pë* emerge in shamanic trance, Bruce Albert describes this not as translation but as transduction – a transformation across media through which the invisible becomes present (2023, 83). Translation instead occurs in the verbal description of these image-essences and through 'image skins' or 'paper skins', the material supports on which, according to the Yanomami, white people inscribe their knowledge (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 19).

Since the 1970s, intensified contact with the Western world – driven by extractive projects supported by Brazil's military dictatorship and mining interests – has led some Yanomami, particularly in mission contexts, to experiment with drawing and writing on paper.7 However, their expressive traditions are rooted in body painting, song, and dance. These drawings and paintings on paper have sparked the interest not only of anthropologists such as Albert and missionaries, but more recently of the art world, which has exhibited the drawings of shamans and Yanomami community members in

major art venues across Europe and the Americas. It is worth noting that many of these expressions are often understood as mechanisms of translation meant to 'synthesize' or transmit their culture (Carreras 2024). Nevertheless, I believe there is a lack of critical reflection on the possibilities and limits of such forms of expression, which adopt the forms of Western educational systems (Caballero Arias 2011, 55–57) and are later instrumentalized within the global art market.

Returning to translation as an act of cosmopolitical diplomacy, these practices can be understood as efforts to establish 'affective alliances' (Krenak 2024) that build alternatives for the future within difference. Here, difference resists homogenisation and implies that translation is both betrayal and negotiation: a provisional, imperfect process that mediates not only between human cultures (Leal 2025) but also among animals, plants and minerals (Robles de la Pava 2025). Such relations operate through transduction during shamanic action (Viveiros de Castro 2010, 153), where all species have their own shamans and engage in alliances shaped by survival (153–154). In this sense, interspecific translation becomes central to heritage practices that acknowledge their partiality.

Two aspects follow from this. First, transduction highlights heritage practices that express ontological plurality, where manifestations through the shaman's body, song and choreography reveal a world in which all beings are potentially human. Second, translation, particularly in intercultural contact, mobilises different material registers to enable communication while remaining aware of its limits. These practices do not seek 'common worlds' but forms of coexistence grounded in respect for difference and disagreement.

Here, cosmopolitics becomes central. As Isabelle Stengers (2014) and Bruno Latour (2014) argue, it does not aim at unity but at negotiating differences. As Mario Blaser writes, it connects to the 'pluriverse', an 'ocean of indistinguishable multiplicity' (2024, 33). Within Amazonian ethnography, this helps explain heritage as negotiation among heterogeneous beings and knowledges.

Diplomacy and heritage-making thus become expressions of cosmopolitics, enabling 'the negotiated coming together of heterogeneous worlds' (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 4). As shown by Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, chants, drawings and shamanic translations are not merely symbolic but sustain relations across ontologies. In this way, heritage operates as a political and ontological practice that challenges fixed hierarchies of the Human (cf. Viveiros de Castro and Stolze Lima; Carneiro da Cunha 1998; Cesarino 2011; Krenak 2024), foregrounding negotiation, care and the coexistence of multiple worlds without fusion or assimilation.

An ontological politics of heritage from the perspective of extended humanity

If we consider Rodney Harrison's discussion in 'Beyond "Natural" and "Cultural" Heritage', where heritage is described as a collaborative, dialogical and material-discursive process through which past and future emerge in the present (Harrison 2015, 27), *utupë a* can be understood as both material and spiritual expression. These are heritage-making practices shared by humans and other-than-human beings.

Harrison's notion of 'ontologies of connectivity' and 'dialogical models of heritage' seeks to leave open what heritage *could be* and how it is constituted (Holbraad, Pedersen,

and Viveiros de Castro 2014). While this openness is crucial, particularly in contexts of erasure (Bifo Berardi 2025), I argue that it is equally important to examine the effects of these ontological politics and where they are enacted. In particular, the emphasis on the 'common' – common worlds or futures (Harrison 2015, 38) – can be productively rethought through a cosmopolitics of the uncommon (Blaser 2024), grounded in concrete heritage practices.

From this perspective, *utupa pë* demonstrate how heritage, as a future-oriented assemblage, is also produced by other-than-human forms of humanity. They show that such agencies become perceptible only through processes of transduction and translation, involving ongoing negotiation and irreducible tension. Contemporary Yanomami artistic practices exemplify this, as artists such as Joseca Mokahesi Yanomami, Aida Harika Yanomami, Edmar Tokorino Yanomami and Roseane Yariana Yanomami use media shaped by colonial histories – drawing, writing, video – to narrate and transform experiences of violence (e.g. *Yuri u xëatima thë* – Fishing with Timbó –and *Thuë pihi kuuwi* – A Woman Thinking).

In this sense, the ontological politics of heritage can be expanded through an extended notion of humanity. As Bruce Albert notes, Amazonian living images are both vital essence and bodily form (2023, 100), binding matter and spirit. Finally, reclaiming anthropomorphism in this context does not reinforce anthropocentrism but reconfigures it: as Viveiros de Castro suggests, humanity is not an exception but a shared condition, 'not a species chosen by God … but … the starting condition' (Viveiros de Castro 2013, 57).

Building on this expanded understanding of heritage as relational and more-than-human, *utupë a* can be understood as both a way of being and a way of doing, rooted in a shared anthropomorphic foundation that extends across rainforest beings, particularly animals understood as forest spirits. As Mario Blaser notes, shamans have long developed protocols for engaging these perspectives – what may be understood as the human in an Amazonian sense (2024). These practices do not always rely on human representatives; entities such as the jaguar, central among the Yanomami, Araweté and Shuar, or the tapir in Kayapó and Asháninka cosmologies, may assume this role (Descola 1996; Fausto 2004; Lima 1996; Viveiros de Castro 1992). Such figures operate as assemblages, destabilising fixed notions of humanity and prompting a rethinking of heritage as a sociopolitical process.

This shift aligns with what Viveiros de Castro (2013) and Marisol De la Cadena et al. (2019) describe as a 'permanent decolonisation of thought', a relational politics that challenges dominant ontological frameworks. At the same time, as Smith reminds us, Indigenous ontologies resist romanticised notions of solidarity and often remain partially inaccessible to Western political forms (2020, 337). From this perspective, decentring the human is not about expanding an existing category, but about challenging the ontological and political assumptions that define both humanity and heritage. It opens heritage to forms of inheritance that are spiritual, material and political, involving multiple forms of existence in shaping what is transmitted, preserved and transformed across generations.

The voices of shamans and Indigenous thinkers from the Americas offer us a lesson in this regard; they gift us words, and here, I use the term 'words' while echoing what Davi Kopenawa Yanomami states when he says he offers words to the 'white people' – though what he offers goes far beyond mere words (2013). As Kopenawa states:

> If you want to take my words, do not destroy them. They are the words of Omama and the *xapiri*. First draw them on image skins, then look at them often. Then you will think: 'Haixopë! This truly is the story of the spirits!' And later you will tell your children: These drawn words are those of a Yanomami who once told me how he became spirit and learned to speak to defend his forest. (2013, 11)

Based on these words – translated from Yanomami into French, then into English, and into the many languages in which *The Falling Sky. Words of a Yanomami Shaman* has circulated – it can be affirmed that an ontological politics of heritage can only be conceived through difference and through the ways this difference becomes communicable across forms of existence. This challenges the principle of recognition and self-identity that has dominated Western metaphysics. Rather than presupposing stable subjects or universal visibility, difference enables multiplicity and relational forms of personhood. In this sense, Pedro Cesarino introduces the notion of 'multiple person' or extra-human persons, understood not as individuals but as configurations of relations (2011, 33). Heritage, then, is not a bounded cultural object but a relational and processual field emerging from heterogeneous assemblages of human and extra-human beings.

Building on this perspective, an ontological politics of heritage calls into question regimes structured around recognition, representation, and stabilised identities. While critical heritage studies have emphasised power and exclusion, an ontological approach shifts attention to relational existence. Heritage becomes what persists and transforms through interactions among multiple forms of life, unsettling human-centred and object-based frameworks and foregrounding plural ontologies and their tensions.

Perhaps, then, we might understand that images sing, are kept in the chest, and are brought forth – or created – by trees not merely as metaphor, but as an ontological proposition that compels us to rethink heritage beyond representation and human-exceptionalist transmission.

Notes

1. A translated and transcribed version of this song appears in Bruce Albert's 'La Floresta Políglota' (Albert and Kopenawa 2023). Related Yanomami songs are also available on Reahu heã: Cantos da festa Yanomami, published by the Hutukara Association in 2009 andrecorded in Watoriki (Amazonas) and accessible via IMS Rádio Batuta.: https://radiobatuta.ims.com.br/especiais/cantos-da-festa-yanomami.
2. Let us recall how, in Genesis Chapter 1, verses 27 and 28, it is written: 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. 28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Genesis 2004, 1)
3. Although I mention the English title here, for this article I have used the Spanish version, which is cited in the references.
4. I revisit the notion of animism here in order to place it in dialogue with Amerindian perspectivism, while remaining attentive to the extensive debates surrounding its use in Amazonian ethnography. For critical discussions, see Costa and Fausto (2010) and Kohn (2007), among others.
5. A useful concept for thinking about heritage beyond a human-centred framework is Marco Antonio Valentim's notion of extramundanidade (outerworldliness), which, drawing on Amerindian perspectivism and contemporary philosophy, gestures towards the 'point of

view of the Other' as a mode of being distinct from existential notions of being (Valentim 2018).

6. I draw here on a description by Kopenawa: 'The *xapiri*'s image is very bright. They are always clean, for they do not live in the smoke from houses and eat game like we do. Their bodies never remain grey, without paint or finery, like ours do. They are always covered in fresh vermilion annatto dye and decorated with shiny black waves, lines, and spots. They are heavily scented. When they play with the wind being's wives, the forest smells of annatto and the hunting charms they wear around their necks. The breeze from their flight spreads fragrances through the forest as strong as those of the white people's perfumes. But the *xapiri* dye is one of their own precious goods. It comes from the mixed odours of things of the forest and does not have the acrid, dangerous scent of alcohol. Their arms are decorated with a profusion of bunches of parrot feathers and macaw tail feathers stuck in armbands made of beautifully bright, smooth beads. A multitude of toucan tails and colourful wisawisama si feathered skins hang from them too. They really cut a fine figure! Omama taught them to dress like this' (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 56–57).
7. According to Bruce Albert, the Yanomami's engagement with Western drawing tools on paper can be traced back to the 1970s. As the anthropologist notes, Swiss-Brazilian artist and photographer Claudia Andujar – who has maintained a long-standing alliance with the Yanomami since that decade – brought drawing materials to Catrimani and organised drawing sessions with members of the community who expressed interest. One well-known example is that of the shaman Taniki (Albert and Kopenawa 2023, 97–99).

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