

Embodied Memory: Reimagining and Legislating *Sumak Kawsay* in the Modern Andes¹
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*To this day colonised societies are divided into two groups: those who cannot forget and those who would rather not remember.*²

*If I want to go to the moon, I cannot go by using indigenous knowledge, I need the scientific and technological knowledge of the West; but if I want to preserve the biodiversity of the planet, I need indigenous knowledge...*³

—Boaventura de Sousa Santos

The 2006 presidential election that swept Rafael Correa into power in Ecuador, after years of political instability and an economic crisis that saw the dollarization of the economy, will be remembered for several advances, and some key failures, that were legislatively proposed in order to push the small Andean nation of fifteen million into new experimental forms of modernity. One of Correa's key legacies will be the 2008 Constitution and subsequent supporting documents that feature radical language reflecting indigenous ancestral knowledge. In August 2015, as I write this text, I have just returned from Ecuador, where simultaneously Taita Cotopaxi was threatening the population of Quito with ash and smoke and thousands of Ecuadoreans were participating in street demonstrations against many of Correa's policies; he is now in his third term in office. The memory of Pope Francis's recent visit is still palpable and well discussed in the city. Francis's scathing critique of the president's recent environmental policy shifts, on the heels of the publication of the 190-page papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* in defense of the environment, made international news.

Regardless, this government's most enduring and well-documented achievement might be in the arena of education and cultural work. And it is in this realm that this text will have something to contribute. Having just witnessed and walked the streets of Quito during these

seminal events, I felt it was time to take stock of what cultural actions and government policy are attempting to accomplish. This case study considers the 2008 Constitutional language and artistic practices that look to reconcile the environmental, the political, and the cultural, not only in the Andes, but also in the larger context of how art and cultural work can address such divergent sociopolitical interests.

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The artist and activist Pablo Sanaguano has devoted much of his cultural practice to working with native Kichwa communities in the province of Chimborazo, Ecuador, where as a youth he witnessed discrimination against them firsthand. Indigenous communities who make up the majority of the population in this part of the world, and have traditions and knowledge that go back centuries, have been historically alienated from the larger nation-building process and imaginary. Despite the arduous travel time required to reach these communities living at the foot of the now-dormant Chimborazo volcano, this geography and its natural beauty have been depicted and circulated for centuries. From colonial-era travel writers such as the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt to the US-born painter Frederic Edwin Church, Chimborazo's snow-capped peak and its surrounding grasslands have been historically depicted as a sublime and depopulated mystery for foreign visual consumption.

Sanaguano was trained here in grassroots ecclesial communities and studied from 1982 to 1988 under Monsignor Leonidas Proaño, an important proponent and articulator of the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. He subsequently traveled to France to study art. He returned some years later to the high grasslands of Chimborazo to continue his work with the same Kichwa communities he had lived among as a seminary student, but this time as an artist following the same methodologies he had learned under Proaño.

That method, known as “see-judge-act,” was enthusiastically embraced by proponents of Liberation Theology during the 1960s and has endured as a relevant pedagogical tool to this day. It was pioneered by the Belgian Catholic priest Joseph Cardijn in the early twentieth century as part of his outreach to young factory workers and the movement he founded, Young Christian Workers. The idea is to see current social realities, to judge them in light of the church’s social teaching, and then to act to make those realities more just. Within the Liberation Theology movement, “see-judge-act” is understood as a metaphor for lay empowerment and broad community learning. Sanaguano believes this method is imperative but also believes that art fosters and strengthens this process by opening channels to affective bonding through collective imagination.⁴ He was also greatly influenced by the dialogical learning and teaching method of Paulo Freire, who conversely was greatly influential within the Liberation Theology movement.

Sanaguano often uses walking and community walks as a form of art practice. His most recent project, *Los Hieleros del Chimborazo*, consisted of following the trail (*chakiñanes*) used by the historic ice collectors of the Chimborazo volcano with members of the Kichwa community of La Moya, near the volcano. The ice miners, who climb to an altitude of 5200 meters to pick ice, have been filmed, documented, and photographed by foreign journalists and filmmakers for decades. What struck Sanaguano was that these depictions had never reflected the indigenous as his/her own protagonist in the story. The arduous task and its sole protagonist were captured on film and circulated as ethnographic curiosities, ones in which the community itself never played a role. These narratives were never meant to be theirs.

The documentaries generally depict the one older male who is supposedly the final person to exercise this dying age-old tradition. Sanaguano’s walking project begins with a screening of a recent documentary after which the conversation centers on the role the

community plays in such works. Questions begin to emerge challenging those depictions and the construction of an identity they had no role in devising.



Walking up Chimborazo. Photo courtesy of the artist

The entire community makes the six-hour walk—adults, youth, and children alike. Along the way conversations are had regarding the receding layers of ice and the effects of climate change, and about the high grasses that have been traditionally used to make the rope to carry the ice. Here in the high grassland region, the grasses have an important historic function, serving as a central material in the creation of traditional dwellings, although they are currently giving way to concrete blocks and metal siding imported from cities far away. During the walk there are discussions about the creeks of water emerging from the ice glaciers atop Chimborazo and about the role the creeks, grasses, and landscape play in the cosmovision⁵ and memory of the Kichwa people. Along the route the very role this ritual of ice-mining holds is discussed, and

inquiries emerge around the communal nature of how and why the ice was historically used for communal festivals and why it is currently understood as only one man's job. People who have never made the trek or considered the process learn the native tradition of how to prepare the donkeys to bring the blocks of ice down the volcano. At the conclusion of the journey, once everyone has returned to their homes, traditional ice treats are made and shared with the community.



Thanking the Pachamama. Photo courtesy of the artist

Sanaguano sees the walk as an exercise in recreating memory and community identity. Why is this important? Upon returning from Europe, he noticed that the communities had naturally changed, but he also noticed the rapid growth of NGOs in the region and the rise of capital speculation of natural resources in various parts of the country. He also perceived a rapidly growing evangelical presence in the region, affecting the communities and their ritualistic practices in ways that he considered dangerous. Why are memory and identity

important to an indigenous community in the twenty-first century? I would argue that the reason is tied to two intertwined but equally important forms of building subjectivity: the cultural and the economic.

The region near Chimborazo has long been a destination for some of the key figures in the Liberation Theology movement: Monsignor Proaño, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Federico Carrasquilla, and Leonardo Boff, among others who all visited the region. The dramatic setting of the now-dormant volcano—the absolute highest point from the center of the earth’s core, amid the high grasslands, hours by horse from the nearest town—must have seemed like a world away from the centers of Lima, Medellín, and São Paulo. But modernization and modernity (and their challenges) bypass no one. For Sanaguano, the questions that emerge while walking and reflecting on the links that remain amongst Kichwa communities regarding memory and narratives to their ancestral land require inquiry and recuperation. The walking and studying along the way are imperative pedagogical moments of praxis—a cyclical model of action and reflection.

Paolo Freire’s larger literacy project was not about learning to read your ABCs. In the 1960s context of a Brazil that was attempting to keep the vote limited to those who could read the ballot, surely his plan was one that attempted to teach basic skills, but ultimately, literacy was primarily a more concrete long-term project. If the colonial difference is between *naming* and *being named*, then literacy was a process of building political subjects.⁶ It was in this vein that the theological agitators within the Catholic Church in Latin America, people such as Proaño, adopted Freirian techniques and contributed to the movement we have come to know as the pedagogy of liberation.



Pablo Sanaguano, *Yo soy del cielo, tu de la tierra*, 2007.

In his foundational text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in Portuguese in 1968 and translated into English in 1970, Freire defines his key term “praxis”—acts that shape and change the world—by invoking the singular term “action-reflection.” He explains, “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interconnection that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers.”⁷ Freire sees action and reflection as concurrent. To separate the processes is to create a dichotomy that is akin to dichotomizing and separating theory from practice. The reflective and dialogical component within his pedagogical methodology is inseparable from action; it gives action its purpose, and this form of praxis is the key to liberation. Furthermore it is this ontology of praxis and our possibility to achieve it that defines us as human, and as subjects in the world—not objects—capable of transforming reality.⁸

Why is an understanding of praxis as a methodology important? Why are identity and memory-recuperation relating to ancestral land important to an indigenous community in the twenty-first century? There are cultural and economical imperatives that require subjects operating simultaneously on dual fronts. The cultural work Sanaguano puts into operation is about expanding on the ongoing identification, as well as the new narrative-building, of indigenous communities to their ancestral land. It is about continually doing the long-term labor of creating bonds that cross over from ritual to action/reflection and back again. It is a form of praxis that is put in place to further generate subjects out of those historically seen as objects.

Why is this cultural work important? Because an indigenous future (our future) depends on both imagining that future while learning from the past. Their terrain, both natural and cognitive, and their struggles to survive are equally ours. Given the predatory, extractivist logic currently pressing down on the Andes that sees neither future nor past (as it is elsewhere), it would seem that Sanaguano is betting on art and pedagogy to build bonds to memory and the landscape that move from the cultural to the political and back again. He is building a form of praxis. Those relationships are developed from within a Kichwa imaginary where ancestral knowledge—a worldview including what many in this part of the world call *sumak kawsay*—plays the role of the protagonist, not the sidekick. And Sanaguano’s art form—his praxis—has political subject-building at its core.

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The term *sumak kawsay* is a Quechua term that has been translated to roughly mean “buen vivir” in Spanish, or “good living” in English. Quechua is a living language family spoken by nearly ten million people across the Andean region, so the term has several meanings implying several forms of relationship. Primarily, it implies a relationship of intersubjective reciprocity, as it is often cited within the context of the extended communal family, or the *ayllu*. But this reciprocity

can also extend to nature and one's surroundings. We are natural beings, we are part of nature, so the reciprocity extends beyond our bodies. Just as importantly, these relationships carry the potential for a decolonial political dimension due to the inherently communal, cyclical, non-consumerist logic of *sumak kawsay*.

Immediately following the ratification of the 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution, the government published a public document elaborating certain aspects called the “National Plan for Good Living 2009–2013”—the subtitle was “Building a Plurinational and Intercultural State”—which includes this description in its introduction:

*Good Living is the result of a search, over several decades, for new ways of living on behalf of Latin American social actors. It is the result of their demands in the face of the neoliberal economic model and paradigm. In Ecuador, these demands were eventually incorporated into the Constitution and have since become the guiding principles of the new social contract.*⁹

The legislative changes that the “National Plan for Good Living” impacted in some way could not have equaled the enthusiasm this discursive shift had set in motion. Theorists, artists, and social actors across the globe began to look intently toward the small Andean nation that was using indigenous concepts in the framing of a new legislative effort aimed at radical forms of civic reimagining. Convenings on the principles of *sumak kawsay*, and its possibilities within a legislative frame, immediately began to take form. But theory is rarely practice. The Constitution's follow-through has not entirely gone according to plan. Enforcement has been a challenge. We will cover some of those challenges below.

The reasons for the aforementioned theoretical excitement are easily understandable. The language found in the government's *sumak kawsay* document is revolutionary for important reasons. After years of political instability, Ecuador managed to invite people who were truly

representative of the various community-driven interests to rewrite their Constitution. The language and issues addressed reflect both the document's as well as the region's plurinational diversity. More importantly, the National Plan covered some key issues that have never been addressed before in constitutional form, much less with such unambiguous language. Notions such as interculturality and plurinationalism were introduced into the larger cultural lexicon. Whereas the idea that Ecuadorean indigenous and Afro-American communities were unique cultures that should be addressed and understood discursively on their own terms¹⁰ was well established amongst social scientists, this new publicly driven lexical realignment entered into wide circulation and became part of a national conversation very quickly.¹¹ Not only did these ideas, once taboo, enter into a larger consciousness, they implied legislative action beyond anything ever proposed before. Regional and international theorists from various disciplines came to Quito, and continue to arrive, thanks in great part to the National Plan's discursive and legislative potential.

*The 2009-2013 National Plan for Good Living raises significant technical and political challenges, as well as methodological and instrumental innovations. However, the Plan's greatest significance lies in the conceptual rupture with the so-called Washington Consensus and the most orthodox approaches to the concept of development.*¹²

For Latin American thinkers, the history of *desarrollismo*—the Washington-backed developmental plans in place during much of the late twentieth century until the financial collapse in the first decade of the new millennium—is a history that is not distant enough. Early challenges came from social scientists and intellectuals in the late 1960s with the articulation of dependency theory. That theory states that the history of Latin America was one of *dependence*

built on the massive exploitation and exportation of raw goods and natural materials for the purposes of enriching international centers of production and their local allies. The explanation for underdevelopment was a structural inequality that had less to do with backwardness than it did with dependency. The National Plan interlocks the questions of environmental sustainability and social reimagining, and places them firmly within the purview of a larger political and economic decolonization project.

Under the heading of Change of Paradigm: From Development to Good Living:

The prevalent concept of “development” is undergoing a profound crisis. In part this is only due to the colonial perspective from which the concept is derived. But it is also a result of its failure throughout the world. The present global crisis has demonstrated that it is impossible to maintain the current patterns of accumulation. For the South, it has meant an extractivist and devastating path to development, with unequal relations of power and trade with the North. Moreover the unlimited consumption patterns derived from this model are leading the entire planet to collapse, given that the biosphere is unable to ensure its capacity for regeneration. It is essential, therefore, to promote new modes of production, consumption, and organization of life and coexistence.

The hegemonic ideas of progress and development have generated a monoculture that invisibilizes the historic experience of the diverse peoples that compose our societies. A linear vision of time supports the concept of progress, modernization and development in which history has only one purpose and one direction: developed countries are ahead and are the “model” all societies should follow. Whatever falls outside these ideas is considered savage, primitive, obsolete, pre-modern (Sousa Santos, 2006: 24).¹³

Sumak kawsay is therefore not only a cultural position with regards to social organization; within the document, it begins to map out a viewpoint toward alternative economic/political development. When asked about “el buen vivir,” Alberto Acosta, who was President of the National Constitutional Assembly during the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, stated:

Sumak kawsay or good living is a worldview that emerges strongly from the peoples of the South, the same people that have been marginalized throughout history. Good living does not imply an academic policy, but rather it is an opportunity to learn from realities, experiences, practices and values in many different places, even now in the midst of a capitalist civilization.

This good living, to attempt a first definition, proposes the search for life where man is in harmony with himself, with his fellow man and with nature, understanding that we are all interdependent and that we exist because of the other. Searching for these harmonies does not imply ignoring social conflicts and social and economic differences, nor deny that we live within an order, a capitalist one, that is first and foremost predatory. Precisely, *sumak kawsay* would be a pathway out of this system.¹⁴

While the notion of growth as the means of economic development is rejected, it opens the possibility of other forms of lifeworlds—other cosmovisions—with regard to our understanding of natural resources. The cyclical and interdependent relationship between humans and their environment is affirmed. According to *sumak kawsay*, if nature is a living being, it is a limited being.¹⁵

Good Living is based on a vision that surpasses the narrow confines of quantitative economicism and challenges the notion of material, mechanic and

endless accumulation of goods. Instead the new paradigm promotes an inclusive, sustainable, and democratic economic strategy; one that incorporates actors historically excluded from the capitalist, market-driven logic of accumulation and redistribution.

Similarly, Good Living revises and reinterprets the relation between nature and human beings, and proposes a shift from the current prevailing anthropocentrism to what we may call bio-pluralism (Guimaraes in Acosta, 2009). Good Living posits that humans should use natural resources in a way that allows their natural generation (or regeneration.)

Finally, Good Living also relies on social equality and justice, and gives importance to dialogue with—and acknowledgement and value of—diverse peoples, cultures, forms of knowledge and ways of life. Good Living, therefore, is a complex, non-linear concept which is in permanent re-signification.¹⁶

If the notions of interculturality and reciprocity found within *sumak kawsay* were key terms to designate a cultural realignment of the historic social order, they also act as a metaphor for a parallel economic project. The cultural project within the Constitution entails a defense of ancestral knowledge, supporting communal rights, and respect for various ethnic groups. These are situated as a structural support for a parallel argument, a new economic developmental model. And in this coupling dynamic, the most discussed aspect of the *sumak kawsay* documents are undoubtedly the Rights of Nature found within the Constitution, crafted with support from the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund.

Article 71. Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes. All persons,

communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature. To enforce and interpret these rights, the principles set forth in the Constitution shall be observed, as appropriate. The State shall give incentives to natural persons and legal entities and to communities to protect nature and to promote respect for all the elements comprising an ecosystem.¹⁷

In order to understand this coupling of the cultural project—the revindication of ancestral knowledge and the economic project of decolonization—let us return to the notion of the family or *ayllu*. The *ayllu* is a long-understood and -practiced form of communal living in the Andes—a political form of family and community organization. In this communal living, the notion of reciprocity/cooperation is a central concept. That reciprocity is not only one of communal collaboration and assistance, but is also extended to nature—it is the notion that nature has life, it is a limited being and consequently has rights. This repositioning of nature to reflect the Andean cosmovision is not only a political realignment, it is a historic one. What is in play is what horizons indigenous communities living within an extractivist economy have before them, what they may question, in the face of the teleological trajectory of capital and its seemingly limited historical possibilities. As in the work of Pablo Sanaguano, cultural work is the base upon which we build political subjects. Plurinationality and the economic arguments within *sumak kawsay* go hand in hand.

But something went wrong with the subsequent reelection of President Correa and his political party Alianza PAÍS, something that did not sit well with his original supporters and particularly with intellectuals. What Correa has called the “Citizen’s Revolution” began to unravel with the recent 2013 decision to allow oil drilling within the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve. Other financial capitulations soon followed.

Acosta has been one of the main critics of the ways in which the concept of *sumak kawsay* has been appropriated. Rather than framed as an “alternative to development,” *sumak kawsay* has been implemented simply as a “developmental alternative,” meaning that fundamentally, it seems to be carrying little weight toward rethinking the relationship between natural resources and the extractivist capital that has driven the Ecuadorean economy over these past few decades. The nature/culture division of the West, it seems, remains intact.

Part of the problem is that naturally “el buen vivir” is a process of living, while governments generally attempt to frame certain productivist qualifiers in qualitative ways. The former has a long-term view of how that goal is accomplished, while the latter necessarily has short-term aims. Culturally as well, what was initially going to be a challenge, and what has not been upheld, was the possibility of revindicating certain ancestral knowledge and worldviews in the construction of new political forms. For example, the construction of new schools of indigenous knowledge and research that were promised but never built, or the tension between increased mining and drilling interests and outraged indigenous groups and conservationists who accuse the government of simply making slogans. It is clear that in some cases, what was opted for was defining a “buen vivir” for the general population—and perhaps one that represented a form of ideal citizenship—but not the cultural, social, and political realignment many had hoped for.

Is it possible to attempt to embed what are essentially non-Western concepts into a modern Western political platform? What about the idea of transforming a distinct cultural way of life such as *sumak kawsay*—an embodied form of community knowledge—into a political, qualitative dimension? When Ecuador benefitted from high oil prices things certainly looked more optimistic.

What becomes clear from the work of cultural actors like Pablo Sanaguano is the importance of long-term cultural and community work with respect to future political and legislative action. The tenets of *sumak kawsay* demand an active and dialogical form of subject-building that is equally intersubjective and embodied within the natural world. It is in Sanaguano's practice that the larger themes of interculturality and reciprocity create an important space for reflection and action—praxis. The act of producing culture on that larger scale also serves as a human-scale indicator proving how cultural action can have profound effects in building political subjects.

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2 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Can Rafael Correa Deliver His Citizens' Revolution for Ecuador?," *Guardian*, May 29, 2014, [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/29/rafael-correa-deliver-citizens-revolution-ecuador)

2014/may/29/rafael-correa-deliver-citizens-revolution-ecuador.

3 Enrique Díaz Álvarez, "Interview with Boaventura de Sousa Santos," *Barcelona Metropolis*, June 2011, <http://w2.bcn.cat/bcnmetropolis/arxiu/en/page0b1a.html?id=22&ui=518>.

4 Maria Fernanda Cartagena, "Interview with Pablo Sanaguano," in *Collective Situations: Dialogues in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995–2010*, eds. Bill Kelley, Jr. and Grant Kester (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

5 The term “cosmivision” is not often used in English but is used frequently in Spanish and is adapted from the German *Weltanschauung* (welt = world, and anschauen = observe). It can be translated as “worldview” but this lacks the cosmological connotation of other possible worlds and non-Western forms of cognition.

6 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Handsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972).

7 Freire, 75.

8 Raymond Allen Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Social Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 34.

9 “National Plan for Good Living 2009–2013” [*Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo*], <http://plan2009.senplades.gob.ec/web/en>. This document was published both in English and Spanish.

10 An important distinction in this struggle for recognition of different social groups is its focus on difference, not equality. Given the different groups and their different histories, the recognition of that difference is a central argument for a plurinational state.

11 This is not to say that this discursive development happened spontaneously or simply through this legislative act. Indigenous community organizing through groups like Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), and social science research centers like FLACSO, had a great role to play in opening up a space for these conversations to happen.

12 “National Plan for Good Living 2009–2013.”

13 “National Plan for Good Living 2009–2013.” Portuguese sociologist de Sousa Santos is cited within the original document: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Renovar la teoría crítica y reinventar la emancipación social* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2006).

14 Luciano Concheiro, “El buen vivir: una conversación con Alberto Acosta,” *Horizontal*, February 27, 2015, <http://horizontal.mx/el-buen-vivir-una-conversacion-con-alberto-acosta>. Translation mine.

15 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Can Rafael Correa Deliver His Citizens’ Revolution for Ecuador?”

16 “National Plan for Good Living 2009–2013.” Ecuadorean economist Alberto Acosta is cited in the original document: Alberto Acosta, “El Buen Vivir, una oportunidad por construir,” in *Ecuador Debate* (Quito: Centro Andino de Acción Popular, 2009).

17 National Assembly, “Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador,” October 20, 2008, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.