My Amazon Teachers: Photographs, Politics, and Plants

My Rites of Passage in the Peruvian Jungle

1975. I am 30 years old. Child of the 60s revolutions in the US: Civil Rights, sexual liberation, the women's movement. The doors opened wide for young (at least, for white middle-class) women of my generation and I ran through….one door after another! Before going to Peru, I had studied in France, worked in an international organization in Switzerland, travelled through Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Asia. Teaching in an alternative community college in New Jersey sparked my interest in radical education and led me to PhD research on the popular education praxis of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. I planned to do field research in Chile in 1973, where Freire was exiled and had joined Allende's socialist government with his liberatory literacy program. But then there was the first September 11, the coup, leaving Allende dead and Freire in exile – again. Through a serendipitous (and romantically dramatic) route, my site of research shifted to Peru.

Peru's leftist military government had adopted the Freirean method for the national literacy program, ALFIN. I found my way into ALFIN as well as into ALFALIT, an evangelical continent-wide literacy program with headquarters in the conservative southern US. I made friends with staff of both organizations and offered my photographic skills to help produce learning materials based on the daily lives of the learners. Each program contributed to my deepening social consciousness. While most of my research took place in the barrios of Lima, I had two opportunities to travel to the Amazon region of Peru. My accounts below integrate some journal entries (in italics).

My First Visit to the Amazon

It was through ALFALIT that I was first invited to the Amazon to take photos for the literacy materials. I was accompanied by Walter, a sweet but somewhat awkward ALFALIT staff person. We flew on a small plane from Lima to Pucallpa, the main town in the eastern Amazonian rainforest. As soon as we climbed out of the small air-conditioned plane, we were assaulted by the steaming hot air of the jungle.

It's warm & fresh & green here – the sky is clear – the wet grass and jasmine trees let off an entrancing odor, the sounds of the crickets… I feel at home again – how much I need la naturaleza*…it will nourish me in a totally different way than the last month in Lima.*

My first romantic impressions of the Amazon were soon tempered by the reality of a chaotic border town, a gathering place for local jungle communities, commercial interests, and competing social ideologies. I noted in my journal:

Pucallpa is an ugly, awkward town…dirt roads, now gutted and muddy from torrential rains – trucks & buses & motorcycles & wheelbarrows bumping/jumping through the streets….a center for this area…also with a clear stamp of gringo evangelicals – the blue building called "The Truth," a religious bookstore with Newsweek, Women's Day, modern English versions of the New Testament.

Vultures greeted us as we walked through a chaotic market along the riverbank. I recoiled at the pungent smell of rotting fish and fruit, trembled at the sight of the birds of death circling above my head, some diving into the decaying piles.

The airstrip where we landed was actually owned by the Misión Suisse, just outside the town, on the jungle's edge. I was embarrassed to learn that the central office of ALFALIT in Lima had not confirmed our visit:

it's quite clear that they weren't expecting us and aren't ready for us…they are in seminars, or on vacation, and there are heavy rains, etc. I'm not sure yet about Walter, his sense of initiative, timing, etc.

Nonetheless, we were greeted warmly, and shown to our cabin: *charming – wooden, clean, crisp – very Swiss! – photos of the Alps on the walls…*

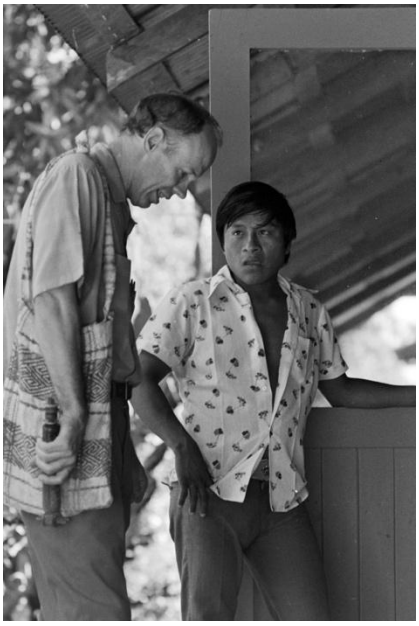
It was Sunday so I went to a church service with Señor Zehnder. The mission staff were all Swiss Germans, and I introduced myself in Spanish, recalling my year in Switzerland and the music. Even though I did not identify with the evangelical tone,

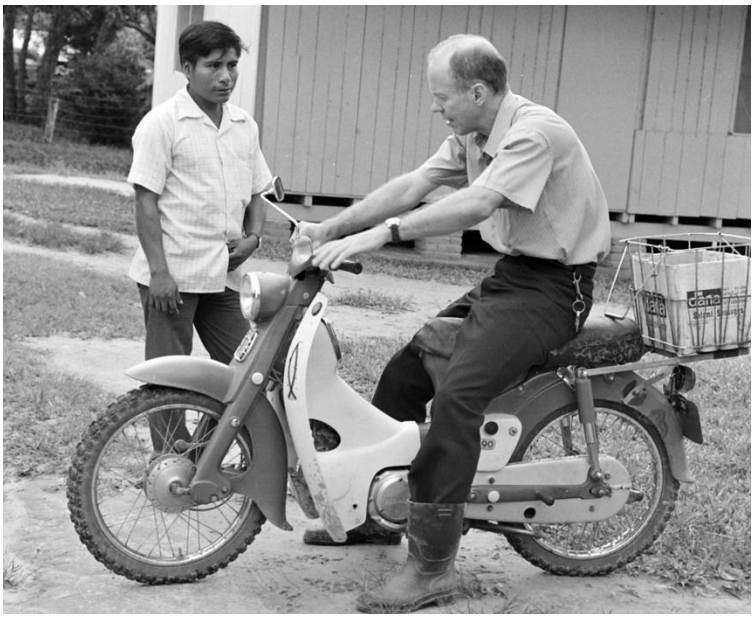
I had a feeling of connection with this tradition of European religious music. It was much more than a reminder of my own church past – but permeates my blood – touches nerves of my total culture – makes me feel at home – and realize again – in a visceral way that here I am not at home.

Everything about this place was new. The jungle daily downpours created a gorgeous sound – wet, green, lush.

I took a post-rain walk with my camera (& in Walter's shoes!) – such fun – the world of raindrops, spider's webs, blades of grass…
We had dinner with the Zehnder family.

I enjoyed the anecdotes and perspectives of Mr. and Mrs. Zehnder today at the table, her tales about being the sole gringa woman living in a Shipibo tribe for three years, almost going mad, what she's learned, some of the dilemmas of culture contact.





On Monday morning, Mr. Zehnder introduced us to two coordinators of the literacy classes. *Señor Zehnder was a sensitive, sensible man but the two Shipibos were still cow-towing to us all.*

I felt somewhat embarrassed - "our" plans (for a research project) *appeared so imposed, ambitious. I was bothered by Walter's approach…later realized how snobbish I was being toward him – he's a good person, interested in poetry, drama, etc…but also gets on my nerves in a way that's difficult to describe: his words and actions seem ill-timed, slightly off the wave-length…a kind of social ineptness, combined with a fastidiousness (carefully ironing his clothes, taking mountains of medicines for his bites and colds).*

In a way, I was relieved when it was decided that the major research project we were proposing would be postponed until March. I also realized it was too much for me to take on. I needed to focus on my thesis research in Lima.

Fortunately, we were able to take advantage of this trip to visit a Shipibo village with Alejandro, one of the local literacy teachers attending a seminar at the Swiss Mission. Thank goodness, because on my return, I wrote in my journal:

During the last three days I've had one of the most memorable experiences of my life…one that I had perhaps fantasized – but I'm not sure even believed existed.

Santa Teresita: A Fish out of Water

Leaving the small airstrip of the mission, we headed out in a tiny wooden dug-out boat, Alejandro paddling with a stick – through swamp & algae-covered river…and finally where the river was a bit deeper, wider, clearer…

My first impression was totally romanticized, perhaps shaped by American musicals?

Approaching Santa Teresita, it appeared as a South Pacific dream – grass huts placed among the palm trees, a gentle breeze, and the constant song of birds. Otherwise – total tranquility…

We first had to get official permission to visit the community, so Alejandro announced our arrival to the “Teniente Governador.”

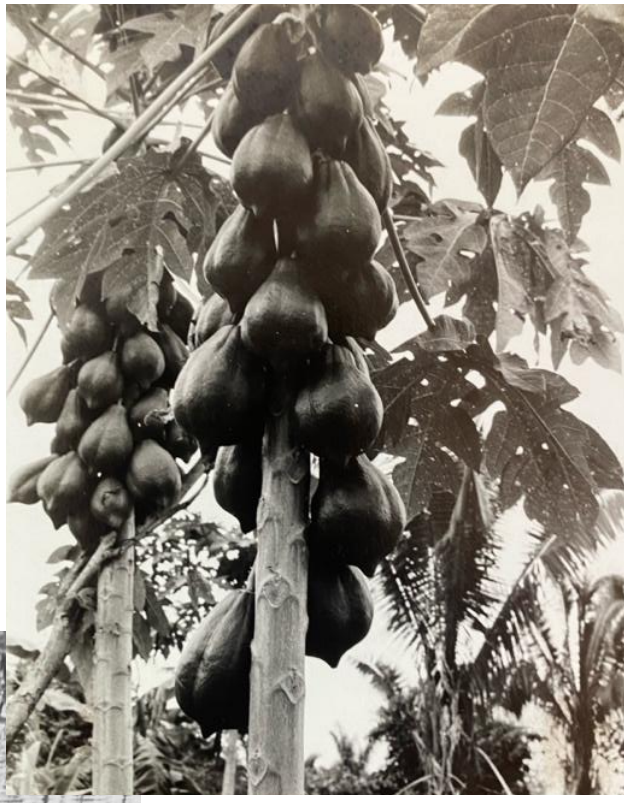
All the houses had thatched roofs sheltering open platforms on stilts, offering a flow of air in the intense heat. As we passed by homes on our way to Alejandro’s family, I felt very conspicuous. I could feel eyes following me, this pale tall white female dressed in pants rather than the skirts hand painted with the exquisite geometric design the Shipibo were known for. Being accompanied by a local literacy teacher helped ease my discomfort, and the children were especially friendly.

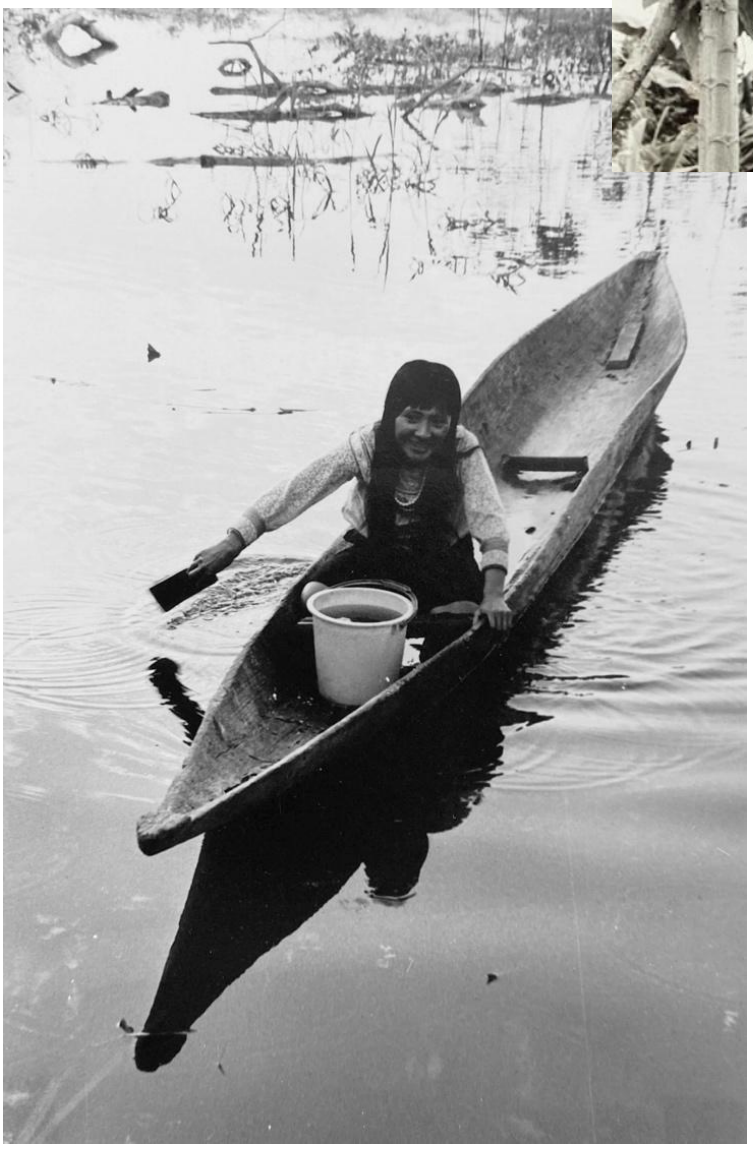
Alejandro was my guide and we asked if I could take their pictures, promising to bring the photos back to them on another visit. The idea was to pass the photos on to local teachers to use in their literacy classes, so they could learn to read and write about their daily lives.

I noticed a young woman weaving a belt with her hip-strap loom tied to a corner pole. I was taken back to my own attempt at hip-strap weaving in 1974, when I took lessons from a Mayan family near Antigua, Guatemala, while I was studying Spanish. This loom always seemed magical to me, because it has three strings in the warp, creating a single colour back for the intricately designed huipils that the women wear. The Shipibo loom had a warp of only two strings, so was simpler. I watched as she constructed this portable loom by sitting back and pulling it tightly around her hips. I enjoyed the familiar sound of the batten stick as she yanked it down to create a fine weave, thread by thread.

I wanted to know how they survived, now that they were sedentary, no longer moving for the hunt, though they continued to gather nuts, seeds, and wild fruit of the rainforest.

Samuel explained that they had only recently begun to practice agriculture, using their machetes and selective burning to create fertile ground to grow yucca, avocados, coconut, acai berries, bananas, oranges, grapefruit, and mangos.





At the river's edge we saw people coming back in their dugout canoes from fishing upriver and gathering foods. I watched a woman approaching the riverbank with a pail containing crabs she had pulled from the mangrove riverbed.

At another home, a young mother lay stretched out on the platform, wrapped around her baby, probably under a year old. She tenderly searched the child's hair for lice, or ticks, knowing that they could carry fatal diseases. I had seen this ritual repeated throughout Central America, often women vendors in the market using the time when business was slow to carefully pick out the lice from their child's hair.

With official permission to visit granted, we were given an empty house in one far corner of the community, where we settled down while Alejandro's wife Lucinda fixed dinner (I tried to help) and we sat around the *mechero* (a kind of tin lamp) later – sharing stories.

With a hint of foreboding, I noted that the house *was closer to the jungle (& thus the mosquitoes!),* as if anticipating my first night of torture:

That night began the physical misery that I really have to admit to… Alejandro fixed mosquito nets for us, but still we were sleeping on the hard floor. I slept well until 5 AM & woke up to a couple of mosquitoes who had invaded my little white cage – Unable to locate them or kill them, even with the help of a flashlight. I gave up my good sleep and awaited the day.

In my journal, I started to articulate some of the hard lessons that this experience offered me:

1) The limits of my body

Though Walter complained and was a riot in his finickiness, carrying the mosquito-repelling spiral everywhere, I was the hypocrite, because I was suffering almost as much & wouldn't admit it, having to play brave.

Most bothersome: the incredible heat which immobilizes you & sent us in for siestas 3 or 4 times a day, the ubiquitous mosquitoes and ants (millions of them & some enormous!), getting dirty & smelly & not having fresh cool water to drink or wash in.

Finally – out of desperation – I went twice to the river to swim nude (only at first squirmy about the mud). Having no place to sit & a hard place to sleep (how used to comfort I am!)….all this accumulation of physical discomfort made me realize how much we all learn to adapt to our environments – how totally different was this one from my own – it would take months or years of some suffering before I would adapt.

2) The paucity of my survival skills

An incredible recognition of how dumb a creature I was in this setting, making me feel very humble indeed & thus appreciating all the more the real skills & experiences these people have (how can we call them ignorant..??! They are only ignorant of our ways – and we of theirs….)

Some of the very basic things I found I couldn't do: (find photos of machete, ball game, etc.)

- *Climb up and get down from the raised houses on stilts*
- *Open a nut with a machete*
- *Peel a yucca*
- *Row a small wooden dug-out canoe – which takes some equilibrium*

- *Kick a ball and run the way the girls were running in tight skirts*
- *Enter a swampy river to bathe nude (so simple a thing!)*
- *Suck sugar cane*
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I had a real sense of appreciation for the skills these people have developed to survive in their environment. A lot of very basic survival skills we didn't learn in a highly modernized society. Instead our skills are how to operate machines (cars, typewriters, blenders) that do things for us. (It makes me determined to do a wilderness survival course when I get back to Canada!)

3) Being a woman in this context

Though I could not really get an intimate sense of gender roles in Shipibo society, I had the impression that *a woman's role was extremely circumscribed here, and would drive me crazy after a while…* In retrospect, 45 years later, and learning from my Haudenosaunee friends about a balanced notion of gender roles, I was probably imposing my own American 60s notion of women's liberation, which I would come to learn as very limited indeed.

Overall, though, this short but profound experience with a culture not totally shaped by western (read: North American white middle-class) values, pushed me to reconsider many of the presuppositions of western Eurocentric culture, the whole development enterprise, the deleterious impact of missionaries, and even the underlying objectives of the Freirean educational process I was studying:

I noted in my journal *some crass generalizations about the whole so-called development process:*

- *These people have a right to maintain their culture as it is, even if that doesn't concur with the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the GNP, or Quality of Life measures, the women's liberation movement, the Christian Church, or the Freire conscientization process.*
- *I have even stronger (though still ambiguous) feelings about the work of missionaries. Even if well-intentioned and humble, the basic premise of what they're doing doesn't fit: that these people should accept our God, our Christ, and his lessons.*
- *I've also seen the Freire stuff in a different light. On the one hand, I have a new appreciation for the adaptability of the method – the power of taking the word "*mechero*" (tin light used in tribes), for example, something so central to Shipibo life…and getting them to problematize it (how bad it is for health, starts fires, etc.) and look for solutions. On the other hand, these people don't seem to want to become conscious of these problems nor to act collectively on them. Why push our kind of consciousness on them? I can't see the class conflict concept fitting the Shipibos except in these senses: conflict with neighbouring tribes, with nature, with missionaries, with commercial exploiters, & perhaps with Marxist conscienticizers..!*

The Camera as a Colonial Tool?

The self-questioning continued when we got around to our official purpose of being there: to gather stories that could be used in the literacy class. Alejandro led us around to various houses inviting people to come to the school, another thatched roof hut. When they gathered, he explained why we were there and asked them to share some stories and legends. A few did speak into the recorder, though I couldn't understand what they were saying. I was obviously feeling awkward as I tried to take photos:

My journal revealed my doubts and anxieties during that visit:

I took a lot of pictures but felt more like a rapist without the understanding of or empathy for the people – not having a clue about what they thought of me or my photographing.

While I asked permission, I could not count on straight answers (perhaps it's impolite to say "no!" though one woman did) or nonverbal cues.

And I kept thinking – really what will these photos be to them? They're really for me, for my pretty books, for my varied and interesting life, for my well-paying jobs. So even if I appease my guilt by sending them back a collage of photos and some special ones that Alejandro might use in the literacy class. So what..? Again I have taken from them – it remains a kind of exploitation.

I felt sick for hours after this experience – and it still leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. But I will appease my appeasement with this guilt and confession and self-questioning – and go on committing the same crime.

Walter and I returned to Lima, and I took a few days to recover:

My body is not in good shape: 300 mosquito bites from the jungle, ant bites that are now making my ankles swell, a burn from the Peruvian sun, a gash in my thumb….what a sight! It's a good thing, there's no love around these days.

I was excited to see what the photos had captured so set about developing the film in my tiny darkroom, a small bathroom originally constructed in our apartment for a maid, as most middle-class families had live-in help, or *empleadas.* I spent hours in that space, exposing the negatives through the enlarger that I had set up on a shelf in the shower area, moving the exposed photo paper through trays of chemical baths on shelves I'd built over the sink and toilet. Once fully developed I would hang the finished print by a clothes pin from a rope I had stretched from the shower head to the window frame, which was covered with black cloth to block out all light.

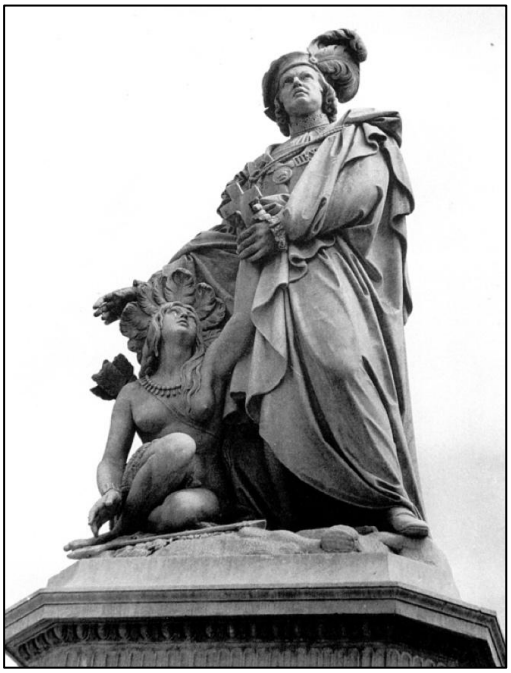
That tiny cave with its red light was my magic space. I never tired of the thrill of the images slowly appearing and would even rub the paper with my fingers in the (toxic!)

chemicals pretending that it was me and not just the chemical bath revealing the face or scene.

For the next few weeks, over the many hours it took to process the photos, I revisited that Shipibo community again and again. I would stare into the faces of women whose lives were such a mystery to me, and yet feel as though I were looking into their souls. How often do we spend an hour or more looking into someone's eyes? I often felt I was silently building an intimate connection with the person in the photo.

I selected about 30 photographs, printed them in varying sizes, and mounted them in a book to tell a story about daily life in the village.

My Second Visit to the Amazon



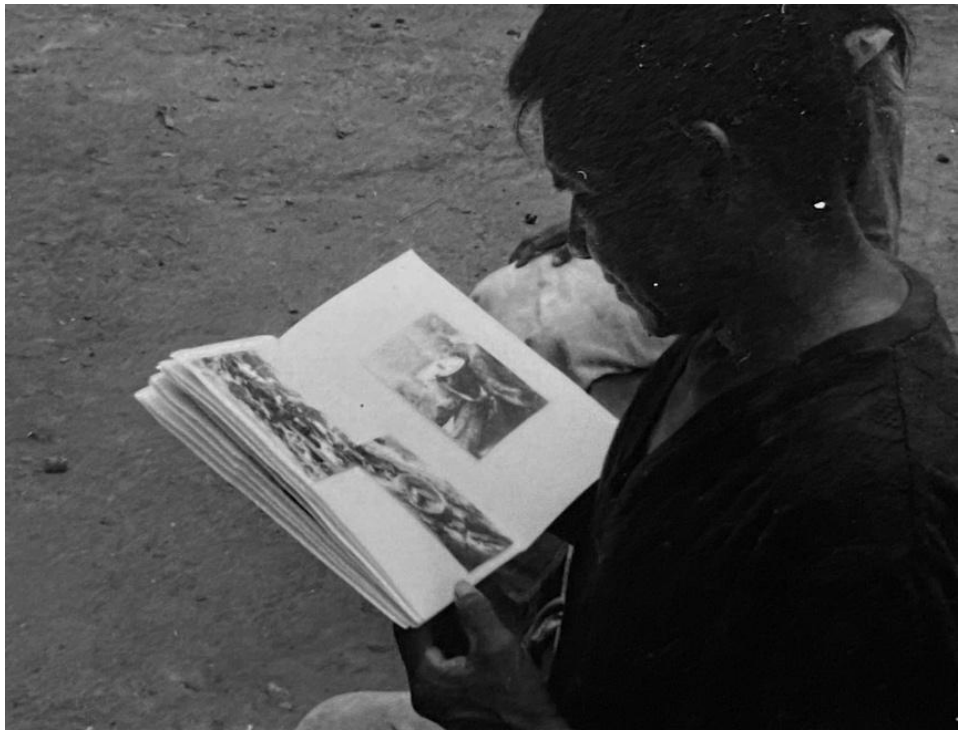
It was my fortune to be invited by my friend, renowned Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, to join him on a research trip a month later to interview the first teachers in the Indigenous communities in the Amazon region. Schools were a new phenomenon, an imposition of the federal government, after the previously nomadic hunters and gatherers had been pressured to settle in small villages. The teachers had gathered at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a Christian organization founded in 1933 by an American missionary in Guatemala, and associated with the Wycliffe Bible Translators. I've reflected in another vignette on my experiences there in the context of colonization, evangelization and militant research in the Peruvian Amazon.

One day while Darcy was interviewing the Indigenous teachers, I was able to arrange a return visit to Santa Teresita, and to bring the literacy teachers the photo album I had made of their community. I headed off with one of the teachers, Samuel, to the riverbank where both boat and bus travel was negotiated. We passed through the market where people from various tribes were bartering for foods and household items that they didn't grow or make in their own towns. We worked our way past the vendors to the long line of buses that carry goods and people alike to and from their villages.

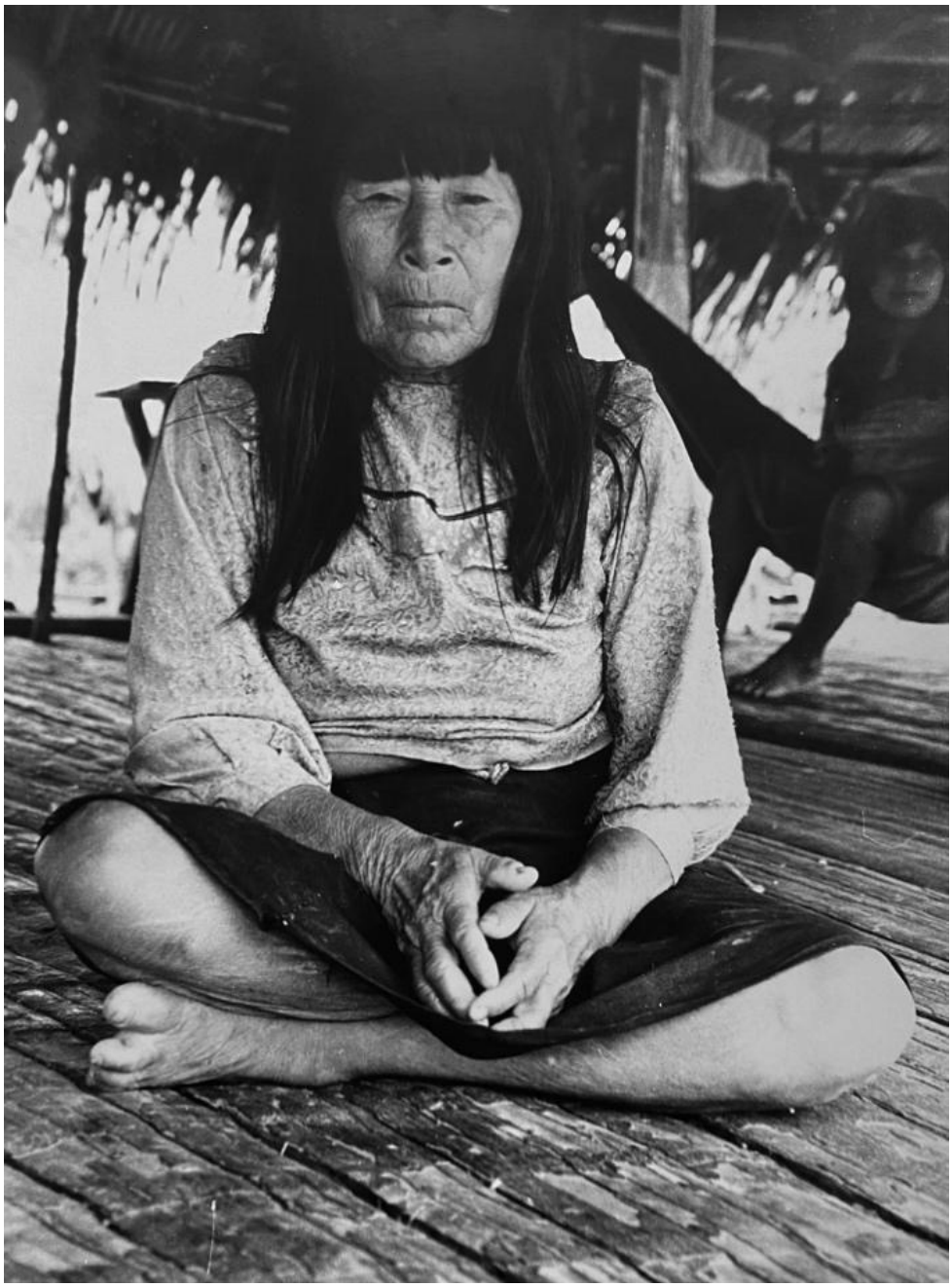
We climbed up into the packed bus, reverberating with the sounds of live chickens amidst the chatter of shoppers speaking in many different tongues. I sat beside an older woman who was holding fresh fish wrapped in newspaper, burlap bags of potatoes and rice at her feet. Samuel was standing with others in the aisle for the hour-long ride, over bumpy ground, as the bus navigated around stumps of trees felled for this first road through the thick jungle.

Photography as a Window or a Mirror?

In Santa Teresita, the villagers gathered round to see themselves in the photos, staring and often laughing at the photos that showed them felling trees, gathering papayas, cooking over a fire, weaving belts, gathering food in their dugout canoes, and picking lice out of their babies' hair.



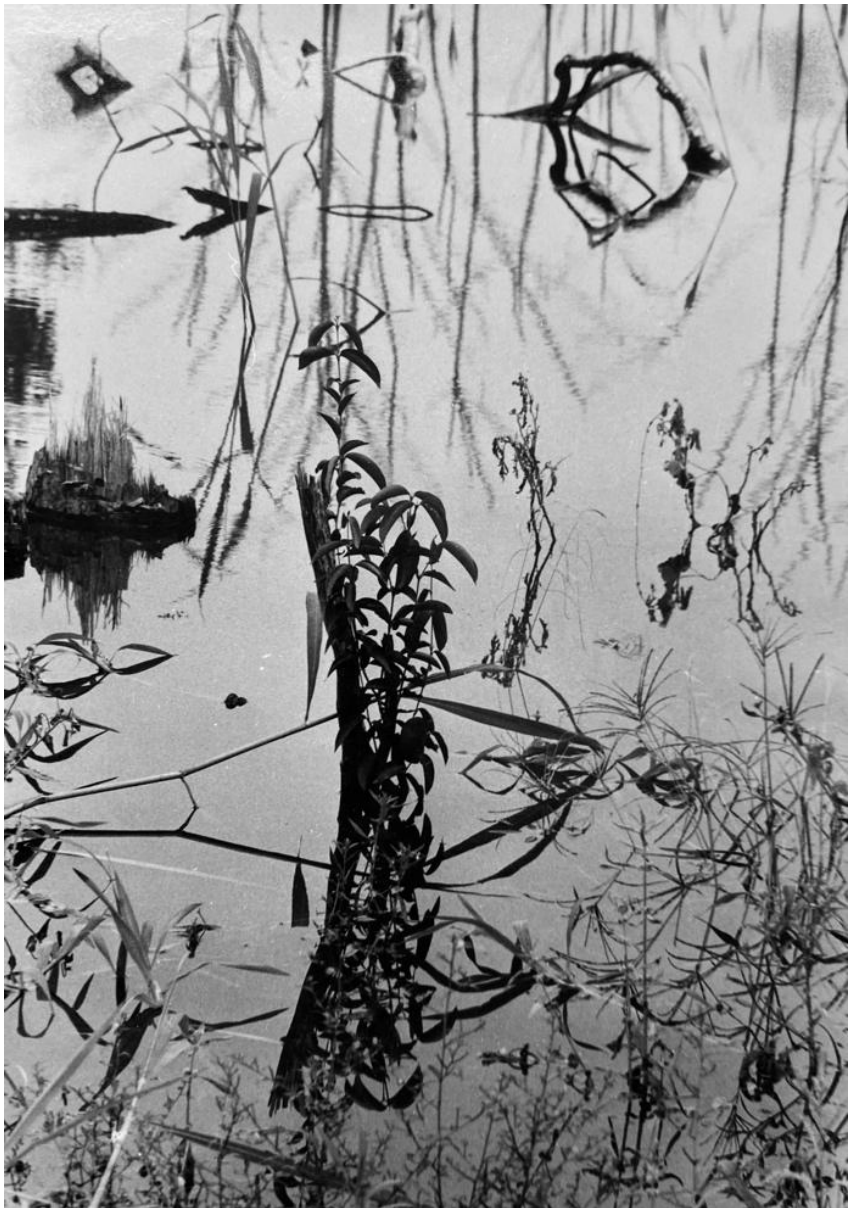
The villagers gathered round to see themselves in the photos, staring and often laughing at the photos showing them felling trees, gathering papayas, cooking over a fire, weaving belts, and gathering food in their dugout canoes. But two of their responses genuinely surprised me.



When I showed a photo of a village matriarch to her, I felt as though I knew her intimately because I had spent hours developing her image in my darkroom. She, on the other hand, barely remembered me and my short visit. I began to wonder if I had actually stolen her soul, as some believed was the danger of the camera in their midst.

I felt uncomfortable realizing how one-sided was my relationship with her and the village. I was the one with the camera, I had taken their images, I would share them around the world. While returning photos to them was one attempt to equalize the relationship, it would never be a genuine exchange.

The other ah-hah came with a photo I took of the vegetation emerging from the shallow riverbed. They excitingly pointed to different parts of the photo, naming each and every one of the plants, and what they used it for. This was the most dramatic reminder of how distant my view of this community was and how little I understood their cosmovision or knowledges.



For me, this photograph had been primarily an aesthetic response to the scene, a Japanese style image that created interesting reflections and shadows. For them, it represented their livelihood, and their relationships with the plant families that sustained them. Decades later, as I learned about Indigenous notions of kinship with the more-than-human world, I began to understand that they were perhaps naming their relatives with the same sense of intimacy that I had tried to portray in my photo portraits of their faces.

Photography and anthropology were both born within the colonial enterprise, and promoted colonial mentalities. In many ways, my use of the camera perpetuated this gaze of the outsider and continued a colonial practice. Perhaps I was one of the culture vultures flying in and carrying out artefacts of lives that I didn't really understand, oblivious to its impact on them.

Were there also ways that those photos could serve to question that history, to decolonize our world views, and to generate critical discussion among the community members about their past, present and future? This was, at least, the intent of Paulo Freire's use of photos as 'codes' to re-present to learners their daily lives and to engage the social contradictions they lived, toward a more critical consciousness and potential collective action for change.

In any case, that was the idea at the core of my doctoral thesis research and the book that emerged from it: *Education and Social Change: A Photographic Study of Peru.* My adventures with Freire's colleague and fellow exile Darcy Ribeiro in the Peruvian Amazon gave me a lot to think about, and now, almost 50 years later, to continue to digest and question.