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# Golden Animals: A Lyric Essay on Animacy and Resilience

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**Abstract:** Amidst crises of species loss and climate collapse, it is heartening to recall that a dialogue about global history, the animacy of the world, and the place of human beings within it is unfinished and ongoing. When I travel for fieldwork in Saraguro, Ecuador; different subjects push to the fore. With my friends Benigno, Ana Victoria, and the members of the women's cooperative Las Mujeres de Teresa de Calcuta as my primary collaborators, we have together explored beadwork and the practice of art in the unfolding of identity for Indigenous people in the transnational world; differing rhythms of agricultural work in Ecuador and the United States; biological diversity and invasive species; cultivating cross-cultural knowing, and more. In 2017, Benigno directed my attention to golden animals tales he had heard from others, and from his own life. When Benigno and other community members tell these stories, they embody ideas about the persistence of history and icons of power from the past. The theme of his story revolves around animate energies embedded in the natural and cultural landscapes in which he dwells.

**Keywords:** Saraguro (Ecuador), gold, animals, storytelling, animacy, ethnographic poetry

**Résumé :** Dans un contexte de crise marqué par la disparition des espèces et la catastrophe climatique, il est réconfortant de rappeler que le dialogue sur l'histoire mondiale, l'animéité (animacy) du monde et la place des êtres humains en son sein, est inachevé et toujours en cours. Lorsque je me rends à Saraguro, en Équateur, pour mon enquête de terrain, différents thèmes passent au premier plan. Avec mes principaux collaborateurs Benigno, Ana Victoria et les membres de la coopérative de femmes *Las Mujeres de Teresa de Calcuta*, nous avons exploré les thèmes suivants : le perlage et la pratique artistique dans le développement de l'identité des peuples autochtones au sein du monde transnational, les rythmes distincts du travail agricole en Équateur et aux États-Unis, la diversité biologique et les espèces envahissantes, la promotion du savoir interculturel, et ainsi de suite. En 2017, Benigno m'a fait découvrir les contes sur les animaux dorés que d'autres lui avaient racontés ou qu'il avait tirés de sa propre vie. En racontant ces histoires, Benigno et les autres membres de la communauté incarnent des idées sur la persistance de l'histoire et des anciennes icônes du pouvoir. L'histoire de Benigno a pour thème les énergies animées ancrées dans les paysages naturels et culturels qu'il habite.

**Mots-clés :** Saraguro (Equateur), or, animaux, narration, animéité (*animacy*), poésie ethnographique

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Stories with animals are older than history and better than philosophy.

Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*

. . . life in the animic ontology is not an emanation but a generation of being . . . incipient, forever on the verge . . .

Tim Ingold, "Totemism, Animism and the Depiction of Animals," *The Perception of the Environment*

## Prelude

The restaurant at the Grand Hotel speaks of gold, carrying the name *Pepa de Oro* ("seed of gold"), with a gilded cacao pod as the café's logo. In 2017, for the first time in the 12 years since I started ethnographic fieldwork in Ecuador, I brought students along for a short-term study abroad program. We began in Guayaquil and stayed a night at the Grand Hotel. I had no idea that the presence of gold would pervade what my Indigenous Saraguro friends and I would talk about during the next six weeks.

When I travel for fieldwork, different subjects push to the fore. With Benigno, Ana Victoria, and the members of the women's cooperative Las Mujeres de Teresa de Calcuta as my primary collaborators, we have together explored beadwork and the practice of art in the unfolding of identity for Indigenous people in the transnational world; differing rhythms of agricultural work in Ecuador and the United States; biological diversity and invasive species; cultivating cross-cultural knowing, and more. In 2017, Benigno directed my attention to golden animals tales he had heard from others, and from his own life. We often find ourselves engaged in animal stories, and animals frequently play roles in his stories, a fact that underscores the quotation from Paul Shepard used as an epigraph.

One day, we sat on a riverbank in the highland community where Benigno lives and he told a personal tale (*propia de mi*), a story of his own experience finding a golden animal figure in that exact place. When Benigno and other community members tell these stories, they embody ideas about the persistence of history and icons of power from the past. The theme of his story and his diction – using pauses, repetitions and poetic phrasings (which I here translate using poetic conventions in English) – revolve around animate energies embedded in the natural and cultural landscapes in

which he dwells. Benigno is an accomplished storyteller who uses rhythm and deliberate phrasings to excellent effect. My effort to render his style as poetry seeks to honour the spirit of his evocative language use.

Amidst crises of species loss and climate collapse, it is heartening to recall that a dialogue about global history, the animacy of the world, and the place of human beings within it is unfinished and ongoing.

## 1: Benigno Tells a Story

I had the cow and calf over in this part of my land.  
One afternoon I brought the cow to drink  
from the river. I found a tortoise,  
about this size, like a *tomate de arbol*.

And I said to myself, “This tortoise, is it alive or dead?”  
I touched the leg of the tortoise . . . the leg was like marble.  
It was marble.  
I put it in my pocket.

I arrived at the house and I said, “Look, Anita, I’ve  
brought a tortoise.”

Anita said, “What do you mean?”  
I put it on the table. It looked like a tortoise.  
Shell with segments, exactly like a tortoise.

I asked my grandmother. My grandmother said,  
“It’s made of gold.”  
She scraped it with a knife.  
With a knife she scratched the shell.

It was yellow. Completely yellow.  
The part underneath, on its belly . . . marble.  
But the hill of its back, the part above . . . yellow.  
I’m sure it was made of gold.

I put it inside for safe  
keeping. It went missing.  
We had it for one, two or maybe three months . . .  
then it went missing. We’ve never again seen the tortoise.

I don’t know how these things move.  
They were made by the Inkas.  
They knew a lot, those old people.  
These are not lies.

They say that when the Spanish came,  
the Inkas hid the gold under stones, in holes,  
even threw it into lakes to keep the gold  
away from the invaders.

How did they make such animals from gold ore and dust?

## 2: Questions to Investigate

How did they fashion gold ore into such creatures?

When tales tell of golden animals, what is more salient –  
that they are golden or that they are animals?

What is gold like to human beings outside our efforts to  
own it?

A portal to other realities?  
Mere metal to fill ships’ holds and bank vaults?

Tamed token in a materialised world?  
The shimmering wild thing itself?

Image of Viracocha?  
Image of greed?

What do golden animals who bring luck have to say to the  
living?

Why do golden animals come, now, out of the past?

What does the future bring for those of us who seek, still,  
the animate heart within the landscapes where we  
live?

## 3: Hearing the Stories Both Down and Across

I found a golden	snake that moved into dry grass
turtle on the bank	below our feet as we went down the mountainside
where I lead one cow	light shimmering on the stream
to drink each morning	

how did they, the old ones,	stop time, congeal into metal, the magic
make these figures alive	animate the world with resistance

they knew things about which we cannot know but	their future, our present offer stories to reshape the world
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still, we find their messages buried in the soil of our land	in museums the wealth has been emptied of meaning
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raising questions I must	begin again to see, begin again
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ask my grandmother how	to unlock life as felt connections
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can we understand	these stories glimmer with the life of
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being native	people who refuse to unexist
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in this place despite force from a world	in spite of the energy of a system that seeks their erasure
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## Elaboration

Stories, far from frivolous entertainments, often contain seeds of resilience that have enabled Indigenous peoples to persist despite centuries of global capitalism, which often draws its profits from exploiting native peoples and their lands. People tell stories to revolve ideas and keep questions alive to themselves. As Thomas King reminds us in his brilliant series of talks for the Massey Lectures, “The truth about stories is, that’s all we are” (King 2003).

Di Hu (2017), in a brief essay on Andean stories (from the Otavalo, Ecuador, region) about musicians whose eyes were sacrificed by parents to prevent them from being exploited in colonial-era textile factories, explores the role of stories in seeding the ground for Indigenous uprisings against exploitation:

That uprising [in the 1960s] came about, in part, because some of the workers and others in the community had become politically aware of global communist movements and had allied themselves with neighboring communities. But a readied consciousness about the systemic nature of the exploitation they suffered had already been shaped by folk tales. So while stories alone are not sufficient to overcome exploitation, they have continued to play an important role in raising awareness among the oppressed peoples of the Andes and planting the seeds of rebellion in modern times.

The stories of animate golden animals I have heard are more than wishful thinking about good fortune. When I hear Benigno’s stories about golden animals, I receive them in a context where he and I have often discussed ways that the Spanish invaders altered the physical and social landscapes of his ancestors. He points out places where stones from Inkan structures were taken by the Spanish for their own purposes; for example, to lay the foundation for a Catholic church in the nearby community of Urdaneta. Encounters with golden animals and the stories they evoke remind Benigno and his community (and teach me) that even now, in this era of technological dominance and global connections, the places where the people live are full of histories, powers and forces that exceed current economic and political realities. The previous mayor of Saraguro was the first Indigenous person elected to that position in the more than two centuries of the municipality’s existence. This suggests that a resurgent Indigenous Saraguro culture is drawing on those histories, powers and forces – recalling to themselves that their stories are their own to tell and to live after centuries of domination by an imported system.

Perhaps Benigno accepts the eruptions of luck and misfortune represented in the wildness of golden animals because, as suggested by Peruvian agronomist and Andean activist Eduardo Grillo Fernandez (1998, 129–130), these artifacts and the stories engendered by them reflect the living world of Andean cosmology:

Our Andean world is an animal world. It is like ourselves; it needs to nourish itself and to rest . . . Like any other animal it is mysterious, unpredictable, even capricious. The Andean people who live in a world with such a temperament know what they are contending with and because of this they interact with it all with spontaneity and familiarity. The Andean people are at ease with the unexpected, the unstable and the contradictory, and face them without repugnance or apprehension. They are seen simply as things that sometimes happen in life, and so do not surprise or frighten anyone in our living world.

Scholars of this cosmovision highlight that Andean peoples see the world as animate rather than inert, with anything that exhibits special energy acknowledged as possessing life. The Saraguro scholar María Bacacela Gualán, in her study of Saraguro arts as resistance, writes:

*La tierra para el indigena es su protectora y fuente de vida. La pachamama es padre y madre que nos prepara para enfrentar la vida. Los fenomenos naturales como la lluvia, el rocío, el viento, el frío son regalos de naturaleza para el diario sobrevivir y aprendizaje. Por eso el hombre indigena madruga para encontrarse y comunicarse con las plantas, con las montañas y con los animales, ya que ellos dan fuerza. Rodean su chacra y se santiguan porque la tierra era la diosa; y alzaban la mano en alto al Sol y la Luna diciendo “julli annan pacha ynde, o annan pachaquilla,” que significa “juramento lo hago al Sol o al Hacedor de la gran tierra y de la luna.*

An Indigenous person perceives the earth to be their protector and source of life. Pachamama is father and mother, preparing us to face the world. Natural phenomena such as rain, dew, wind and cold temperatures are nature’s gifts for everyday survival and learning. Thus, the Indigenous individual rises early in order to search within and communicate with plants, mountains and animals, since they provide strength. They surround the individual’s land, are blessed because land itself was the goddess; and they raised a hand high to the Sun and the Moon, saying, “*julli annan pacha ynde, o annan pachaquilla,*” which means “I swear by the Sun and Maker of the great earth and the moon.” (Bacacela Gualán 2010, 69–70, translation provided by Jennifer Gómez Menjívar)

This animate world directly contests the colonizing attitudes of conqueror mentality:

The Andean world and the modern Western world are incommensurable . . . In our living Andean world all of us who exist are alive: not only humans, animals and plants but also the stones, the mountains, the rivers, the gorges, the sun, the moon, the stars and so on. In our world we live the equivalence of the diverse, the heterogeneous, because here the mosquito, the frog, the frost, the hail, the fox, the human, the mountain, the river; the stars are all indispensable in the delicate nurturance of our harmony. (Grillo Fernandez 1998, 128)

As a creative Indigenous Andean thinker, Benigno develops ways of thinking about his community's history that emerge from within his own world. To echo the idea in the second epigraph above (from the work of Tim Ingold), Benigno's engagement with animacy generates being rather than seeing the world as a completed reality. I see my task as a visitor and collaborative scholar as opening space within my discipline to accept multiple versions of the world as meaningful tellings of human being.

#### *Coda: A Gold Mine in the Amazon*

Benigno led us on a field trip to visit the headwaters of the animate being that is the Amazon basin. This was near the end of the six-week study abroad program mentioned at the beginning of this piece. We visited the Yacuambi River, an area to which Saraguros began expanding in the early twentieth century (see Belote 1984, 221–304 for details). We stopped along the way at sites on what had been a key footpath colonisation route for Saraguros as they spread into the Amazon region (in Ecuador referred to as *El Oriente*) in the early and mid-twentieth century. We visited the place where Benigno's father died from exposure (as described in my book; Syring 2014, 110). We visited the plunge pool of a waterfall where Saraguro shaman Polivio Minga offered a cleansing ceremony that he insisted I film (to view a video of this ceremony, see YouTube link: Syring 2017). After lunch at his aunt's house, Benigno decided to show a few of us an illegal gold mine in the river. He could not take all the students down to see the mine; he feared angering the miners. So, he chose me, my trip co-leader, Micaella, and one student, Emily – an environmental studies major fluent in Spanish – to serve as the group's representatives. The remaining students played soccer with kids from the houses where we had parked the bus.

The mining project dug river gravel. Machines had created a 40-foot deep, 150-foot long, 100-foot wide hole.

They processed the diggings with water piped and returned to the river. The mine occupied the living body of the river on a flood plain beside the current.

"If everybody here knows, why doesn't the government do something?" Emily asked.

"Probably they are paying someone," I said. "Ecuador, like many countries, including the US, has a corrupt government."

"I wonder how much profit they make?"

"I counted about twenty men working."

"There were women, too. I saw them in their traditional skirts," Emily said.

"So, twenty or more people work there. They make enough so that many families earn their livelihoods, along with profits to the mine owners."

And here we arrived at the questions that drove me to write this essay (and which are in the second section of the poem above), which challenged my usual modes of thinking and rearranged my perceptions of the animacy of the world. The frequent stories during that particular trip to Ecuador undermine the idea that I understand what gold, or what animals, mean to my Saraguro friends. This piece represents my effort (my *essay*, in the original sense of "to attempt" or "to try") to hold open the question: "What was gold like before we turned it into merely one way to count economic activity, even when the getting of it kills the liveliness of a river, poisons animals, denudes the world of its animate heart?"

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