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Altamira 2042: Feminist performance and the anthropocene

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Abstract

This essay deals with climate crisis through the discussion of *Altamira 2042*, a multimedia performance-installation by Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha, which addresses the social, cultural and environmental consequences of the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric plant, responsible for one of the worst ecocides of the 21st century. Belo Monte's dystopia highlights the conflict between the interests of global capital, the forces of "progress," and the survival of the local population and their social organizations, knowledge and traditions; between modernity's instrumental technology and their ancient technologies. The essay focuses on how feminist performances can respond to the specter of mass extinction and climate change.

Keywords: *Altamira 2042*. Performance. Feminism. Anthropocene. Climate Change.

Altamira 2042: Performance feminista e o antropoceno


Resumo

Este ensaio trata da crise climática através da discussão de *Altamira 2042*, uma performance-instalação multimídia de Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha, que aborda as consequências sociais, culturais e ambientais da construção da usina hidrelétrica de Belo Monte, responsável por um dos piores ecocídios do século XXI. A distopia de Belo Monte evidencia o conflito entre os interesses do capital global, as forças do "progresso" e a sobrevivência da população local e suas organizações sociais, conhecimentos e tradições; entre a tecnologia instrumental da modernidade e suas tecnologias antigas. O ensaio debruça-se sobre a questão de como as performances feministas podem responder ao espectro da extinção em massa e à crise da mudança climática.

Palavras-chave: *Altamira 2042*. Performance. Feminismo. Antropoceno. Mudança climática.

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Altamira 2042: Performance feminista y antropoceno

Resumen

Este ensayo aborda la crisis climática, por medio de la discusión de *Altamira 2042*, una performance-instalación de Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha, que trata las consecuencias sociales, culturales y ambientales de la construcción de la central hidroeléctrica de Belo Monte, responsable por uno de los peores ecocidios del siglo XXI. La distopía de Belo Monte pone en evidencia el conflicto de intereses del capital global y la sobrevivencia de la población local y sus organizaciones sociales, conocimientos y tradiciones; entre la tecnología instrumental de la modernidad y sus tecnologías antiguas. El ensayo se centra en cómo las performances feministas pueden responder al espectro de la extinción en masa y a las crisis de cambio climático.

Palabras clave: *Altamira 2042*. Performance. Feminismo. Antropoceno. Cambio climático.



They paved paradise and put up a parking lot
Joni Mitchell

Why can we imagine the ending of the world, yet not the ending of colonialism?
Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto

Violence against the descendants of millions of Brazil's Indigenous peoples — who were systematically decimated after the arrival of the Portuguese—, has reached unprecedented levels in the past few years, especially since the outbreak of the new coronavirus pandemic. The approximated 900,000 survivors of the colonial genocide, now more vulnerable than ever, are under attack by the Brazilian government. We are witnessing what anthropologist Viveiros de Castro describes as “the final offensive against the Indigenous peoples” (Viveiros de Castro, 2019), the conclusion of a campaign of genocide that began in 1500. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened an already dire situation by providing Jair Bolsonaro's government with further opportunities to endanger the Indigenous communities. As the pandemic ravages the lives of Brazilians, this highly vulnerable population has been denied access to health care, medicine, food and drinkable water. The government has given them large amounts of hydroxychloroquine, a drug that has been proven ineffective for the treatment of Covid19 and discredited by the World Health Organization — an action harrowingly reminiscent of the colonial biopolitics of distributing smallpox-infected clothes to the natives. Indigenous lands have been attacked by heavily armed miners, loggers, and land invaders, encouraged by Bolsonaro's Minister of Environment, Ricardo Salles, himself currently under investigation for trafficking in Amazonian timber. Coupled with this systematic violence, we are also witnessing the accelerated destruction of precious and irreplaceable biomes with catastrophic consequences for the planet.

Yet it is thanks to Indigenous societies, perceived by the West as “primitive,” that the Amazon has not been entirely destroyed. Scientists have warned us that the world's largest rainforest is nearing a tipping point, and will likely experience a process of savannization. While growing awareness of the irreversible damages to the environment caused by human activities forces us to face the prospect of the



end of the world, for the Amerindians, the world ended in the 1500s, following their first encounters with Europeans.



In his 1954 essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, Martin Heidegger argues that modernity is defined by its instrumental reason and technology. In ancient Greece *technē* was inseparable from art and knowledge — thus poiesis was a means to set free that which "does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us" (Heidegger, 1977, p.13). As Heidegger puts it, the modern concept of technology aims to regulate, secure, and control nature, which is instrumentally seen as an unlimited source of energy and resources to be exploited and stored. As humans dissociated themselves from nonhumans and began to see themselves as superior and extraordinary, a kind of "species supremacism," nature became a standing reserve for their purposes. Moreover, as humans seek to satisfy their immediate needs, they colonize, exploit, store, transform, distribute, and deplete earth's resources: "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering" (Heidegger, 1977, p.17). Informed by this instrumental view, humans have changed from being biological agents to wielding a geological force (Chakrabarty, 2009). Or, in the words of Eliane Brum, "humans have stopped fearing a catastrophe to become a catastrophe" (Brum, 2014).

The magnitude of the environmental impact on the planet caused by the extractivist mindset that characterizes human relationship with nature (Klein, 2019), which is erroneously conceived as passive and stable, resulted in extensive damages to the biosphere, leading a number of scientists to designate the current geological era as the Anthropocene. The term, popularized in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, and quickly adopted by many scholars, has not escaped controversy, precisely for its focus on the word *Anthropos*, reinforcing the idea of an Age of Man. Critics of the term — and of the assumption that a "good Anthropocene" is possible and even desirable — have proposed other designations such as Capitalocene (Andreas Malm, Jason W. Moore), Plantationocene, Chthulucene (Donna Haraway), and Gaia (Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers). Equally controversial is the dating of this new



geological era. While Crutzen and Stoermer associate it with the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s, other scholars claim that it dates back to the beginning of agriculture, while some others point to the period of WWII and the development of the atomic bomb. Authors such as Moore, Haraway, and Viveiros de Castro and Danowski date it to the beginning of European colonization and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. As Viveiros de Castro and Danowski write (2015, p.141):

The genocide of Amerindian peoples - the end of the world for them - was the beginning of the modern world for Europe: without the despoiling of the Americas, Europe would have never become more than the backyard of Eurasia, the home continent of civilizations that were much richer than the Europeans during "our" Middle Ages (Byzantium, China, India, the Arab polities). No pillage of the Americas, no capitalism, no Industrial Revolution, thus perhaps no Anthropocene either.

Scholars who use the term Capitalocene emphasize the role of capitalism in the creation and worsening of the current ecological crisis. For them, ours is not the "Age of Man", it is the Age of Capital. As Moore and Patel state, "it's not just some natural human behavior but rather a specific interaction between humans and the biological and physical world that has brought us to this point" (Patel and Moore, 2017, p.17). To name this new geological era Capitalocene is to take "capitalism seriously, understanding it not just as an economic system but as a *way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of nature*" (Patel and Moore, 2017, p.14-15, emphasis added) To succeed, capitalism needs to transform humans and nonhumans into objects, preferably cheap ones that more quickly generate surplus and accumulation.

The idea of nature with capital N, something out there from which humans are hyper-separated, to use Valerie Plumwood's expression, coincides with European colonization and the beginning of capitalism. This idea of Nature included not only lands, rivers, fauna and flora, but also those viewed as subhumans, inferior, or primitives such as women, Indigenous peoples, and Blacks — who were seen as cheap resources and sources of free labor. Clearly, this notion of Anthropos does not refer to a homogenous group of humans, as colonization in



the past and today's ne[cr]oliberal policies make evident. Some lives still matter more than others.

The global implementation of late capitalism neoliberal policies, which promote free-market and the privatization of essential "goods" such as water and energy, as well as the dismantling of workers' rights, together with the cutting of public spending on health, housing, education, and public transportation have increased the precarity of those whose lives matter less than the interests of large corporations (which in the USA have the same legal rights of persons). That became glaringly evident by the COVID-19 pandemic, when companies made astronomical profits while almost four million lives were lost worldwide and the plight of populations already suffering from poverty, unemployment, systematic discrimination, racism, land conflicts, a lack of social assistance programs, and in some cases, war and forced migration, was exacerbated.

In this era of extreme inequality and discrimination, feminist theory and practice are essential tools for changing our anthropocentric, capitalist, and colonialist modes of thinking and behaving. Long before the consensus around a new geological era was formed, ecofeminists were questioning the hyper separation between Human and Nature (Plumwood) and addressing the impact of human activities on other species and environments. Feminists critiqued the idea of Nature as passive, inferior, and feminized for being anchored on a logic of hierarchical dualisms, and made connections between environmental problems and gender and racial justice. Environmental racist practices, such as the dumping of toxic industrial products, waste, and water contamination, disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, usually communities constituted by race, class, and gender minorities.

In the next section, I will examine *Altamira 2042*, a multimedia performance installation by Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha, that addresses the social, cultural, and environmental consequences of the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric power plant which diverted the course of the Xingu river, one of Amazon's principal tributaries in the Northern state of Pará. Cunha's piece is an example of a feminist performance that confronts the specter of ecological collapse.



Inaugurated on May 5, 2016, Belo Monte, located in the first Indigenous territory demarcated in Brazil, is the world's fourth-largest hydroelectric dam. To build it, the state forced the displacement of thousands of Indigenous communities and traditional populations. The project was conceived by the military dictatorial regime and dates from 1975. At the time, it was met with strong resistance from Indigenous and human rights groups, whose actions stopped the construction until 2003. During the military dictatorship the policy outlined for the Amazon was to "foster progress" in the region. That meant settling, promoting migration to occupy and develop the land as if it were unpopulated and unused — the Indigenous and traditional populations such as *ribeirinhos* ("river people") and *quilombolas* (descendants of freed slaves) were not considered as people. Thus the military government gave farmers land ownership, erected dams, and built the Transamazônica Highway, which cuts through thousands of kilometers of tropical forest, killing and displacing entire Indigenous nations in the process.

One of world's largest river basins, the Amazon has been coveted by various administrations and transnational corporations as a source of hydroelectric power. Over the years, the policies for conservation of Amazon's natural resources have not significantly differed from those of the military dictatorial regime (If anything, they have now dramatically worsened under Bolsonaro's government). Ironically, it was during the democratically elected administrations of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, both members of the Workers Party, that Belo Monte would finally come to fruition, despite various legal challenges from Indigenous nations, *ribeirinhos*, local and international environmental agencies, and the Public Prosecutor's Office, in a clear violation of the Indigenous rights guaranteed by the country's Constitution. All of the studies of the dam's environmental impact conducted in the last 30 years denounced the project that would devastate the Xingu ecosystem, one of the planet's richest and most diverse biomes - home to approximately 500 endemic fish species -, and displace thousands of people, destroying their livelihoods and traditions. Moreover, energy researchers noted that the dam's power would be inefficient due to the regional,



seasonal draught, when water levels are significantly reduced and part of the dam's turbines are stopped (Brum, 2016) .

The developmental and extractivist mindset that drives Brazil's energy and investment policies assumes that nature provides unlimited resources, and is geared toward the implementation of agribusiness, mining, and timber industries. Such practices expose a process of recolonization of nature and of Indigenous peoples encouraged by the state's neoliberal agenda. As Viveiros de Castro asserts, it is in fact a process of self-recolonization, in which the country intently revives its colonial legacy and policies to become a true plantation, i.e., “an exporter of primary products to the capitalist metropolises. We are in the same position we were in 1500. It is a commodity export colony” (Viveiros de Castro, 2019).

Belo Monte's dystopia, produced by capitalism's fixation on “progress” and growth is the subject of Cunha's performance installation *Altamira 2042*, which premiered in 2019 at Mostra Internacional de Teatro de São Paulo (MIT-SP) and has been performed in Brazil and abroad.

The work is the result of a long artistic research, and is part of a larger project called *Margins - On Rivers, Buiúnas and Fireflies*, during which Cunha and her collaborators embedded themselves in the town of Altamira, living with the survivors of the ecological crime that is Belo Monte. In the performance, the Xingu river figures as the witness of the Belo Monte disaster. The performance creates “a polyphony of beings, languages, sounds, and perspectives” of human and nonhuman beings who speak through techno-shamanic devices (sound-speakers and flash drives). (*Altamira 2042* program). The piece seeks “to displace humans from the center of the narrative, turning them into ears, and hear the voices of everything else that exists: the river witnesses, fireflies people, and the buiúna-women” (Cunha).

Before entering the performance space, each spectator answers a question: River or Street? (Rio ou Rua?) *Street* is what the locals call the city. Then, s/he is taken to a place inside a dark room. There are no chairs, only a few pillows on the floor. The performer carefully places in front of audience members a series of sound-speakers that randomly flash color lights. A soundscape of forest, river,



birds, insects, and frogs slowly fills the space. Darkness, colorful lights and sounds create a sensorial experience, a welcome break from the busy city outside. Cunha moves through the room, rearranging speakers, adjusting volumes, turning them on and off and continuously reconfiguring the space. Slowly, noises of machinery, chainsaws, cars, and construction dominates the soundscape, overwhelming the audience's sensorial experience. The street obliterates the river and the audience is reduced to its own poverty.

Following this opening, the performance is divided in three parts: *Dona Herondina*, the enchanted narrator of the buiúna-women (women artists from the margins, women who dwell at the margins as well as the bottom of the river, and women activists) has the body of a woman (the performer's body) and a head made of two sound speakers. The voice of this cybernetic being, a sympoietic figure, belongs to Dona Raimunda, whose family was evicted and whose house and belongings were burnt by Norte Energia S.A., the company that built the dam. As she recounts the story of the snake-woman, the spirit of the waters, images of the river are projected on the walls. Women have been at the forefront of the fight against Belo Monte, and Herondina/Raimunda is a woman warrior. She recalls other women activists who were murdered defending the forest, for whom there has been no justice. "I am the woods, the forest / The forest is alive like me," she says, evoking Tânia Stolze and Viveiros de Castro's concept of Amerindian perspectivism, which is central to the project.

Figure 1 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Photo: Nereu Jr.



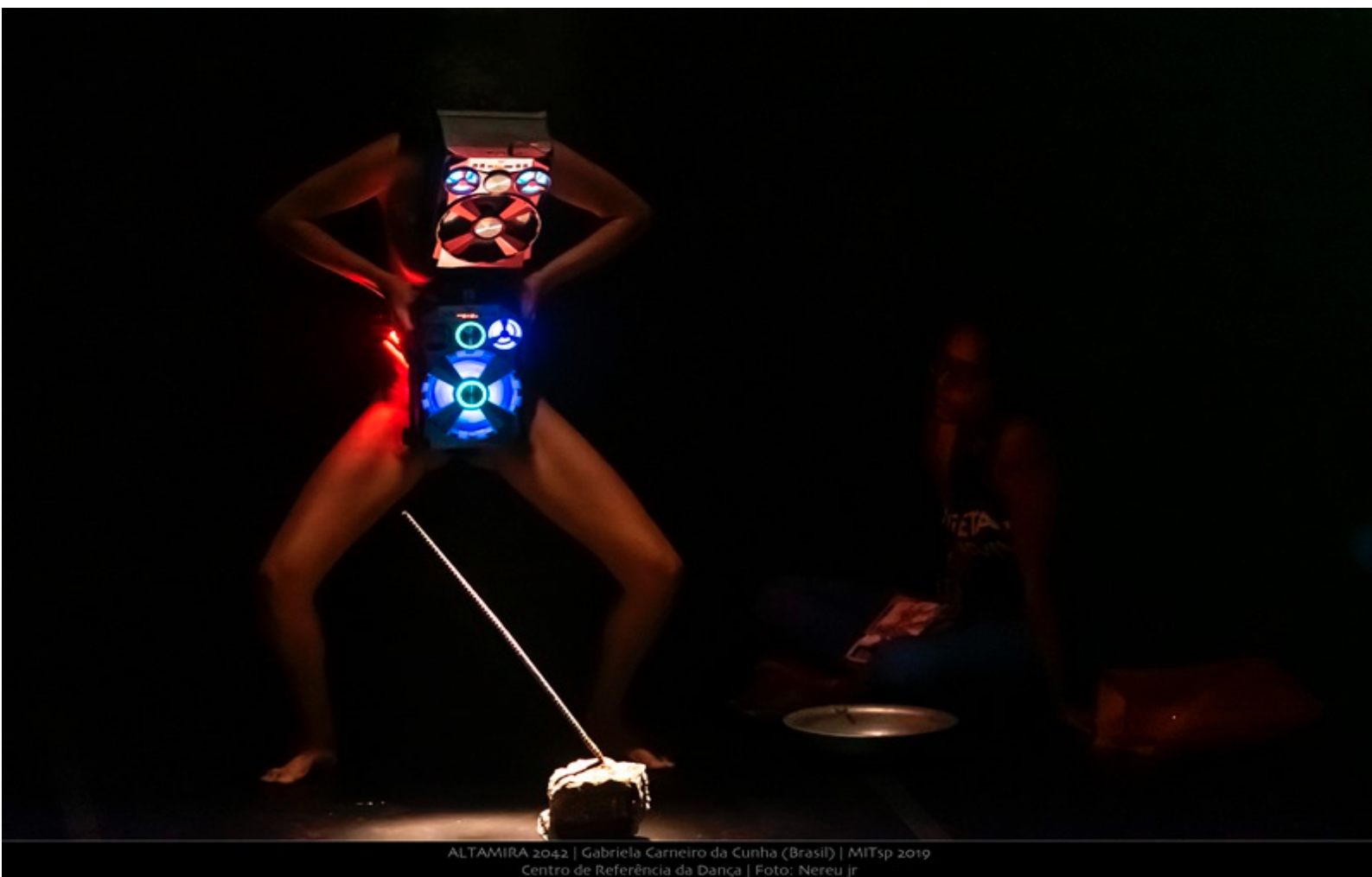
ALTAMIRA 2042 | Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha (Brasil) | MITsp 2019
Centro de Referência da Dança | Foto: Nereu jr

Contrarily to the Anthropos, the Amerindians (and most Indigenous people in the world) do not see themselves as different from nonhumans. They see themselves as beings not dissimilar to animals, minerals, and plants. They "share a conception of the world as composed of a multiplicity of points of view. Every being is a center of intentionality apprehending other beings according to their respective characteristics and powers" (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p.55, translation modified). In other words, for the Amerindians, all beings are people (but not *humans*), they share the same "soul." Animals perceive the world just like people do, but because their bodies are different, they perceive different things. This difference in perception is not a matter of physiology, since the body is a

"bundle of affects and capacities, and that is at the origin of perspectivism"
(Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p.73).

In the tale of the snake-woman, a young woman gives birth to a baby girl in the river, abandons her there, and bleeds to death. The baby turns into a river snake, and under the full moon, she becomes a young woman in search of sexual partners. Her curse will only end when she gives birth to a child. This part of the performance ends with a birth scene in which Herondina, the sound-woman, gives birth to a sound speaker-child. We witness a snake-becoming: with her body attached to a long trail of LED serpentine lights, this sympoietic techno-creature sings and performs a slow choreography of body and light.

Figure 2 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Photo: Nereu Jr.



Seu Quebra Barragem (Mx. Dam Breaker), the enchanted narrator of the witness-rivers, presides the second part of the performance. S/he is a Great Audiovisual Snake, another sympoietic being, and her body is a hybrid of the performer's own body and a sound speaker cum video projector head. I consider both Dona Herondina and Seu Quebra Barragens examples of what Haraway calls "naturalcultural assemblages" (Haraway, 2016 p.38), a sympoietic entanglement of critter and technology, a human-inhuman entity. Many voices speak through this figure: river dwellers expelled from the Xingu islands, the Araweté and Juruna nations, leaders of the *Xingu Vivo* movement, and the voices of the woods, the animals, the rain, and the Xingu river itself.

Figure 3 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Photo: Nereu Jr.



The enchanted narrator's tools are both high tech (image, sound stream, and text projections) and low tech (candle, hammer, and chisel), but her/his power derives from the collective body that takes part in the symbolic ritual of destroying the dam. If the climate crisis is a collective problem, it demands, as Klein notes, collective action. (Klein, 2019)

Entering a device that combines a keyboard, a neon structure in the shape of a light bulb, and long LED light trails, Seu Quebra Barragens projects images of a *curumim* (Indigenous child) listening to headphones. As the sounds change, the child's joy vanishes and he removes the headphones with a painful expression. We see images of areas flooded by the dam, dead trees, tractors, turbines, and police, images of "progress" in action. We see Altamira, a city of the living dead, of fishermen without fish, and Indigenous people without land, water, and nutritious food. We find ourselves at the epicenter of a global war between two worlds. The Amazon is the center of the world and the site of the final battle. We hear an old man's voice telling us that the Xingu river is dead. Because "it cannot speak, the river suffers in silence." But "if the river could speak it would cry."

Figure 4 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Photo: Nereu Jr.



ALTAMIRA 2042 | Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha (Brasil) | MITSp 2019
Centro de Referência da Dança | Foto: Nereu Jr.

The war of two worlds is the final part of the performance, called *Aliendigenous*. In it, we see the enchanted narrator of the firefly people, i.e., people in danger of extinction, but whose light still flickers. The narrator's body is composed of shamanic instruments like rattles and drums. If they are played in unison by all, the aliendigenous body will destroy the dam in the year 2042.

Figure 5 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Photo: Nereu Jr.



ALTAMIRA 2042 | Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha (Brasil) | MITSp 2019
Centro de Referência da Dança | Foto: Nereu Jr

This part begins like a bad sci-fi movie about an alien spaceship that lands on the Amazon river in 2015 carrying a group of people known as the Progressians. A sense of *dejà vu* sets in: have we not seen this movie in the 1500s? The



Progressians are "a pure people," whose only objective is to create deserts, a task that requires the extermination of all other people. Their weapon is the pen. With it, they can kill millions with one single stroke, without using atomic weapons. Their mythology is History. Images are now projected on spectators 'as well, enmeshed with their bodies. In contrast to the Progressians, the Aliendigenous are a mixed people, whose mission is to "amazonize" the world. Their tools are songs, dances, language, and dreams. An aliendigenous being represents addition, rather than subtraction: s/he is wind and spirit and fish and canoe, s/he is Terran, street, snail, and light. The question s/he faces is To be and To be, to be with others, akin to others.

From her/his keyboard cum lightbulb assemblage, the Aliendigenous types the story of the final war, which is projected by her/his video projector eyes. Later, s/he picks up the hammer and chisel and resumes the symbolic work of destroying the dam. The audience gradually joins her, creating a new and more powerful assemblage. The sounds of hammer and chisel becomes louder and louder, more rhythmic. Other audience members play rattles and drums. The performance slowly turns into a collective ritual guided by the performer/shaman. In the final scene, we see the image of a ruptured dam, followed by free flowing water.

It is possibly a dream, but we need to dream to effect change. In the Indigenous experience, dreams are not merely part of sleeping, rather they are "the disciplined exercise of deriving guidance for our actions in the waking world from the dreams that visit us in our slumber." (Krenak, 2020) Or, as Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa explains, "the dream is our way of learning" (Kopenawa and Albert, 2013, p.376).

In *Staying With The Trouble*, Haraway urges feminists to "exercise high leadership in imagination, theory, and action" (Haraway, p.102). For Cunha, the feminist artist must also learn how to dream. Her eyes and ears must die before she learns to see and hear other people and other places, something she learnt from Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa. She could then become like a shaman who teaches others to dream and see different beings, times, and realities (Cunha, Rios).

Figure 6 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Photo: Nereu Jr.



ALTAMIRA 2042 | Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha (Brasil) | MITsp 2019
Centro de Referência da Dança | Foto: Nereu Jr

Like the sympoietic beings, human-inhuman assemblages who defend the forest and the waters, we must learn to create new inter and cross-species relations, new alliances; we must open our eyes and ears to the polyphony of voices and beings, form a kinship with others and *think with* our Earth companions (Haraway). We must move humans from the center of the narrative, replacing a dualistic logic with a multiplicity of perspectives. Indigenous people can teach us “how to live better in a worse world” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014). After all, they are “end-of-the-world experts,” as Viveiros de Castro puts it. They had to learn how to live in a world invaded and devastated by white colonizers, and they have been

resisting domination for five centuries. We can learn from them how "to rethink our relationship with the material world" (Viveiros de Castro, 2014), lessons we must learn if we want to win the fight against disaster capitalism and colonialism and avoid an ecological catastrophe.



After all the sound speakers and lights are turned off and the music slowly subsides, only a candle light is left, which Cunha then blows out.

Figure 7 - Altamira 2042 - MITSp 2019. Foto: Nereu Jr.



ALTAMIRA 2042 | Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha (Brasil) | MITSp 2019
Centro de Referência da Dança | Foto: Nereu Jr



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