
The Empathy of Birds: Lessons from Pacha Mama in the Face of Despair

LISA MARÍA MADERA

We are floating down the Tiputini River. My son sits in the front of the canoe, listening. He is fourteen. He turns his head slightly, lifting his ear to the concert pulsing around us. We are in Yasuni National Park, the most biodiverse corner of the Amazon. He listens a little more, then whistles a haunting, three-point song. He pauses, listens, waits, and then, out of the canopy, the whistle returns. My son is singing with a Panguana, an Undulated Tinamou. Their call and response last for over an hour.

We visit the Casa del Alabado, the “House of Praise.” Elegant stone carvings behind protective glass stare out at us. They are *w’akas*. Ancient sacred beings. Carved thousands of years ago, we don’t know who these stones represent, but their eyes look like birds. Owls.

Our guide pours water into a ceramic, u-shaped bottle with two necks, a replica of one of the many pre-Columbian sonorous objects in the Alabado collection. A red bird perches on the rim of one of the necks. Small holes circle the other like a flute. She tips the bottle back and forth, her fingers flowing over the holes in the lip. The songs of birds swell into the room—a canopy full of calls rising up from the waters that swirl through the dark hollows of this ancient instrument.

Perhaps this, too, is *w’aka*.

The ceramic flute astonishes with its liquid concert of songs, and yet it does not surprise me that a talented and observant

musician thousands of years ago conjured out of clay this musical wonder, for we live in the land of birds.

In this tiny country the size of Colorado, there are 1,670 identified species of birds, almost twice as many species as in all of North America. Hummingbirds alone, those fierce jewels of the air, represent 132 of those species. There are migratory birds who make their home in this land, and many who spend a portion of their year here. There are birds that arrived generations ago, found this land pleasing, and decided to stay. There are newly arrived birds. And there are forty-one species of birds who transformed into their current selves here, bodies and behaviors shaped by their relations to this particular place. Thirty-four bird species alone are endemic to Galapagos, along with seven endemic to the mainland. You have likely heard of our Andean Condors, our Waved Albatross, our Flightless Cormorant, and of course, our Darwin finches.

There is an old *w’aka* story, recorded for the first time in 1653 by the Catholic priest Padre Bernabe Cobo. Still told today, the story recounts the origin of the Cañari people in southern Ecuador.

The story goes something like this:

It is said that after the Great Flood, two brothers survived on a mountain. As waters receded, they gathered wood and built a rustic shelter. During the day, they hunted for food, returning at night to their makeshift home. One morning, two Guacamayo



Sincholagua

sisters cloaked in shimmering blue feathers flew high across the forest and spotted the men below. They watched as the brothers returned to their home, prepared their spare meal, and fell exhausted into their cold beds.

The Guacamayo sisters felt pity for the brothers. One morning they waited for the men to leave and flew down to the shelter, transforming into beautiful women with blue shawls. The sisters built a fire, prepared chicha and a delicious meal, and then flew away.

When the brothers returned, they were astonished to find their house warmed and soup laid out for them. Overwhelmed by curiosity, the brothers hid in the darkest corner of the house in order to see who was coming to their aid and watched as shimmering Guacamayo sisters descended, transformed into Cañari women, and began to work, bringing joy to their home.

The brothers decided to capture these women, grabbing them before the sisters could slip back into bird form. They spoke to the women, convincing them to stay and marry them.¹

These are the first fathers and mothers of the Cañari people: brothers who survived the Great Flood and captured Guacamayo sisters; birds who, in their keen empathy, transformed into women to help the brothers in the face of devastation and despair.

Early morning. A fluffy layer of clouds blanket Guagua Pichincha, the volcano rising before me. I was born on the flanks of this mountain, as was my daughter.

I have crawled out of bed after a sleepless night to write. This is the amber hour—that predawn smoky ring of time when the Earth’s dreams interweave with our own. I light candles, open the window, and lean out as far as I can to hear the soulful aria

of a Great Thrush and the *tsi-kiri-ki* of hummingbirds rising from the clutch of pines circling our eight-story building.

I reread the text above. Written only a few weeks ago, my words speak to me as if over a great chasm.

Today is Sunday, March 29, 2020. We are in Day 13 of Quito's COVID-19 total lockdown. Confined to our fourth-floor apartment in a nationwide quarantine, my husband and son are with me. My beloved daughter is a heartbreak away.

The House of Praise is now shuttered. Yasuni closed.

Here in Quito, birdwatching is now defined by our wraparound windows. I follow the swoop and dive of Blue-and-White Swallows. Listen for the soft, rhythmic murmur of Eared Doves perched momentarily on our window ledge before our cats startle them away. I scan the pines with a fierce intensity. Look! There! A Sparkling Violetear! And there! A Black-tailed Trainbearer! I watch with hungry delight as the hummingbirds spar and dance in the air.

I learn new names. *Spinus magellanicus*. Jilguero Encapuchado. The Hooded Siskin with a black head and bright yellow body forages for a moment on a branch and then, in a flash of gold, flits away. *Phrygilus plebejus ocularis*. Frigilío Pechicénizo. Grey-blue, the Ash-breasted Sierra-Finch stares up at me. His branch sways in the mid-morning breeze.

I crane my neck to track a Peregrine Falcon soaring above our building.

Over the past few weeks, we have tracked the novel coronavirus sweeping across countries, ravaging China, Iran, Italy, Spain. We have watched in disbelief as the United States, United Kingdom, and Brazil have downplayed this existential threat circulating amongst us.

In Ecuador, we believe that our government has acted swiftly, but the virus has already slipped past our gates like a ruthless band of thieves. In a state of alarm, Ecuador closes its borders with two days warning.

As soon as I hear the news, I call my daughter, a college freshman in New York, and tell her to leave immediately. With the help of friends, we get her masked and gloved and onto planes headed south. But then, a faulty bathroom in her connecting flight leaves her stranded for four hours. The wait is excruciating. She arrives in Florida, having missed her flight to Quito by minutes. As I write, my dearest first born is marooned in the United States. In my bones I feel she has been caught on the

wrong side of a border, ambushed by an unseen enemy in what promises to be a devastating war.

I obsess on the miserable absurdity of her delay—a broken bathroom! Later, she tells me that her plane was full of raucous “bros” headed for spring break. We see them in news footage crowding beaches, bragging about their invincibility. “Nothing is going to keep me from partying,” one sunburned blond boasts to the camera.

Five days into quarantine, my beautiful son turns fifteen. We tele-celebrate. Perched on my phone screen, my daughter sings “Happy Birthday” to her brother from 4,379 kilometers away. As my son blows out his candles and his sister calls out to him in love, I shut my eyes, and with the silken powers of Chagall, I will my beautiful children up over the Andes, eastward to the Amazon, back into the forest and into that canoe with the lulling ripple of the Tiputini and the mournful song of the Panguana to comfort us all.

“I pray to the birds,” Terry Tempest Williams writes. “I pray to the birds because I believe they will carry the messages of my heart upward. I pray to them because I believe in their existence, the way their songs begin and end each day—the invocations and benedictions of Earth. I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen.”²

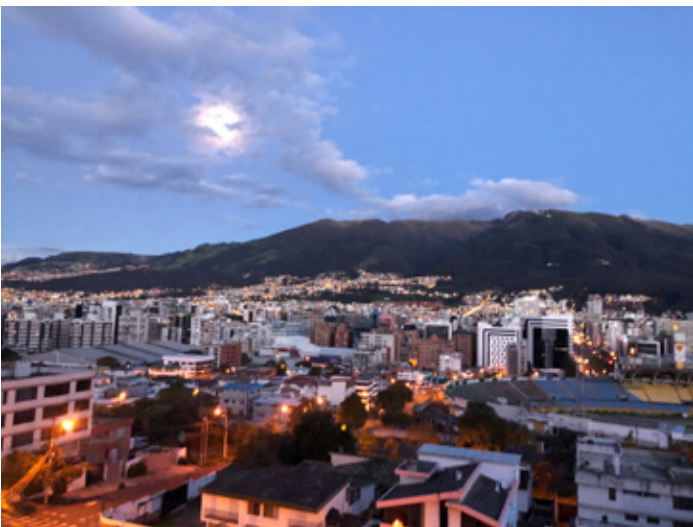
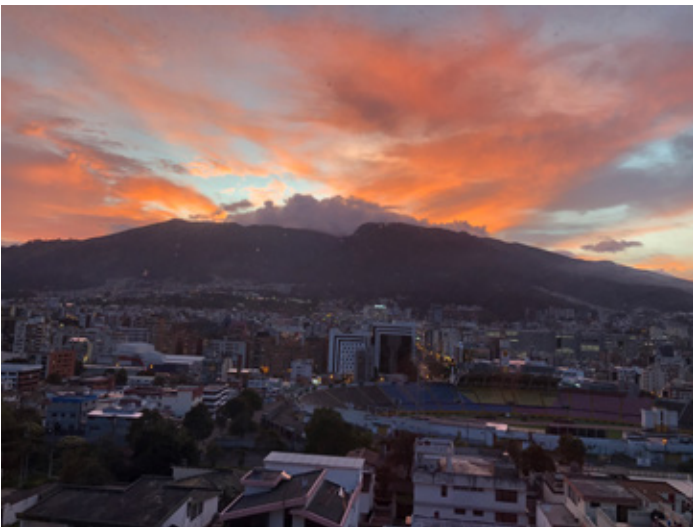
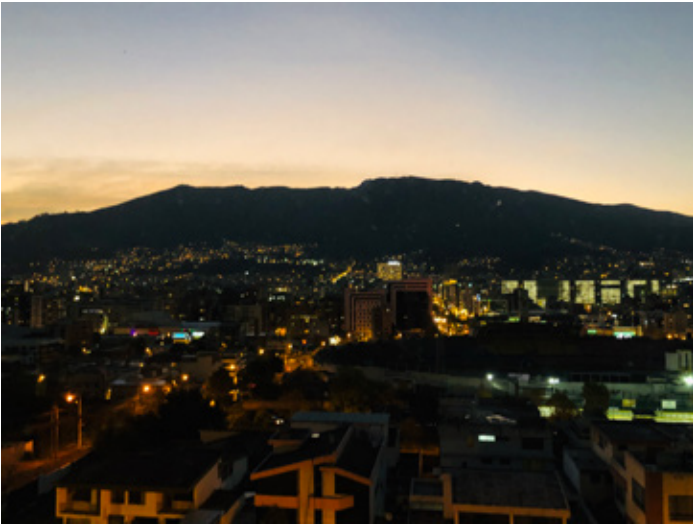
I am trying to listen.

I want to tell you a love story.

It is said that in the time before, the *w'aka* Cuni Raya Viracocha wandered throughout the world searching for his lost love Caui Llaca. Disguised as a beggar, Viracocha encountered all kinds of people and creatures, some who treated him well and some who did not. The skunk, who told Viracocha that he'd never find Caui Llaca, received a curse. “As for you, because of what you've just told me, you'll never go around in the daytime. You'll only walk at night, stinking disgustingly. People will be revolted by you.”³

But the condor flying high above called down to Viracocha encouraging him to be strong and take heart, for Caui Llaca was just a little way ahead. Viracocha blessed the condor, saying, “You'll live a long life. You alone will eat any dead animal from the wild mountain slopes, both guanacos and vicuñas, of any kind and in any number. And if anybody should kill you, he'll die himself, too.”⁴

Exhausted, Viracocha approached people in the fields and asked for food. Some took pity on him, telling him, “Come,



Views of Pichincha

grandfather, come rest in the shade of this beautiful tree. Let me bring you some water to wash your face, some *chicha*, some quinoa soup and potatoes.” He blessed them, filling their fields with potatoes, ensuring their llamas gave birth, and making their quinoa harvests plentiful.

But others cursed Viracocha, saying, “Get out of here, you miserable wretch with your filth and disease!” They threw rocks at him, chasing him away. Viracocha grew angry, cursing them in return, leaving illness at their door. Their potatoes turned to stone, their crops rotted, and their animals died. “Whenever he met anyone who gave him good news,” the Huarochirí manuscript tells us, “[Viracocha] conferred on him a good fortune. But he went along viciously cursing those who gave him bad news.”⁵

I want to tell you a love story.

Cuzco, 1621. In his treatise on the extirpation of idolatry in Peru, Pablo José de Arriaga, a Jesuit Spanish inquisitor,

describes ritual practices he encountered in the Andes. The verb for worship in Spanish is *adorar*, to adore, and while Arriaga encounters what he sees as idolatry, what he describes is Andean adoration—expressions of profound love and active reverence—for the sacred, living land.

Arriaga described how, in certain seasons on specific fiestas, Andeans adored *Inti*, the sun. They adored *Quilla*, the moon. They honored specific stars, along with *Hillapa* or *Libiac*, lightning. They adored *Mamacocha*, the sea, and *Mamapacha*, the earth. They adored the *Puquois*, the springs, and in places where there was little water, they asked the springs not to dry up. They adored the rivers, and before they crossed the river, they performed a ritual called *mayuchulla* in which they would take some of the water in their hands and ask permission to safely cross or to fish in the waters without coming to harm. They loved the *Cerros*, the high mountains and large rock formations and the rocks themselves, which they called by name. They adored their *Pacarinas*, their place of origin, those



Antisana, Grandmother of all Mountains

mountains, springs, rivers, and lakes from which the First Man and the First Woman of their people were born.⁶

Coming from a foreign world, oceans away, Arriaga describes the Andean *w'aka* world not in love or awe, but rather out of disdain. "All of these things listed above," Arriaga goes on to write, "are *Huaca* which they adore as God, and which you cannot remove from their eyes, because these things are fixed, and immobile, and so you must try... to remove these things from their hearts showing them the truth and revealing the lies."⁷ He describes these practices in advance of equally detailed instructions on how to wipe these rituals out.

Remove the sun, the moon. Remove the earth, the sea. Remove Guagua Pichincha, if not from your eyes, then from your heart. *No surprise*. This impossible task gives birth to grotesque visions and violence. But this is a longer story—for another time.

Writing earlier, in 1609, Garcilaso de la Vega, a second generation Incan leader born after the conquest and converted to Christianity, wrote that the term *w'aka* not only meant a "sacred thing" such as "idols, rocks, great stones or trees which the enemy [meaning Satan] entered to make the people believe he was a god," but, in addition, Andeans

also give the name *huaca* [*w'aka*] to things they have offered to the Sun, such as figures of men, birds, and animals.... The same name is given to all those things which for their beauty or excellence stand above other things of the same kind, such as a rose, an apple, or a pippin, or any other fruit that is better or more beautiful than the rest.... On the other hand, they give the name *huaca* to ugly and monstrous things... the great serpents of the Antis... eerie thing that is out of the usual course of nature, as a woman who gives birth to twins... double-yolked eggs are *huaca*.⁸

Seventeenth-century Andeans described as *w'aka* those things that provoked love, terror, and awe. *W'aka* included the beautiful and the monstrous, the horrifying and the strange. The term captured objects of art, exquisitely wrought offerings made and laid with respect and love at sacred sites. It described the springs and mountains, *pacarinas* that gave them birth. It described ancestors and primordial beings who later transformed into revered features of the living land. *W'aka* traced out the pulsing, interwoven fabric of sacred life, the vibrant flow of kinship across the quilted earth.

Over time, after the conquest, people associated *w'aka* with ancestral burial sites, and because of the Spaniards' lust for

gold, common parlance equated *huaca* with looted treasure. At the hands of the Spaniards, *w'aka* objects of art expressing and honoring the most creative, intimate, and sacred connection to all that lives were melted down into bricks and shipped off to Europe as looted treasure. From 1500 to 1650, the Spanish treasure fleets carried an estimated 180 tons of gold and 16,000 tons of silver from South America to Europe.

Today, *w'aka* is a term that points toward history, though many contemporary Andeans ritually honor, love, and adore the living world around them in ways that resonate with Arriaga's description.

I am always moved when I read these colonial descriptions of *w'aka* and the Andean response of love, respect, and awe for the mountains, springs, lakes, and rivers. For the sun, the moon, and the stars. For Pacha Mama, Mother Earth, and Mama Cocha, Mother Ocean.

These are not my ancestors or my cultural heritage. I am the daughter of American Evangelical medical missionaries. I was born to this land through the twisted turns of colonial and neo-colonial history. Like the chicks of migratory birds, it is my *suerte*, my damned luck and strange providence, to have been born to the Andes and to have lived as a child in the Amazon. From my experience, this land is both breath-giving and breathtaking. I was born here. My daughter was born here. My mother died here. Our lives have been sewn into the sacred fabric of this land. I resonate with this Andean concept of *w'aka*, this word that speaks to the powerful encounter with this beautiful, generous, and terrifying Earth.

I think about the *w'aka* world.

The Guacamayo mothers of the Cañari transformed in an act of empathy are *w'aka*.

The elegant carved stones in the house of praise are *w'aka*.

The mesmerizing water whistle that conjures birds out of an ancient canopy is *w'aka*.

My birth volcano, Guagua Pichincha, rising in splendor before me, is *w'aka*.

And perhaps...

The thrush's predawn aria soothing my heart is *w'aka*.

And COVID-19?

Is COVID-19 *w'aka*?



Tungurahua

Good Friday, April 10, 2020. Day 25 of Quito's COVID lockdown.

The Angel of Death flies low overhead. Earlier this week, we tele-celebrated Pesach with my daughter exiled in Maryland. The state of New York now has more COVID cases than any single country. Drone footage of mass graves on Hart Island and grotesque images of seeping bodies abandoned on our streets in Guayaquil stream across international news.

In my sorrow and worry, I watch the mountain before me.

Guagua means *child* and Guagua Pichincha is the son of the sultry, seductive volcano Isabel Tungurahua, whose jealous husbands and lovers fight in fiery fury over her. I love Tungurahua. A lifetime ago, I organized funding and my doctoral work so that I could live on her skirts off and on for seven years. I would hike on her slopes, burying gifts under the surface of the grass.

I bathed in her thermal springs, watched her dance at dawn and at sunset and under the rising moon as the clouds from the Amazon poured past her.

My daughter took form in the midst of her rising volcanic currents.

I adored Tungurahua and then, when I was seven months pregnant, she erupted. Within weeks, the military evacuated the entire town and threw our little family back onto the flanks of Pichincha where, without warning, one clear October morning a week later, Pichincha also erupted silently, throwing up a twelve-kilometer cloud of ash and gas into the cerulean sky.

These volcanoes are alive. Depending which mountain you live near, Pichincha's father is either the massive volcano Chimborazo, the tallest mountain on the planet if measured

from the center of the Earth, or the nearby elegant stratocone Cotopaxi. In Cotopaxi province, they say that when the child Guagua Pichincha cries, his father Cotopaxi complains, and his mother Tungurahua responds. These mountains are family.

We live in the ring of fire, along the “Avenue of the Volcanoes”: thirty-two volcanoes on our mainland and fifteen volcanoes in the Galapagos Archipelago. You may be familiar with Edwin Church’s paintings *The Heart of the Andes* or *Cotopaxi*, or perhaps you have seen Alexander von Humboldt’s 1807 *Tableau Physique*, which maps the vegetation on the rising flanks of Cotopaxi and Chimborazo, tracking the changing range of creatures living along mountain slopes in relation to altitude. Most certainly you have heard of our life-giving Galápagos Islands, where the beaks of Darwin’s famous finches have changed shape as they seek nourishment from plants around them. Finches evolve, not after centuries of pressure, but in the span of a few short generations, allowing their offspring to survive.

Myths of creation in this region reflect this intense eco-diversity. Out of each island, each mountain, each canyon, springs new life. So, too, myths from this region recount how out of these dawning places—these *pacarinas*—new people are born. The myths of creation and transformation endemic to the equatorial Andean region—where, centuries later, Darwin’s observations off the mainland led to Western theories of natural selection—are mythologies describing *many* creations *always in motion*, where creatures continually transform *in relation to place and in relation to one another*, in an intricate web of creative interaction and exchange. These biodiverse mythologies describe ethical landscapes of consequence in interspecies relations.

Andean accounts of their *pacarinas* inherently express a rooted connection to profoundly biodiverse, interrelated places. During the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Andes, *pacarinas* served as significant obstacles to Catholic conversion, providing a kind of mythic inoculation against the full cultural, theological, ritual, and cosmological forces of erasure and re-orientation that a colonizing Christianity proposed. When Catholic priests recounted the Genesis creation myth, including the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, Andeans understood this creation account to be true... for the Spaniards. From Andean points of view, the story of the Garden of Eden was a cultural narrative describing the foreigner’s origins and their *pacarina*. In the Andes, communal rootedness in a biodiverse region, where endemic species emerge from mountain peak to mountain peak and from valley

to valley and all through the lowlands in between, nurtured a pluralistic, ontological mind frame that embraced the existence of multiple interconnected realities and histories where plural truths, identities, and experiences can be active all at one time.

In 2008, Ecuador’s congress passed a new constitution encompassing a multicultural, plurinational state reflecting Andean and Amazonian cosmological connections to the Earth. As the first constitution in the world to establish and protect the inherent rights of Nature, our constitution names and acknowledges Pacha Mama, Mother Earth, as a living, evolving being. Article 71 states that “Nature or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and realized, must be respected for its inherent right to existence including the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structures, functions and evolving processes.”⁹

I am moved by this description of Pacha Mama’s rights. I am moved that Ecuador’s congress reflected the biodiverse realities of this region and identified a critical aspect of Nature’s rights as the right to evolve, the right to transform, for this is where I find hope and comfort, in the power of evolution, in the beak of the finch.

We cannot evolve in a vacuum. We evolve in cross-personal, cross-cultural, and cross-creatural contact. We evolve through extraordinary bonds of empathy *and* enmity, in exchanges of appreciation *and* frustration, in responses to curiosity *and* fear. We live in a pulsing web of relation. Attracting and repelling, we evolve in an ongoing exchange of blessings and curses, in positive and negative interactions along with another kind. We evolve through our ingenuity, through creativity, flexibility, cooperation, and kinship. And we evolve through competition and trickery, domination, predation, and fear.

When I think about evolution and what it might mean for human beings, I am compelled by the ways that creatures survive, adapt, and evolve through the ingenious powers of their creative solutions, often through their ability to reach across the species divide and cooperate with others. These traits propel natural selection: Survival of the creative. Survival of the cooperative. Survival of the welcoming. Survival of the bridge builders. Survival of the observant. Survival of the seductive. Survival of the inclusive. Survival of the artistic. Survival of the resilient. Survival of the strategic. Survival of the flexible. Survival of the colorful. Survival of the transparent. Survival of the musical. Survival of the fragrant. Survival of the generous. Survival of the impervious. Survival of the ingenious. Survival of the bold. Survival of the shy. The list could go on. Fitness manifests in a magnificent variety of forms.



Through the expression of our diverse and astounding gifts, we adapt, transform, and evolve communally in relation to the living land and all living things. Each of us plays our part in this collective transformation. Our web of relation spins the world together.

But we find ourselves in deep trouble. We are witnessing a global parasitic deformation of an economic and social myth that is devouring us all. Propelled by the lucre lust of a predatory global plutocracy, this zombie mythic mash-up justifies a social and economic structure of human domination, predation, control, and extermination, privileging the dominant ONE (one person, one group, one nation, one species, one gender, one race, one sexuality, one religion, one creation, one history, *en fin*) in order to feed the devouring maw of consumerism, gluttony, and unfettered greed. This disfigured and alienated mythology justifies the predatory elite's abuse of power over other people, other creatures, and the extended natural world. We are witnessing a mythic zombie invading host bodies on a global scale—whether individuals, religious communities, political parties, nations, or corporations.

I watch in fury as the *w'aka* world is reduced to extracted, looted treasure.

I am reminded of the zombie Amazonian fungi, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, creeping through the body

of its ant host, sabotaging its brain and then directing the ant's movements to maximize the spread of its toxic spores through the forest. Or *Leucochloridium paradoxum*, a parasite cycling through birds and snails. The snail is infected by ingesting bird shit. Once inside the snail's body, the larvae travel to its head infesting the snail's eyes in a pulsing writhing ball, blinding the snail. Controlled by this zombie parasite, the snails leave the dark forest floor and climb trees, seeking out the sunlight where birds find them and eat their eyes.

I remember Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming."

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

Years ago, when I was living on Tungurahua's slopes studying Andean mythologies and ritual relationships to mountains, I read an interview by Joseph Bastian of an Aymara woman who described her community's relationship to Kaata, their home mountain and *pacarina*, their place of origin.¹⁰ I think about her

observations all the time. We are like the mountain and the mountain is like us, she said. We feed the mountain and the mountain feeds us. In a cycle of nourishing exchange, the mountain provides its bounty. We eat from the mountain and at some point, our bodies return to the land, and the mountain, in turn, will also be satisfied; the mountain will eat us. The Aymaran woman described a reciprocal cycle of balance, gratitude, nourishment, love, appreciation, responsibility, respect, and exchange.

Now as I watch Pichincha before me, I am absorbed by this cycle of nourishment and gratitude. I think about my beloved Tungurahua, so many kilometers from here, as evening colors shift across her son's sensuous slopes. The constant sift of veils rise and fall, glisten, go slack, clear, gather and then drop in a heavy dull slate; they momentarily illuminate, in resplendent glowing purples, oranges, golds, and then turn to silver and back to creams, blue grays, and purples once again. I am deeply grateful to this mountain that nourishes my spirit even now in my COVID lockdown. I write and wonder what more I can do in return.

And I grieve, for the cycle has slid off its axis. In our unstoppable greed, we have abandoned our role and responsibility in this mutual relationship of respect, care, and nourishment. The wheel of time and consumption spins ever faster and faster as we ceaselessly devour the Earth.

Yeats's falcon spirals above us.

We devour the mountain and...? We abuse another and...? We curse another and...? The weight of ellipses lingers above us. Its impending slice grazes our necks.

Then suddenly, surprise! Here we are! Stopped in our tracks! Locked down!

Stomach-turning images of China's wet markets have now been replaced by satellite images of mass graves in Iran. Drone images of mass graves in New York. Containers full of oozing cardboard coffins in our own Guayaquil streets. Stunned and stilled into submission, we watch in horror as Earth's microbial emissaries threaten and consume us.

Ellipses complete! Indeed. When we devour the Earth, the Earth will surely devour us.

And here I am—like many of you—strangely safe with my cats and houseplants, holed up with my husband and son in my Andean eyrie, witnessing through a flat screen this mind-bending suffering where the most physically, socially, and economically vulnerable of our human community are dying, along

with so many of our brave and knowledgeable healing warriors. Alone. In isolation. *En masse*. While the rest of us watch from our sofas.

The horror.

The horror!

And—like many of you—in the midst of this cataclysm, I find comfort and nourishment in the avian aria at dawn and the drama of clouds rising and falling across the rugged flanks of my mountain.

It is impossible to reconcile.

Here in Quito, above empty streets, I breathe in sweet air and think of Pacha Mama resting, sea turtles nesting, the incessant tremor of human noise quieting, if only for a time. But what a time! The world has slowed back to a rhythm that beats in concert with my heart.

I count all the ways that COVID-19 acts as an emissary of evolution, a powerful immune response targeting sustained assaults and all that ails our beloved Earth—an intelligent surgical strike against lethal onslaughts, strategic pushback against deadly parasitic threats—our greedy, gluttonous, blind, self-absorbed, misplaced, misinformed, deadly human kind.

We devour the Earth. The Earth will devour us.

Scientists have told us that destruction of habitat and abuse of wildlife has brought COVID-19 into our midst and makes us more vulnerable to incoming pandemics.

The microbial message is brutal and clear: *iUbicate!*

To survive and thrive, we must understand our proper place in this shimmering, pulsing *w'aka* web of life. We must reconfigure our relation to the communal human and more-than-human world or suffer—as a species, as a planet—devastating consequences arising from this fundamental misunderstanding and resulting imbalance. We must move. We must *step off our deadly predatory pedestal* and stop devouring everything in our range. We must change our relation to the world, change our behavior, activate empathy, collectively evolve.

Die or transform.

White noise.

This observation is not new. It has grown stale. It is worn.

I lift my eyes to the hills and pray. From whence cometh my help?

Ever despairing and ever hopeful, I wonder if perhaps NOW in our confinement, as we squirm inside our forced cocoons, we will respond to this existential pressure and evolve. Perhaps NOW, forever chastened, we will learn our lesson and scale down, forced to emerge with new forms of moving, seeing, acting, feeding, feeling, touching, relating, and being.

We must be conscious and intentional. Who will we choose to be? What new gifts will we treasure and express? How will we relate to one another? What are we willing to leave behind? What is this new world that we will call, collectively, into being? Through the window of this time we must pause and ask ourselves, how can we change?

We must act. We must intentionally and collectively evolve. In answer to our despair, we must reach out and realign our relation to the wondrous *w'aka* world.

And so, in this *w'aka* moment, when our lives have grown at once chaotic and still, I turn for guidance to the myths born from this generous land that gave birth to me. I turn to my mountain, to Guagua Pichincha, to Pacha Mama, to this most beautiful and biodiverse luminescent sliver of our Mother Earth. I remember the time when waters erased the face of the Earth and two brothers survived because Guacamayo sisters reached out in compassion across the species divide. I remember the skunk, cursed for his indifference and cruelty when faced with another's suffering. I remember the condor, blessed for giving hope to a destitute beggar as he searched for his lost love in a foreign land.

On my Facebook feed someone posts a video of a pair of endangered condors soaring through cerulean skies over Quito's silent airport.

My heart aches in joy. My heart aches in longing.

My heart aches in absolute despair.

I think of Yeats and his reeling birds. I think of Viracocha and his blessing.

I sing and pray to the birds.

May those who have ears, hear.

I sing and pray to the birds.

May those who have life, transform.

nature, and extractivist economies through the lens of neo/colonial myth and history. As an educator and social entrepreneur, Lisa works to foster compassionate and resilient communities by providing extraordinary encounters with nature and her many creatures.

NOTES

1. Father B. Cobo, *Inca Religion and Customs*, R. Hamilton, trans. and ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 14-15.
2. T.T. Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York : Vintage, 1992).
3. F. Salomon and G.L. Urioste, trans., *The Huarochirí Manuscript: A Testament of Ancient and Colonial Andean Religion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 46.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 49.
6. P. José de Arriaga, *La Extirpación de la idolatría en el Perú*, ser. 2, vol. 1 de Colección de libros y documentos referentes a la historia del Perú, ed. H.H. Urteaga (1621; Lima, Peru: Imprenta y Librería San Martín, 1920), 19-21.
7. *Ibid.*, 22.
8. El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru*, H.V. Livermore, trans. (1609; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), I: 76–77.
9. My own translation. Artículo 71, Constitución del Ecuador, 2008, <https://educacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/08/Constitucion.pdf>.
10. J. Bastien, *Mountain of the Condor: Metaphor and Ritual in an Andean Ayllu* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1985).

Raised in the Ecuadorian Amazon and Andes among volcanoes, Lisa María Madera's writing explores the intersections of religion,