The Turtle and the Falling Sky: Yanomami Mimesis, F(r)iction, and Performance

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Turtles, Cars, and Falling Sky[1]

In mid-August 2019, it rained in the city of São Paulo. Dark waters fell from the sky. They had the smell of burnt wood. It was as if the sky poured ash-filled waters over the city. São Paulo is a city of many fumes. But the fumes this day, mixed with rain, came from afar. The clouds came from the Amazon. Trees were burning. Modernized napë (a Yanomami term for the nonindigenous majority of Brazil) people were setting fire to the forest. I remembered the book The Falling Sky, *by the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa and anthropologist Bruce Albert. It looked like the sky was falling. Not only the Yanomami sky, or the sky of the Amazon, but also the sky of São Paulo.*

I HAVE VERY LITTLE first-hand knowledge of the Yanomami. But *The Falling Sky* captured my imagination. As an anthropologist born in Brazil, my main field of research has been with sugarcane cutters. From the backs of trucks and in sugarcane fields I became accustomed to seeing ashes of burnt sugarcane leaves falling from the sky. In cities of the interior of São Paulo, the state, this was a common experience, several years into the twenty-first century. Now when seeing ashes from the Amazon falling on the city of São Paulo, memories of my experience with sugarcane cutters came back. Some of the families of women cutting cane, who spoke of themselves as daughters and granddaughters of Indian women "lassoed or hunted in the woods" (*laçadas ou caçadas no mato*), are also in my memories, and have been part of my relations for the last forty years.

Because of the everyday playful and stage-like behaviors of sugarcane cutters in Brazil—who impersonate multitudes of characters as a social pastime while working or going to work—I became interested in theater and the anthropology of performance. My reading of *The Falling Sky* challenged me to rethink the anthropology of performance from the perspective of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who discusses the conceptual imagination, or thought, of native cultures of the Amazon.[2] *The Falling Sky* also brought back to memory some of Victor Turner's insights into theater and performance as forms of healing.[3] The same falling sky I saw with the sugarcane cutters, I also witnessed in São Paulo, and read about in Kopenawa and Albert's book.

In 2019, I received an invitation to speak at an academic event scheduled for September, in Manaus: "Arcana 6: Decolonial Movements of the Stage and the Amazonian Imaginary—The Unstable Path of the Chariot to Justice."[4] Bringing together artists and researchers of the stage arts, anthropology, and other areas, the Arcana Meetings are designed to spark discussions regarding social and cultural imaginations. For each event, one or two cards from the major Arcana of the Tarot deck are selected as thought images. At this meeting, the chosen cards were the Chariot and Justice. While watching the ash-filled rain and thinking about the smoking car traffic of São Paulo, I reached for *The Falling Sky* on my bookshelf. I also observed the image of the Chariot card—a scene with two horses dragging a type of box mounted on two wheels and covered by a canopy, with a crowned man holding a scepter in his right hand. In Portuguese the word for chariot is *carro*, which is also the word for car. I asked myself, what would a Yanomami car be like?

The first edition of *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* was published in 2013, in England and the United States. The Portuguese language translation came out in Brazil, in 2015, as *A queda do céu: palavras de um xamã yanomami*. This was the version that I first read in 2019.[5]

The book consists of the thoughts and narratives of shaman Davi Kopenawa, whose words were collected and transcribed by the anthropologist Bruce Albert. The two have known each other since 1978, when Albert began his second phase of ethnography among the Yanomami. Kopenawa's shamanic initiation occurred in the 1980s, under the guidance of his father-in-law, a renowned shaman. The book project came about at the request of Kopenawa, who wanted Albert to write down his words. Recordings which became the basis for various versions of the manuscript began in late 1989, and continued until the early years of the twenty-first century.

Mimesis, Performance, and Amerindian Thought in the Amazon

When Kopenawa saw cars for the first time in Manaus, he asked himself, "What could that be? Were they made like big iron turtles?"[6] He saw the car as a living being, similar to a turtle. According to the Yanomami and other forest people of the Amazon, animals are also human. Would a car also be made like a human being? He saw a subject, not an object. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in Western cosmology, a point of view creates an object, while in Amerindian cosmology, a point of view creates or activates a subject, someone who is similar to and as human as oneself.[7] An image of likeness or, better, similarity. In *The Falling Sky*, the Yanomami capacity to produce and recognize similarities, while transforming and creating differences, is striking. So also is the portrait of the napë as a people who are incapable of seeing the forest as "the flesh and skin of our earth."[8]

In my interpretation of *The Falling Sky*, I have found an interesting juncture in the thoughts of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Amerindian conceptual imagination in the Amazon), Walter Benjamin (creative mimesis as a capacity to produce and recognize similarities as we become other), and Richard Schechner and Victor Turner (anthropology of performance). According to napë—non-indigenous—thought, what is common to all things and living beings is nature. We all have bodies, some of which have souls and are human, others of which are not. In Yanomami thought, what is common to all beings and things is humanity. Bodies create difference. In this sense, on this earth, for the Yanomami—a term which means human—we are all Yanomami.

In cities, Kopenawa searches for the human in things: that which makes things dance, burst into song, come to life. Notable is the Yanomami capacity to recognize and create similarities and connections between bodies and things, revealing the human that may flash from below. Even in cars, Kopenawa sought a connection.

In the forest, napë incapacity to recognize and create the human, to become similar to others, while transforming ourselves, leads to destruction. The trail of the napë is marked by death and disease, and the killing of the forest. Much of this destruction has to do with producing commodities such as rubber, tin, iron, and fuel for cars, a process of turning life—for in Yanomami thought, all these are alive—into things, or objects, and forgetting how they are part of the living. Recall that Kopenawa sought the human in cars, seeing them possibly as turtles. Turtles, like other animals, plants, and things, are human underneath their bodies.

The creative act of bringing things to life, and revealing the human in all things, while becoming other and remaking one's body, is part of Yanomami performance, as seen in Kopenawa's narratives of the arrival of the *xapiri*, or forest spirits. In napë thinking, bodies are a given, already there. In Yanomami thought, bodies are made—created, like masks. They are body-masks, one might say. As Viveiros de Castro suggests, in regard to Amerindian thought of the Amazon, bodies are like the masks and equipment used by underwater divers, through which comes the breath of life.[9] Body-masks give access to multiple and different universes.

Richard Schechner has called attention to the relationship between bodies and masks, suggesting that some of the most electrifying moments in performance occur when bodies are revealed beneath masks.[10] I describe this process as a type of f(r)iction, with the R between parentheses, a striking of sparks, highlighting the fictive (from *fictio*, to fabricate or make) dimensions of reality revealed in performance.

In napë performance, f(r)iction occurs between bodies and masks. For the napë, perhaps one can speak of person-masks, or masks as *personae*: when wearing a mask, one impersonates. In Amerindian conceptual imagination of the Amazon, bodies are the masks: when wearing a mask, one embodies. Yanomami performance reveals the human beneath bodies, or body-masks. In Yanomami f(r)iction, what is underneath body-masks is revealed.

Yanomami xapiri performance is a form of creative mimesis, of becoming other and bringing to life the human similarity of others.[11] In shamanic experience this involves becoming, activating, many other subjects and viewpoints, or bodies at risk of disappearing or being forgotten. In Yanomami performance, an energy field, or what I like to think of as a mimetic circuit, is formed between the Yanomami and the xapiri spirits of the forest. As the Yanomami activate the almost countless forms of xapiri, these forest spirits, created in performance, in turn activate the Yanomami in their everyday social and political struggles in forests and in cities.

In this essay, I will be discussing Kopenawa's narratives relating to cities, forests, and xapiri performances. My final remarks will have to do with processes of healing for napë and Amerindian people.

Cities and Wheels

Cities

In cities, Kopenawa is appalled by the lifelessness of things. Even so, he looks for the human, the living spirit that lies dormant or buried underneath, or is in danger of disappearing and being forgotten.

In Manaus, when seeing a car for the first time, Kopenawa sees a turtle. As an image of similarity, in a f(r)iction-like way, the turtle image rubs against that of the car. Could a car be a type of forest creature? Could it be an animal with wheels and an iron shell? A nonhuman being that is actually human, like a turtle? Kopenawa seeks the forgotten reality lying beneath the skins of those who turn into merchandise—their condition as subjects or living beings.

Years later, in defense of the forest, Kopenawa visited other cities. Near London, at Stonehenge, he saw a circle of huge blocks of stone rising from the ground.[12] He saw them as traces of ancestors who died long ago, "the remains of abandoned old gardens in the forest."[13] But, the napë could not recognize them. They had lost the stones' words. They merely looked at the stones for a long time.

In Paris, the Eiffel Tower appeared to Kopenawa as a large antenna covered with lightning vines. It looked like the image of the houses of the xapiri, the spirits of the forest, rivers, and animals. Yet, it seemed lifeless, without resonance. If it were alive, its occupants would be singing, and the light would carry the songs.[14]

In museums, he recognized various items as traces of ancestors of forest people. But, the ghosts of their owners were imprisoned in them. Their words, like those of the stones that he had seen near London, were forgotten. Their images, according to Kopenawa, "can no longer dance for us."[15]

In New York, Kopenawa's attentions were directed toward the edges of the city, its ruins, and forgotten people and places. In a dream, he saw "the sky catch fire with the heat from the factories' smoke. The thunders, the lightning beings, and the human ghosts who live on its back were caught in huge flames. Then the burning sky began crashing down to earth."[16] The sky of New York is similar to that of the Amazon forest. It is falling.

In cities and forests, Kopenawa is appalled by the incapacity of the napë people to see and hear the human in things, or to connect with others, becoming similar to them, while we become other, as part of the living.

Wheels

In Manaus, Kopenawa stared at the wheels of the cars. He was intrigued. When observed from the top of trees or from the sky, Yanomami villages are similar to wheels. Yanomami houses are circular, and so are their baskets, and some of their dances. Dancers whirl like wheels. The wheels of these turtle-like beings are covered with live material which comes from rubber trees of the forest. Iron and tin drawn from the entrails and bloodlines of the forest are used to make cars. As he fixed his eyes on the wheels, was Kopenawa recognizing living things and creatures that he already knew in the forest?

The headlights of cars, when turned on at night, were like lightning bolts of the spirits of the forest; they were similar to the lights of the sparkling vines of xapiri houses during celebrations. In dreams Kopenawa saw these lights.

Forest

> *The Yanomami and the forest in which they live were created by Omama, the napë by his brother, Yoasi.*
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> *In* The Falling Sky *it is written: "It was Omama who created the land and the forest, the wind that shakes its leaves, and the rivers whose waters we drink. It is he who gave us life and made us many."*[17] *And later:"The forest is the flesh and skin of our earth."*[18]
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> *As I read this book, as ash-filled rain fell in São Paulo, a startling and self-revealing image of napë people emerged. Not believing the forest is alive; nor believing it feels pain, as humans do; unable to hear its laments, or perceive its respiration, or feel its breath; the napë rip out the floor of the forest. Like cannibal specters they devour it, then are haunted by dark rain, and by the fumes that they themselves produce in cities and in the forest. As sons and daughters of Yoasi, the brother of Omama, the napë leave traces of death wherever they go.*

Vulcan, Cars, and Commodities

The automobile industry is intimately associated with the colonization of the Amazon. In 1839, Charles Goodyear discovered the process of vulcanization: with the addition of sulfur to crude rubber at high temperature, rubber becomes more elastic and resistant. By this means, latex from age-old tropical forests can be used for belts and tires. Vulcanization gives impulsion to the automobile and machine industries of the Northern Hemisphere.

In Roman mythology, Vulcan is the god of fire, a destructive yet life-giving god. In 2019, as I looked at the image of the Chariot, I saw a living car made of horses, wheels, a canopy, and a man holding a scepter—all of whom constituted the chariot or car. The man was not simply riding in a car, he was part of it, along with the horses, wheels, canopy, and scepter. In order to see the human and the living in creatures and things, Kopenawa says, a person needs to know how to dream. The napë have forgotten how to dream. Yet, they dream of cars and other commodities. In dreams of progress and vulcanization, cars, automobiles, and other commodities shine as dream images. Apollo, Osiris, Indra, Phaethon, Electra, Eos, Mercury, Mazda, Minotaur, and Jaguar are some of the model names of modern cars. Commodities assume the names of gods and mythic creatures, and take their places as objects of devotion. When Kopenawa sees a car, he calls it an iron turtle, and imagines a creature with a body that is human underneath. The napë give names of mythic beings to their cars, but see them as objects and commodities nonetheless.

Roads and Fumes

The Yawari were the first Yanomami to see napë people opening a road in the forest—the Perimetral Norte highway (BR-210), parallel to the frontier between Brazil and Venezuela. With giant machines, napë people ripped the floor of the forest, knocking down trees, exploding mounds and hilltops, and scaring away game.

In the 1970s, the military regime developed various geopolitical projects for occupying the Amazon, such as the "National Integration Plan," the "Polamazônia Project," the "RADAM Project," the "Perimetral Norte highway," and the "Trans-Amazonian highway,"[19] Seeing the arrival of napë people in the Amazon forest, Davi Kopenawa told himself: "The white people tear up the forest floor.… Now will the epidemic fumes from their machines and bombs finally kill all of us?"[20] Many Yanomami died. Napë people went up the rivers, taking diseases: measles, flu, malaria, tuberculosis, whooping cough—and, now, COVID-19. Kopenawa knew the napë in dreams, he said. In mourning for the death of family members and neighbors, his thoughts were overcome with rage. "This white people's path is truly evil! The *xarawari* epidemic beings follow their machines and trucks on it. Will their hunger for human flesh really make all the rest of us die, one after another?"[21]

Savagery, Terror

The Yanomami are in danger of extermination. In 1993, the Haximu massacre drew international attention.[22] Assassinations occurred on the Alto Orinoco.

There was the massacre of the Inhambuaçu River. Garimpeiros (illegal gold prospectors) mutilated and dismembered the bodies of their victims, which included women, children, and elders.

Yet, images of the savagery created by napë people are projected onto the Yanomami and other forest people. Among them are images of violence and wildness such as one finds in the book *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, published in 1968 by the North American anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon.[23] In *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig discusses how, in the Putumayo region of the Colombian Amazon, at the height of rubber extraction, images of savagery are imitated by white colonizers in their relations with Amerindian people on whom such images are projected by the same colonizers.[24] Blaming the victim, the napë imitate their own projections.

Xapiri

What would a Yanomami car be like? In his first encounter with a car, Kopenawa saw a creature similar to a turtle. After his initiation as a shaman, he saw even more powerful images, some of which flash from the memory of seeing a car with headlights for the first time in Manaus. What would a Yanomami shamanic car be like? And how would it be made?

Arrival

In August 2019, while thinking of the Arcana Meeting to which I had been invited, I looked closely at the Chariot card of the Tarot, which would be serving as a focus of inspiration. In a quick inquiry into the origins of that image, I found a biblical (and cabalistic) source in Ezekiel (1:1-28): the "chariot of Yahweh" (in Portuguese, *carro de Iahweh*), an impressive apparition consisting of winds, fires, lights, thunderstorms, swirling waters, wheels within wheels moving in all directions, and a human being with multiple faces of animals coming and going like lightning.

In *The Falling Sky*, I also encountered a thunderous and radiant image: the arrival of the xapiri.

> "These are the paths our shaman elders opened for them in the past. The *xapiri* travel on them making a loud noise, impetuously cutting everything up as they pass. The ground flies into pieces and the trees come crashing down behind them. Their march's force and violence make our stomachs drop with fear! Yet despite this terrible din, we begin to hear their approaching clamor and, more and more clearly, the melodious sound of their voices. Then we can distinguish the magnificent songs of the *yõrixiama* thrush, the *ayokora* cacique, and

> the *sitipari si* birds. Finally, the *xapiri* reveal themselves to our terrified eyes. They brandish huge sabers projecting flashes of light in every direction, as if they were waving mirrors around them. They advance in blinding light, like that of *car headlights* [emphasis mine] in the night."[25]

Notice the "car headlights in the night." The shamanic vision includes spirits of rivers, land, and forest, in all their impressive variety. In the above description, songs of birds are highlighted. In other accounts there are bees, wasps, stingrays, electric eels, porpoises, anacondas, alligators, scorpions, beetles, ants, snakes, peccaries, giant armadillos, anteaters, jaguars, vultures, and sloths.[26] Great trees gather momentum and join forces with turbulent waters, winds, and storms. But, images from the worlds of napë people are also mobilized. Images of car headlights of Manaus, sparkling vines of the Eiffel Tower, and airplanes flying over the forest appear in different narratives. In one account, Kopenawa speaks of Omama's airplane taking away the fumes of the garimpeiros, dragging them by the hair.[27]

Images that may evoke the entrance of napë people in the forest are also mobilized. The xapiri arrive "making a loud noise, impetuously cutting everything up as they pass," But, the xapiri are not invaders; they are forest spirits. Among them are the spirits of windstorms, *Yariporari*, and of chaos, *Xiwirapo* "The ground flies into pieces and the trees come crashing down behind them." As a result of shamanic action, the forest opens up pathways for the xapiri. More and more clearly can be heard "the melodious sound of their voices" and their "magnificent songs." As songs rise from noise, cosmos emerges from chaos.

The xapiri arrive with music and dance. They awaken the beings of the forest, transforming movement into dance, and noises into marvelous sounds. The forest manifests itself in an impressive array of sound, light, and movement. The xapiri arrive as invited guests to a celebration, a gathering of mobile, multiple, even countless viewpoints—bodies—in performance.

According to Richard Schechner, performance consists of restored behavior. Just as moviemaking involves the putting together, or montage, of strips of film, performance involves the restoration of strips of behavior.[28] At the arrival of the xapiri, fragments or strips of Yanomami behavior are restored. Also, by mimesis, becoming similar to others, behaviors of other forest beings are restored, producing a stunning and ever-changing variety of gestures, sounds, and images. In performance, the forest is recreated in multifarious and kaleidoscopic montage.

We recall that in napë performance, experience is heightened and f(r)iction is produced between masks and bodies, bringing to light the fictive dimensions

of reality, when bodies are revealed beneath masks or *personae*. Such moments occur in Amerindian cosmologies in symmetrically inverted ways that reveal subjects found beneath bodies, which are themselves seen as masks. In f(r) iction of bodies, or body-masks, living beings play and are reborn. By mimetic action, the capacity to become other, and similar to others, Amerindian performances activate subjects of the forest. The arrival of the xapiri, which recreates forest beings in a performance of their bodies, or viewpoints, can be seen as a manifestation of their deeper and sometimes forgotten selves: they are human beings, children of Omama. Shamans in performance become other, as human revelations of forest beings.

Yanomami shamanic action opens the way for beings to manifest. As Kopenawa told a *rezador* ("prayer-maker"), "we become xapiri ourselves drinking the *yãkoana*."[29] By means of the psychotropic yãkoana powder, made from the yãkoana tree for drinking or sniffing, the Yanomami are able to see and hear the spirits of the forest. As they sing and dance with the xapiri, entering into a sphere beyond quotidian reality, the Yanomami are transformed. Through shamanic action, a deeper and human reality of the spirits is revealed.

The shaman is transformed into xapiri. However, the variety of xapiri is as great as that of the forest beings. Thus, the shaman activates forest spirits, without becoming any one of them specifically. Being none, the shaman is able to be all of them. One is struck by this negative capability, the manner in which an absence of being is mobilized, so as to become all beings. In velocity the shaman moves in multiple directions, as a liminal being capable of activating the spirits of multiple masks or bodies of the forest. The experience of a shaman in performance, as "not me and not *not* me (emphasis added)" at the same time, as discussed by Schechner, is suggestive.[30] In this regard, one calls attention to the primacy of the negative (the "not"), or double negative ("not not"), the capacity to move between different viewpoints, or the lived places of things (*lugar vivido das coisas*), without being limited by any one of them in particular.[31] In proposing the idea of a negative capability, the poet Keats said that Shakespeare, having the capacity to become all characters, was none himself. If he were to have a personality, he would not be able to become all the personalities that he had the capacity to become.[32] In the Amerindian case, if the shaman were to have only one body, or viewpoint, he would not be able to become all of the other bodies, body-masks, or viewpoints, of the beings that he is capable of becoming.

Mimetic Circuit

As a result of shamanic action, there emerges a field of energy, which I liken to a mimetic circuit. Yanomami shamans activate spirits of rivers, land, and forest,

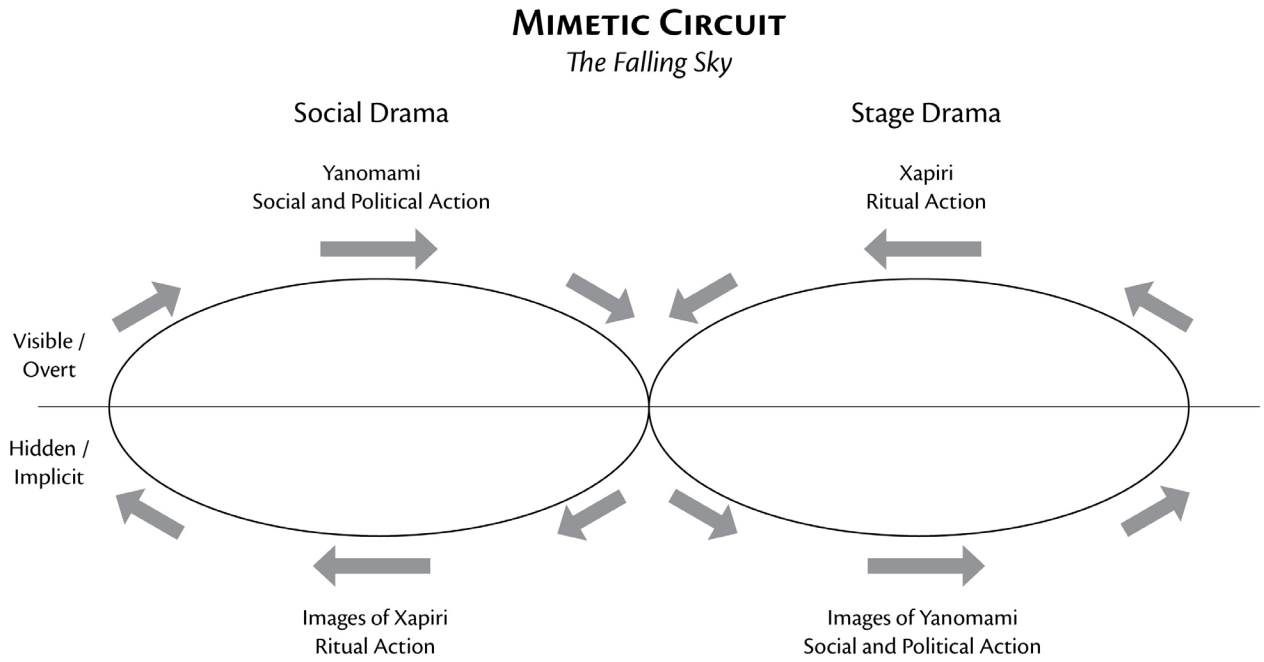
which become similar to Yanomami, and reveal themselves as human. At the same time, in the reverse or looping movement of the circuit, the xapiri that are mobilized by shamans activate the Yanomami, who become similar to these spirit beings, particularly in their efforts to protect the forest.

Similarities between actions of the Yanomami and of the xapiri spirits are remarkable. Activated by shamans, *xapiri* spirits go into battle against the *xawarari* epidemic beings, introduced by garimpeiros, the illegal gold prospectors:

> "The wasp spirits sting these man-eaters with their poisoned spears while the caiman spirits strike them with their heavy machetes. The aggressive *xaki* and *pari* bee spirits slash them while the *waroma* snake spirits pierce them. A great number of *ōeōeri* and *aiamori* warrior spirits rush to riddle them with their arrows. The anteater and giant armadillo spirits wound them with their sharp knives. The vulture spirits tear them apart. The images of the evil beings of the anaconda and of the master of cotton, *Xinarumari*, seize them to choke them and skin them alive. The big *aro kohi* and *masihanari kohi* tree spirits crush them with the help of the stone spirit *Maamari*. The spirits of the *remoremo moxi* bee, the *hōra* beetle, and the storm wind *Yariporari* tie the hair of their fumes to Omama's airplane to drag them into the far-off places from which they came."[33]

The bravery exhibited by xapiri is also shown, in a similar way, by Yanomami in defense of the forest. With knives, machetes, and arrows, Yanomami warriors resist the garimpeiros armed with rifles and bombs. In this way they protect the forest against evils created by the napë: pollution, disease, deforestation, and death. In rage caused by the assassination of four great Yanomami men, Davi Kopenawa confronted garimpeiros for the first time. That is how he acquired his name. After drinking the powder which shamans extract from the yãkoana *hi* tree, he saw the spirits of *kopena* wasps descend. On the occasion, the spirits told him: "We are by your side and will protect you. This is why you will take this name, Kopenawa!"[34] The name evokes the spirits of the kopena wasps.

As a way of speaking of relations between the Yanomami and xapiri spirits, which I have described as a mimetic circuit, I would like to present the figure on the following page. The inspiration comes from Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's *infinity loop* model[35]—the sign of infinity crossed by a straight line, showing how aesthetic or stage dramas interact with social dramas. In Schechner's model, the left oval has to do with social drama, the right with aesthetic drama. In Turner's model, the left also refers to social drama, the right to stage drama (equivalent to the aesthetic). This model has been used by anthropologists, art critics, and activists to analyze the way the arts are often used



Source: The figure represents the author's own elaboration of the infinity loop model created by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner.

to engage political issues in subtle and subversive ways, especially in contexts where direct political expression may be repressed by governments.

In my model, I have kept the same type of division, taking xapiri ritual as a type of stage drama. I have also kept the horizontal line. Yanomami social and political action that appears as the visible dimension of social drama (top left) reappears as hidden or implicit images of xapiri ritual action (bottom right); and xapiri ritual action that appears as the visible dimension of ritual (or stage) drama (top right) reappears as hidden or implicit images of Yanomami social and political action (bottom left).

Social and political action of the Yanomami now becomes a mirror held up to xapiri ritual, and, at the same time, xapiri ritual action creates mirror images that mobilize the Yanomami. In performing their lives, they become protagonists in living social drama. According to Victor Turner, "neither mutual mirroring, life by art, art by life, is exact, for each is not a planar mirror but a matricial mirror; at each exchange something new is added and something old is lost or discarded."[36] Turner also uses the notion of "magic mirrors," highlighting the creative action involved in production of images in both social and stage dramas. It is not that ritual or stage art imitates life, and life imitates art, but that one influences the other by becoming similar. In a sense, in shamanic ritual, Yanomami become xapiri, or, more precisely, Yanomami-xapiri; and xa-

piri, in Yanomami social and political action (or, one might say, cosmological political action), become Yanomami, or, better, xapiri-Yanomami.[37]

In regard to the use of the mirror metaphor, recall that Kopenawa, when speaking of the arrival of the xapiri, also refers to mirror images, describing how the forest spirits "brandish huge sabers projecting flashes of light in every direction, as if they were waving *mirrors* around them" (emphasis mine).[38] Kopenawa also tells of how the xapiri begin their presentation "in the *mirror* of the central plaza" (emphasis mine).[39]

In moments of danger, as Yanomami act to protect the forest, images of forest beings, including Yanomami, that have disappeared or are in danger of disappearing may emerge from hidden (perhaps unconscious or preconscious) regions of social drama. Such images flash in the form of xapiri spirits that, in turn, become characters in ritual dramas, acting to protect the forest. As such, they affect Yanomami social and political action. While xapiri may be seen to be similar to Yanomami as living and human spirits of the forest, Yanomami become similar to xapiri spirits in cosmopolitical struggles to protect forest, land, and rivers.

Being similar to living and human beings that have disappeared or are in danger of disappearing, xapiri enter into relations, here and now, with Yanomami who become similar to the xapiri. Shamanic action opening the way for arrival of the xapiri loops back with the force of an energized field composed of Yanomami and xapiri spirits renewing the Yanomami in their struggle to protect the forest.

In research in Piracicaba, Brazil, carried out during the 1990s, I observed the ritual action of a local artisan known as "Elijah of the dolls," who populated the banks of the Piracicaba River with many artisan dolls ("when they set fire to five, I put ten in their place"). I found the ritual action returnedwith the force of a mimetic field formed by bank dwellers and dolls, revitalizing dwellers in their determination not to be displaced from Riverbank Street, and renewing the threads of reciprocity from which the social life and relations with the river are woven. Artisan dolls, seen by the artisan and his neighbors as similar to ancestral riverbank dwellers, enter into relationship with the people living on the banks of the river, who become similar to the dolls. The gesture invigorates the riverbank dwellers in their determination not to be removed from their homes with images of Amerindian *evuevi* "river people" of the past who made their homes and fished there. They give expression to and interact with the present moment of danger, in which dwellers are threatened by a city government project—"reconquest of the riverbanks"—based in *bandeirante* (Indian slave-hunter) imagery.[40]

In both cases involving Yanomami and Piracicaba riverbank dwellers, relationships are formed between the living and the dead, past and present. The xapiri evoke ancestral beings. Manifesting a presence of absence, they are charged with energies of the dead and the living that erupt from hidden, unconscious dimensions of social and ritual dramas.

Theater, Healing, and Shamanic Initiation

By means of Yanomami shamans, pathways are opened for xapiri spirits, protectors of the forest. Drinking powder of the yãkoana tree, shamans receive the force that comes from the forest and trees—the force of yãkoana. They become similar to forest trees.

Initiation

As part of his initiation as a shaman, Davi Kopenawa began to drink yãkoana. His father-in-law, a renowned shaman, blew a large amount of the yãkoana into Kopenawa's nostrils. "Then suddenly," Kopenawa says, "its image, *Yãkoanari*, violently struck me on the back of the neck and sent me backward onto the ground. I instantly lost consciousness and remained sprawled on the house's central plaza in a ghost state. This lasted a very long time. The yãkoana had really made me die!"[41] Kopenawa practically stopped eating. He became gaunt with hunger; his ribs stuck out. "You cannot see the xapiri and become a shaman by dozing with your stomach full of game and manioc."[42] Spirits are flower-nectar drinkers. One must turn into spirit, becoming a newborn, a baby, a child.[43]

Children especially, as Walter Benjamin knew, have the gift of mimesis. Born again as a child, the shaman not only becomes other, but acquires the capability *to* other, so as to become many others. Children play not only at being warriors, shamans, potters, hunters, and gatherers, but also bees, sloths, jaguars, windstorms, cars, and airplanes.

After spending several nights in a ghost state, the xapiri start to arrive. "Their troop descended from the edges of the sky, carried by a multitude of glimmering paths that swayed in the air. They were as fast as planes and kicked up a powerful wind. This vast distance was nothing for them. They rushed in without interruption, countless, coming from every direction like television images."[44]

The body is dismembered. "After they cut me up," Kopenawa says, "the xapiri quickly escaped with the different parts of my body they had just sliced off and flew far from our forest, far beyond the land of the white people. I

had lost consciousness, and it was my image they dismembered while my skin stayed on the ground. They flew off on one side with my torso and on the other with my back and legs. They carried my head off in one direction and my tongue in another."[45] Initiation has to do with the shattering of a point of view, or of a specific body. The shattering experience is a prelude to restoring strips of behavior, and, particularly, to restoring bodies or body-masks in multiple, surprising, and appalling ways.

> "Later, the *xapiri* came to reassemble the segments of my body, which they had dismembered. They put my skull and torso where the lower part of my body goes, and they put that part where my arms and head go. It is true! They put me back together upside down, placing my rear where my face was and my mouth where my anus was!"[46]

Theater and Healing

Dismemberment of bodies, *sparagmos*, as found in Dyonisian theater, is enacted in various traditions of theater and ritual. As shown by Victor Turner, it is associated with liminal experiences of "tomb and womb," death and rebirth.[47] Turner also suggests that there is a deep affinity between theater and healing rites.[48]

In a quest for a cure for the collective body, Antonin Artaud calls for a theater in which masks are removed.[49] As seen before, in regard to my notion of f(r)iction, some of the most electrifying moments in performance occur when, beneath masks, in a flash, are revealed the bodies of actresses and actors. But in Yanomami and Amerindian performance, bodies are the masks. The healing process occurs when, beneath bodies or body-masks, the human and living spirit is revealed.

From dismemberment or brokenness of bodies, as made known in shamanic experience, innumerable bodies in extraordinary variety can be made. Through surprising forms of body-making and the art of becoming similar to others, the Yanomami create connections and activate the underlying human spirit in human and so-called nonhuman beings alike.

No longer able to communicate with the universe, or connect with the world in which they are born, modernized napë people become a danger to themselves. In the attempt to dominate nature, from which they have set themselves apart, they come under the dominion of the forces that they themselves have created and unleashed. In a fragment called "To the planetarium," Walter Benjamin suggests that "nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods." It is a dangerous error, says Benjamin, to consider

this experience as irrelevant.[50] Will the napë, in this moment of danger, be able to learn from the Yanomami, seeing and hearing the spirits of the forest, and participating in a living cosmos?

In Benjamin's words, printed on skins of paper made from the substance of forest trees that are being slashed and burned in unprecedented numbers, does one hear sounds of other words spoken in different places and times? Do they resound, as Davi Kopenawa might say, with echoes from the words of Omama? The Yanomami shaman sounds the alert: everywhere we turn there are signs of falling sky. The forest is on fire. Whether in cities or woodlands, we are engulfed by fumes. Benjamin suggests that the question before us has to do with mastery not of nature but of the relationship between nature and the human. We forget that we ourselves and our bodies are part of the nature that we would subjugate. Amerindian peoples might say: we forget that the forest and so-called nonhuman creatures that we would subjugate are actually human underneath.

• • •

In cities and forests, Davi Kopenawa sees signs of the "falling sky," As forests burn throughout the western United States and around the world, some napë people, including scholars such as Isabelle Stengers, have heard and sounded the alarm: we "live in catastrophic times."[51] In such circumstances, it is not enough to preserve the Amazon or other parts of the planet, while continuing to see them as natural resources that fuel napë industry and progress, or as assets that guarantee human domination over nature. The irony is that in our attempt to dominate nature, so as to assure napë well-being on earth, napë modernized people have themselves become endangered species. But, as Stengers has said, the living planet, Gaia herself, is not threatened. Although a considerable number of species may be swept away, many others, such as the microorganisms, "will effectively continue to participate in Gaia's regime of existence, that of a living planet."[52]

In the Yanomami xapiri enactment of wasp spirits attacking xawarari epidemic (and pandemic) beings introduced by illegal gold prospectors, it may be clear to napë readers that the prospectors—whether legal or illegal—are bound to win. What would it take for wasp spirits to win? That is a hard question. The napë themselves may well be playing a losing and catastrophic game.

Perhaps Gaia has her rites of passage. Indeed, it may be that Kopenawa's story has less to do with shamanic rites of initiation than with the rites of Gaia, showing not only how a Yanomami shaman becomes similar to the kopena

wasp, but how wasps, underneath their bodies or masks, are deeply Yanomami, or human.

Finally, let us note that, in Amerindian fashion, Antonin Artaud became increasingly aware of bodies as masks. In his writings on the Land of the Tarahumaras, even the mountains and rocks cry out as living beings.[53] Had Artaud made a journey to the forests of the Yanomami, he would have been impressed by the art of seeing the humanness within a turtle, even an iron turtle, and further, by the art of body-making, including not only electric but also living cars, such as the xapiri with headlights. Had he been around to attend the Arcana Meeting in Manaus, he would certainly have appreciated the animated car of the Tarot.

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Notes

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2. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2002), 373.
3. Victor W. Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey and drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience", in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds., *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1986), 40-41.
4. I am thankful for the invitation made to me by Alexandre Nunes (UFG), Luciana Lyra (UERJ), Robson Haderchpek (UFRN), and Verônica Fabrini (UNICAMP). I also thank Luiz Davi Vieira Gonçalves (UEA), who does research with the Yanomami, and was one of the main organizers of the Manaus event.
5. The French version, *La chute du ciel: paroles d'um chaman yanomami*, was published in 2010.
6. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans.

Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 216.

7. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *A inconstância da alma selvagem* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2002), 373.
8. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 27.
9. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *A inconstância da alma selvagem* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2002), 394.
10. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 6-8.
11. The notion of mimesis, as a creative capacity to other, and to produce and recognize similarities, is developed by Walter Benjamin. See the chapters "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 694-698, 720-722. Assuming a Benjaminian perspective, Michael Taussig speaks of mimesis as a capacity to other. See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).
12. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 317.
13. Ibid., 317.
14. Ibid., 344.
15. Ibid., 345.
16. Ibid., 350-351.
17. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Cambridge, MA: The Belkap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 27.
18. Ibid., 283.
19. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *A queda do céu: palavras de um xamã yanomami* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018), 561.
20. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 234.
21. Ibid., 235.
22. Ibid., 476-487.
23. Napoleon Chagnon, *Yanamamö: The Fierce People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).
24. Michael Taussig, *Xamanismo, colonialismo e o homem selvagem: um estudo sobre o terror e a cura* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987).
25. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 101.
26. Ibid., 262.
27. Ibid., 294.
28. Richard Schechner, "Restoration of Behavior", in *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1985), 35-116. Schechner is well known for creating the concept of restored behavior.
29. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 277.
30. Richard Schechner, "Points of Contact between Anthropological and Theatrical Thought," in *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1985), 3-34.
31. Schechner's idea is inspired by *neti, neti* ("not this, not that") formulations of Vedic Hinduism. John Dawsey and Richard Schechner, "Anthropology in Performance: Interview with Richard Schechner," *GIS – Gesture, Image, Sound – Anthropology Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 2018): 361-419.
32. See Keat's letter to Richard Woodhouse, sent on October 27, 1818. John Keats, *Letters of*

John Keats, ed. M. B. Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935).
33. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 293-294.
34. Ibid., 19.
35. See Richard Schechner, "Selective Inattention," in *Performance Theory* (187-206), by Richard Schechner (New York and London, Routledge, 1988), 190; Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 300.
36. Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 301.
37. Note the interesting parallels in the use of "cosmic mirror" by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (an indigenous Tibetan) to refer to "the unconditioned ground of existence from which conditioned phenomena arise." See, for example, Holly Gayley, "Society as Possibility: On the Semantic Range of the Tibetan Term *Sipa*," *The Arrow: A Journal of Wakeful Society, Culture & Politics* 1 (2014): 1-10.
38. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 101.
39. Ibid.
40. John C. Dawsey, "Bonecos da Rua do Porto: performance, mimesis e memória involuntária," *Ilha: Revista de Antropologia* 13, no. 1 (2012): 185-219; John C. Dawsey and Cláudia da Silva Santana, "Brincando de bonecos: um ensaio benjaminiano sobre mimesis," *Horizontes Antropológicos* 26, no. 56 (2020): 29-56.
41. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 78.
42. Ibid., 81.
43. Ibid., 83.
44. Ibid., 91-92.
45. Ibid., 95.
46. Ibid., 95.
47. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94-130.
48. See Victor Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, eds. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 41.
49. See Antonin Artaud, *O teatro e seu duplo* (São Paulo, Martins Fontes, 1999), 29.
50. Walter Benjamin, "Rua de mão única," in *Obras escolhidas II*: *rua de mão única* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1993), 68-69.
51. Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).
52. Ibid., 46-47.
53. See Antonin Artaud, "Concerning a journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras," in *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1965), 69-83.

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