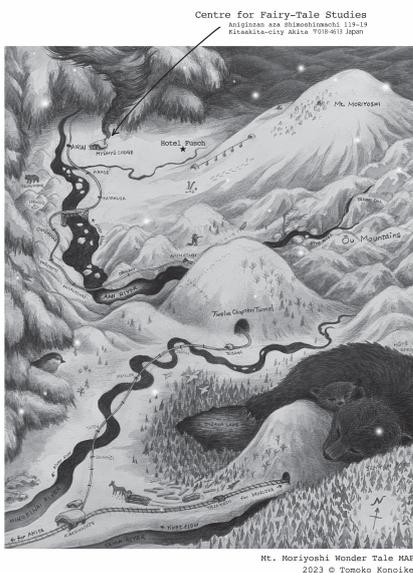


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## Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha's *Altamira 2042*: Fostering Multispecies Survival through Performance, Ritual and Active Listening

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# **Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha's *Altamira 2042*: Fostering Multispecies Survival through Performance, Ritual and Active Listening**

María Georgina Sánchez Celaya

## **Abstract**

Performance can provide far-reaching and meaningful tools to re-think the ways humans construct knowledge to integrate more-than-human worlds. This is the case of the techno-shamanistic ritual performance *Altamira 2042*, directed by Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha. This performance is a starting point to address the critical situation of several endangered species in the Brazilian Amazon. Focusing on how the artist deconstructs the 'metaphorization of nature' (Chaudhuri, 1994) and the 'modern constitution' (Latour, 1993), this article argues that Da Cunha's innovative performative work rests on a decolonised ethnographic practice and a non-anthropo-centered perspective where active listening and ritual become not only aesthetic but also political acts.

Living things make their appearance like actors on a stage set for them...And just as the actor depends upon stage, fellow-actors, and spectators, to make his entrance, every living thing depends upon a world that solidly appears as the location for its own appearance, on fellow-creatures to play with, and on spectators to acknowledge and recognize its existence.

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1978

## **Introduction**

*Altamira 2042* is a techno-shamanistic ritual performance conceived by actress, theatre director, researcher, and performer Gabriela Carneiro da

Cunha (Brazil, 1982). The direction is outlined as a joint work between the artist and the Xingu River, who traverses the state of Mato Grosso and Pará in Brazil. To conceive the Xingu River as a feminine entity—as Gabriela Carneiro and the author of this article also do—far from being considered as a metaphor in the development of the performance, must be taken as a political statement that is in dialogue with theoretical discourses such as new materialism and indigenous cosmopolitics;<sup>1</sup> following Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena, indigenous cosmopolitics means urging a place in politics for the more-than-human or the earth-beings (*seres de la tierra*) by demanding an equal ontological status as humans, while new materialism questions the artificial divisions between categories such as the living and the non-living, the animated and unanimated or the alive and the inert. Both perspectives underscore agency, either in materiality or in that which falls into the category of the non-human.

*Altamira 2042* is a performance about the constant threat and ongoing destruction of the Amazon's riverine ecosystems and the living beings that depend on their stability. One of the major threats for Xingu is the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam, a megaproject that dates to the civil military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985). The Belo Monte Dam Complex was completed in 2019, and nowadays it is still a menace that is causing environmental degradation in the area. In addition, the project has also encouraged and facilitated mining extraction, according to Indigenous groups, civil society organizations, and environmental activists' reports.<sup>2</sup>

The term techno-shamanistic alludes to technology itself as well as to the ritual generated during the entire 90-minute performance with the help of lights, sound, dance, music, myth narration and collective participation among other strategies. It was the artist who defined her work as a ritual practice in a close relationship to the concept of technology, not only because during the staging of the piece she employs a diverse set of high-tech mediums (speakers, data sticks, keyboards, beamers, LED lights cascades etc.), but also because *Altamira 2042* explores an alternative understanding of the term technology, expanding and deconstructing its meaning (da Cunha, *Ma Culture*). In this regard, technology is also understood through its potential to facilitate a connection and foster communication with other non-human species and spirits, and not only as a complex scientific device or machinery developed in an industrial environment for the sake of modern capitalist values such as progress and domination. Therefore, the whole concept of the performance evolves from the notion of ritual as a technology to rehearse active listening in order to establish a connection with non-human species and

supranatural forces, a key idea that will be addressed further along in the article. Moreover, Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha's innovative performative practice is the result of a decolonised ethnographic practice that aims to present a non-anthropo-centric perspective of the world through far-reaching and meaningful tools, such as acoustic immersion and active listening, and by fostering a multisensorial experience as well as the participation of the audience, among other visual, performative, and theatrical strategies. In his book *Immanence and Immersion: On the Acoustic Condition in Contemporary Art*, Will Schrimshaw points out that immersion is an aesthetic category and a prevalent figure in digital performance, installation, sound, and media arts. Acoustic immersion means an enveloping experience in a created artificial environment, fabricated mainly with sound and light. This experience fosters an affective encounter with the world via expanded sensuality. Immersion, and in particular acoustic immersion, facilitates a multisensorial experience in what I defined as a suitable environment for rehearsing active listening. According to Schrimshaw, the figure of immersion describes encircling qualities attributed to a particular sonorous experience or sensibility. Therefore, to be immersed in sound implies embodied presence that activates an emotional experience, often opposed to a rational or critical way of thinking, decision making and discernment (2). Even though *Altamira 2042* prioritizes an affective and multisensorial experience through embodied presence it does not prevent the public to think critically; rather, as I suggest its critical approach is achieved by being conceived as a form of embodied knowledge.

During the performance, listening becomes not only an aesthetic but also a political act. Through a multisensorial experience, the audience can experience the Amazon Forest as a supranatural and powerful force beyond humanity, as a significant encounter where the Anthropos is not above nature; animals, plants and the Xingu River are addressed with respect, and can even be experienced as superior forces. To delve into sound and to hear actively other live entities of the ecosystem such as rivers, mangroves, lakes, mountains, forests, and non-human species is more than a pure aesthetic impulse and goes beyond recognising and valuing the beauty of nature. To listen actively in a performative environment can also be a method of positing and experiencing an alternative ontological reality of natural entities, a reality where these live entities are respected in their full existence, even if only for a few minutes. For indigenous cosmopolitics this means not only to endow nature with legal status and rights, but also to consider this approach not as a mere cultural belief inscribed mainly in indigenous cosmopolitan systems

(Foster, *et.al*, xii-xiii). In *Altamira 2042*, listening actively to other live entities like the Xingu River, for example, is a political act because, first, it challenges the paradigms and values embedded in the modern political field or what Bruno Latour has defined as the “modern constitution.” The idea of the modern constitution depicts the consolidation process of a political system that legally supports the hierarchical distribution and the ontological distinction between human and non-humans and is based on the strict division between the realms of politics and science, but not exclusively (Latour, 13-48). Marisol de la Cadena resumes this idea as “the invention of the ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans, and the practices that allowed for both their mixture and their separation” (92). De la Cadena continues arguing, these practices are, of course, not only present in science and politics, but in the aesthetic realm as well, as they also take part of the portion of the sensible as Jacques Rancière has acknowledged (93). Therefore, art also participates in how non-humans are represented and this can be disputed—and is, actually, disputed—with the realm of politics and science. This quarrel is not only taking place in art but in anthropology as well, since ethnographic methods can adequately describe the relations between power, knowledge, and cultural practices in societies with different constitutions and distribution of power. In this sense, the work of anthropologist Philippe Descola about the Achuar of the Amazon shows how there is an alternative constitution of the world, where the cultural sphere is all-encompassing since, in it, we find animals, plants, and spirits.<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, da Cunha’s performative practice provides a context to deconstruct and rethink the modern constitution in the humanities and the aesthetic realm, first, because her creative process is based in a decolonised ethnographic practice that strives to come up with strategies that are detached from what Una Chaudhuri has conceptualised as the “problematical metaphorization and universalisation of nature” in theatre and the arts (24). And, last but not least, by putting the sense of hearing before the sense of sight in the first part of the performance, the artist also appeals for a de-hierarchisation of the senses on stage and, by doing so, recognises alternative ways of learning neglected in the Western world but present in other communities such as the Indigenous groups of the High Xingu, the Andean or the Mayan, for example. These points also comprise an important part of the argument that considers da Cunha’s performance as a political approach to the urgent situation in the Amazon region. Over the course of this article, I will also discuss how the ritual experience mediates the ecological catastrophe that is caused by the Belo Monte hydroelectric mega project. *Altamira 2042*

mediates the anxiety and frustration for the ongoing destruction of the Amazon Forest through ritual and the appearances of a mythological repertoire that mirrors the performance (acting and dancing). In the first place, the performance creates a tension via sound recordings of the construction of the Belo Monte dam. Finally, the tension is released through participatory strategies that reinforce the sense of community belonging. This happens with the help of powerful gestures, for example, when the audience is creating sounds with maracas, jingles, hand drums, or even clapping to release the stress. But even more importantly, the research/artistic process based on what I defined as a decolonised conception of ethnographic methods is a medium to accompany and support some of the displaced people who lost their homes due to the construction of the Belo Monte dam. These people also appear during the performance in a video montage, audio recordings and, on some occasions, also show up on stage when they go on tour with Gabriela and her team.

The performance is overall presented as an opportunity where the spectators can rehearse active listening, partake and engage in a collective ritual, and understand the political message of the artist and the urgent call of the Amazon Forest and its non-human and human inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to listen actively to other species and be aware of their presence and place in the world is a political practice of vital importance at a time when the ecological debacle and extinction are advancing by leaps and bounds.

### **Towards a Decolonial Ethnographic Practice**

The origins of *Altamira 2042* go back to 2013 when the artist began the research process for the performance trilogy entitled *Riverbanks Project: About Rivers, Buiúnas and Fireflies*. This initiative was intended to gather and document, through ethnographic methods, testimonies about the destruction of the Amazon's river ecosystems. In 2015, the first instalment of this project was staged under the title *Guerrillas or to Earth There Are No Missing Persons*, a play that develops from the story of women victims of forced disappearance and women survivors in the context of the Guerrilla of Araguaia. This conflict took place during the period of the military civil dictatorship in the second half of the 1960s and in the early 1970s in the southern part of the Pará state.<sup>5</sup> *Altamira 2042*, then, is the second output of the *Riverbanks Project*. As an afterthought about her creative process, da Cunha explains that there is a connection between the first piece about the disappearance of guerrilla fighters in Pará and the annihilation of the

Amazonian riverine ecosystems that has also led to the extinction of different species, as well as the disappearance of indigenous peoples and their languages (*Ma Culture*). In an interview with the French media *Ma Culture* conducted by Wilson Le Personnic, da Cunha points out that the *Riverbanks Project* has been developing and expanding until it also focused on the testimonies of the Amazonian rivers and the non-human species that inhabit them. She explains:

Today, this research is dedicated to listening to the testimony of rivers that have themselves entered an era of extinction. Reorienting my interest to the testimony of non-human beings has been a radical shift in my work: opening up the possibility of listening to the testimony of non-human beings opens up the possibility of listening to voices and languages previously ignored by the colonial vocabulary.<sup>6</sup>

It is by means of audio recordings displayed on stage that the audience have access to the riverine environments and their inhabitants as well as the artist's own experience in the Amazon region.<sup>7</sup> In listening to the testimony of the Xingu River, Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha employed what I defined as a decolonial ethnographic practice engrained in the conception of the performance as a methodology based fundamentally on listening. The artist established a working method that includes a set of principles among which are: "do not transcribe the testimonies" to reinforce listening; "do not prioritize the human presence on stage"; "create mediating entities", and "only what belongs to the territory belongs to the work" (*Ma Culture*). Moreover, the development of *Altamira 2042* departed from the following two questions: "if the river could talk what would she say?" and, "do you imagine that the dam will be there forever, or it will break?" Several inhabitants from Altamira Brazil were asked to respond to these questions. Regarding the second one, all the people interviewed answered no. Then, the artist invited the interviewees to co-imagine the breaking moment of the dam (da Cunha). Therefore, this methodology opened a dialogue through the survey and even more important, a moment to co-imagine how the river might feel and put it into words to create the performance collectively.<sup>8</sup> In this regard the answers gave shape to the performance and led to particular image sequences, for example the final moment when the break of a dam is projected. In this sense, following Maria Lugones, I link the artist's creative process with some ideas proposed in her article "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." First, because the performance offers the possibility of listening, feeling, experiencing, and

testifying to how the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam, imposed and endorsed by a neo-colonial project, exerts violence and several oppressions on the riverine-human and non-human communities. According to Lugones, this realisation implies the first task to start working toward a decolonial feminism, meaning the recognition of the “colonial difference” in the modern/colonial world system and its consequences, rather than reproducing the epistemological habit of erasing it, as well as acknowledging the active subjectivity that relies on the oppressed bodies (753). On the other hand, as a result of a decolonised practice based on communal participation, imaginative practices, and the construction of long-term relationships, it is also possible to understand how the resistances in Altamira are articulated and how they can be articulated in the future. Therefore, the methods implemented during the creative process of the performance imply a sort of re-actualisation or historical continuity of what Lugones calls: “intimate, everyday resistance interactions to colonial difference” (743), meaning concrete lived resistances that inhabit the (neo)colonial oppressing/resisting relation dynamic. Lugones points out that resistances are not always necessarily articulated in ‘open defiance’ (754); however, there is always a response to oppression in ways that may or may not be beneficial to (neo)colonial power or capital, but that is not part of its logic. In this sense, the creative process of *Altamira 2042*, the act of imagining the destruction of the Belo Monte Dam and speaking out loud about the socio-environmental issues in Altamira constitute several resistances.

The performance was presented for the first time in Brazil in 2019 at the 6a Mostra Internacional de Teatro de São Paulo (MIT-SP) and afterwards in Altamira, in Pará State. Later, in 2021, the Brazilian performer went on tour in Europe with this piece for the first time and the premier was held at the Kampnagel Theatre in Hamburg, Germany. During this first tour, the performance was shown in several cities such as Vienna, Metz, Paris, Marseille, Basel, Bellinzona, Lisbon, Porto, and finally Helsinki. It was in Lisbon where I had the opportunity to attend *Altamira 2042* on two occasions. The first time, I was a participant. I volunteered and I played a more active role during the performance. The second time, I was an observer, and I adopted a more passive and contemplative role. The performance took place at the Teatro do Bairro Alto and it was part of the International Festival of Performative Arts, better known as Alkantara Festival.

Therefore, the writing process of this article is nourished by different sources. First of all, as stated above, it is the result of having experienced the performance and participated actively in the show on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 at the Teatro do Bairro Alto in Lisbon. Second, it was also constructed

from my experience as a prosumer (producer + consumer).<sup>9</sup> I understand the concept of prosumer from the perspective of transmedia journalism and new media ecology. Both perspectives acknowledge the striking changes in communication and media with the irruption of the Internet. Nowadays, the information mainly circulates in digital/virtual spaces and the production of transmedia text (like this article), can dialogue with different media, narratives, and languages as well as several users/recipients at the same time. While navigating the Internet, I found different material about the performance such as videos, photos, texts, interviews, podcasts, Facebook posts, etc. This is an example of ‘after material’ that researcher Didanwy Kent Trejo conceptualises as the “reverberations of the theatrical or performative event” (Kent Trejo), or what performance scholar Diana Taylor has defined as embodied and disembodied “acts of transfer,” the first mainly constituted in a “repertoire” around performative acts storage in the bodies, and the second in written archival records, but not exclusively (Taylor, 24). Furthermore, following Didanwy Kent Trejo and Maria Teresa Sirvent's line of thought, I became the “participant researcher” that turned her body into a “laboratory of self-perception” (Kent Trejo, “Estudiar el acontecimiento teatral”), while at the same time this was a significant experience in which I got emotionally involved with the topic of performance before experiencing it first-hand.

Finally, this article is an effort to theorise certain key aspects related to how different species and living entities such as the Xingu River appear in the performance. Da Cunha's decolonized practice does not set out to represent non-human species or ‘give voice’ to the people affected by the construction of the dam, but rather think the theatre and the black box as a critical and experimental space where human and non-human entities can have a connection without barriers or hierarchies, by giving Xingu and the non-human species of the Amazon region the same ontological status as humans. Moreover, rather than representation, the concept of appearance developed by Hannah Arendt is more apt to describe Gabriela Carneiro's work on stage since *Altamira 2042* allows us to think of the theatre as a space of appearance for the species of the Amazon or Xingu itself, and performance as an act of constitution of the public sphere where the earth-beings are present (but not represented) also as co-participants. Although this idea in Hannah Arendt's work mainly refers to the appearance of the social body in the public space as one of the conditions to make politics as a community outside the power structures created by the State, this can be thought beyond the human and the social. In this regard, Diego Rosello has pointed out that Arendt's work has remained inattentive to the idea of whether non-human species can become

political actors in the public sphere, however this idea is actually implied in Arendt's works such as *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978). Rosello has reconsidered Arendt's work from the perspective of critical animal studies or animal rights theory and provides a justification to also think the notion of appearance in terms of non-human animal action which also implies acknowledging non-human agency and its right to have a space in politics and therefore act politically (220-30). Whether the fact of the non-human can be acknowledged or provided by a political agency—an interesting debate that requires further development but won't be addressed here—the crucial questions to ponder are: how do non-anthropocentric visions of the world emerge during the performance, how do more-than-human worlds take part in the co-creation of the artwork? Which strategies are employed by the artist to contribute (or not) to practice and experience other ways of learning that could help us change our paradigm of knowledge and rehearse more ethical behaviours through other species?

### **First Appearance: Xingu (She/Her), The River**

In her last and unfinished book, *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt articulates a philosophical reflection on the fluid correlation between the concepts of appearance and disappearance. A relationship in which something of the self is revealed and concealed at once. For Arendt both human and non-human beings always appear in relation to other beings (human and non-human alike), namely, living beings are acknowledged and recognised in relation to other living beings, revealing and concealing something of their ontological status. This fluid interrelation implies being subject and object at the same time; in this regard in the narrative strand presented by Arendt being and appearing coincide (19). For Arendt, to appear means being perceived by a plurality of spectators; for that reason, she uses the image of the theatre, to exemplify how appearances are recognised by a group of spectators, and fellow actors intermittently and transiently (21-22). In Hannah Arendt's work both humans and non-humans are recognized as sentient beings with agency and emotions, as well as having the capacity for self-display and in some cases self-awareness. As mentioned above, the artist displays a set of high-tech and low-tech devices that function as tools to make Xingu and the other earth being of the Amazon Forest appear. Therefore, appearance sets the tone and the rhythm of the performance. While the artist recognises the being of the non-human entities and species, she made them appear on stage, and they appear to the audience because they are heard, therefore, acknowledged and

recognised. And, after they are heard and perceived, a political claim is articulated, namely the right of the non-human to continue existing.

According to the artist, the performance was less about giving voice to the so-called 'speechless' subalterns and more about amplifying the audience's capacity for listening (*Ma Culture*). In the first part of the performance the artist creates a safe environment to delve comfortably into the flow of sound. She places the audience in the thrust stage, in the darkness of a black box theatre only illuminated by the tintinnabulations of spinning lights coming from seven speakers. In this environment, the audience can rehearse, deepen, and strengthen their ability of listening.

The performance is divided into several moments: at the beginning, the public is invited to participate; the first part is conceptualised as a moment of active listening where Xingu appears for the first time. The second part consists in three acts: *Dona Herondina*, *Seu Quebra Barragen*, *Aliendigenous* and an epilogue. In the prelude, before the performance begins, the artist and her team ask for the collaboration of seven people who inhabit feminine perspectives. Right after this call to participation, each volunteer is invited to choose between river or road/street (*rio* or *rua* in Portuguese). Each participant's decision will have an impact on the development of the performance, and every time this piece is on stage the acoustic experience will change. In this sense, the co-creation principle established in the creative process continues to be developed on stage. Afterwards, the volunteers are guided to the centre of the stage to take a place next to a speaker with LED lights that blink and change into different colours randomly (blue, red, green, etc.). Subsequently, the rest of the spectators enter the space of the black box which is reconfigured as a theatre-in-the-round, and sit surrounding the thrust stage, the speakers, and the seven volunteers. At this point, the performance and the moment of active listening begins. From the speakers, the sound of running water of the Xingu begins to flow, followed by a polyphony of the voices of the Amazon inhabitants: all kind of reptiles and insects buzzing, chirping, and squeaking, snakes hissing, frogs croaking and birds whistling. In the middle of this choir, a female voice speaking in Portuguese pops up: "Gaby can you hear it? The sound of the forest. It is beautiful, isn't it? Are you feeling it? NOW SURRENDER." The sound is progressively intensified until the sounds of a set of chainsaws, cars and heavy machinery interferes with the chorus of the different non-human species. These are the sounds of the road/street, the boisterous noises of biodiversity loss and the destruction of the Amazon to make space for the construction of

the Belo Monte dam in the municipality of Altamira in the state of Pará. The sounds of a total ecological catastrophe.

The immersive acoustic experience takes both volunteers and spectators by the hand through two opposite poles of emotions. At this point it is important to notice that immersive works are often abstract, non-representational, diffusive, and non-object based (Schrimshaw 2). *Altamira 2042* is not necessarily an abstract performance, or, as stated above, a piece that forestalls critical thinking. However, an interesting characteristic of immersive art works, and one that *Altamira 2042* does share, is the embodiment of all these characteristics enlisted by Schrimshaw, which trigger a return to a pre-symbolic state and, by so doing, ensure that metaphor is not employed as medium or as an aesthetic strategy to address nature.

As a volunteer, sitting and lying on the floor next to one of the speakers, listening to Xingu and the sounds created by the chorus of non-human species, I experienced a feeling of joy and aesthetic ecstasy. However, these feelings and the sensation of well-being vanished as soon as the sounds of the chainsaws began to resonate. Then, a mixture of anguish, anxiety, frustration, sadness, and anger took the main place of my emotions. From the perspective of performance and performativity theory, which focuses on the relationships between the action (actors/actress and performers) and the reception (audience), this first moment of the performance is a space to be experienced outside of any frame of interpretation. What is happening on stage is not being represented, but rather, is an extract of reality itself.<sup>10</sup> At this very first moment of the performance the artist is moving the speakers and modulating the sound volume to reaffirm the idea and the feeling of acoustic immersion on stage. Moreover, there is no acting unfolding on the scene or a drama script inscribed in a narrative structure, or even a system of symbols waiting to be decoded; only the artist's guidance and the space for the audience to listen actively. This is what Ericka Fischer-Lichte calls the self-referential quality of the performance, which makes sense in the performing arts system and the structure of the performance art itself. Self-referential performances or the self-referential moments of a performance escape artificiality and thereby interpretation. Therefore, self-referential performances embody their signification, in Lichte's terms.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, as Katja Kawastek explains, this does not mean that in a performance based on the concept of self-referentiality the artist sacrifices or cancels representation and interpretation entirely. Instead, there is always a shift between representation and the demand to the audience to participate and engage with the artist's proposal. This also implies that during the performance there is an oscillation between physical

experience and cognitive interpretation, a displacement between illusion and artificiality towards action and reality (Kawastek 87). This approach is useful to understand the rhythm adopted by *Altamira 2042* during its 90-minute duration. Although, at the beginning the artist prioritises action, and what I conceptualise as active listening, the rest of the performance oscillates between the narration and re-enactment of a mythological repertoire and the stories of the communities that co-inhabit or once co-inhabited the space with Xingu. This repertoire includes one of the several versions of the Boiúna myth, the sacred anaconda with a mysterious and destructive power that lives in the Amazon region, and the stories told by the communities of Altamira who bear witness to the experience and resistance during the construction of Belo Monte.

Besides representation, performance (acting), dance, and, once again, the participation of the volunteers to conclude the performance, all this visual, political, and sensorial experience is united through sound. In this sense, *Altamira 2042* is a piece that's more indebted to performance art than it is to drama. Moreover, da Cunha's work has been linked to other performances that are considered militant, developed in the context of dance and choreographic art by Brazilian artists such as Lia Rodrigues, Alice Ripoll, Marcelo Evelin, and Luiz de Abreu (Ma Culture). However, I suggest that da Cunha's practice is also affiliated to a genealogy of Latin American artists who work with ritual such as Cecilia Vicuña, María Evelia Marmolejo, Laura Anderson Barbata, and Regina José Galindo among others.<sup>12</sup>

### **Listening as a Political Act**

An element I would like to bring up at this point is the irruption of a female voice among the chorus of earth-beings (monkeys, frogs, insects, birds, etc.). As stated in the introduction, *Altamira 2042* is the result of a larger research project on the Brazilian rivers and the constant threat to which they are exposed. During her stay in the Amazon tropical forest, the artist formed a collaborative network with riverine and indigenous women and local residents. A key character for the development of Gabriela's work in addition to Xingu was Raimunda Gomes da Silva, a rural worker, community leader, and Brazilian activist who used to live in a natural island of Xingu. Raimunda lost her home and her house due to the construction of the Belo Monte dam; she and her family are among the 16,000 people displaced by the construction of the hydroelectric megaproject by the company Norte Energia S.A. (Brum, *et. al.*).<sup>13</sup> Gabriela read about Raimunda in an article written by Brazilian

journalist Elaine Brum, and she became a crucial character for the development of the performance. For example, it is Raimunda's voice that pops up in the middle of the immersive acoustic experience requesting the artist and the audience to surrender to nature. During the performance the audience encounters excerpts of audio interviews that Gabriela had with Raimunda. By introducing her voice, the artist also includes a particular way of thinking, a philosophy of life that is more attuned to the environment and aware of the other-than-human. Raimunda poses a very deep and meaningful understanding of life that brings a non-anthropocentric perspective. It also resonates with new materialist perspectives mentioned at the beginning of this article. In this sense, her voice and thoughts contribute to the purpose of deconstructing the human/nature division. Moreover, I contend, the potential of this idea of surrendering to the beauty of nature elaborated by Raimunda lies in that it undermines the ontological status of the human being. Through the corporeal preparation of the audience during several minutes intended to lead the audience to a meditative state, the mind/intellect/body is more receptive to the message: SURRENDER TO NATURE. By pronouncing the word 'surrender,' in this immersive environmental context, the audience's bodies are then at the mercy of the sounds of the chorus of life that resonates with Xingu, and the spectators can experience the river and the earth-beings in many different exciting ways. Some members of the public related that they have experienced a connection with the Amazon, and some others mention having felt nature as a sublime, resilient or endangered entity and in some cases even as a superior force.<sup>14</sup> With the audio recordings, the animals and the river are perceived in their full existence, simply being. From the perspective of power relations, the audience, acquires, albeit momentarily, a place underneath this earth-beings and natural forces. However, this fiction vanishes the moment the sounds of the road burst in the acoustic space. The current political order, or the 'modern constitution' in which the human being is above any other being is re-established when the sound of the chainsaws and the heavy machinery starts to rumble. This is the moment in the performance where the power relations gestated in coloniality and capitalist exploitation become evident, and the audience can realise that the devastation of the Amazon, the dead sentence for Xingu materialised in the Belo Monte dam, and the massacre of hundreds of thousands of different species such as, trees, frogs, birds, monkeys, insects, fish etc. is a parallel reality to the one created in the performance.

At this point, I would like to return to the idea of the non-metaphorization of nature and the overturn in the hierarchy of the senses on

stage, also as political strategies. First, as I mentioned in the introduction, the artist does not present the Amazon in an idealised way, through metaphor or solely from a human perspective. On the one hand, as Chaudhuri points out, the metaphorization of nature means understanding nature as mere setting or background, as the scenery where human activity develops and takes place (26). However, the metaphorization of nature can also be thought as a way of using nature as an intellectual resource to perpetuate what I understand as an autoreferential homo sapiens monologue. In this monologue, the rest of the living entities exist only as intellectual resources (or metaphors) so the human being can mirror and evaluate its own experience and condition to understand themselves within their own comedy or drama. This is important precisely because artistic practice can provide us with strategies to break this monologue and get out of the culture/nature | human/non-human dichotomy in order to understand non-human species beyond anthropocentrism or, as Donna Haraway rightly points out, to think and feel with human and non-human critters, establishing a non-natal kin for cultivating what she calls a robust response-ability for powerful and threatened places and beings, creating sympoietic models (to work, to interact with) rather than metaphors (71). In other words, when nature is addressed only through metaphor(s), the global interconnectedness and the interdependencies in which both human and non-human participate are obscured and neglected.

On the other hand, regarding the overturning of the sensorial hierarchy, the elaboration of the history of the senses and corporeal practices has shown us that since modern times society is driven and dominated by an ocular centric perspective of the world, placing sight above the other senses (Classen 269-280). For Western society, sight is the source of reliability par excellence, where the idea of 'seeing to believe' is a *leitmotif*. In modern societies, intellectual activity is also more appreciated than affects and sensations. However, other cultures, especially indigenous ones, have given a place of importance to other senses and to other species, spirits and supranatural forces, or, in other words, to entities that cannot be seen but can be perceived through other senses or other states of consciousness, for example the wind, as Raimunda elaborates in her testimony for the performance, or when she explains to Gabriela: "The spirits of the waters, they are like the wind, you can't see it but you can feel it." As Constance Classen has already discussed in depth, the indigenous groups of the Amazon region such as the Desana people in Colombia, the Warao of Venezuela, the Cashinahua in Peru, or the Tzotziles in Mexico are societies that possess different ways of learning—more sensual or at least not solely sight orientated—which carry non-normative cosmovisions

that also embody a different attitude towards the environment and nature.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the invitation that the artist makes in the performance is precisely to not hyper-intellectualise what happens on stage but to perceive from and with the body, prioritising hearing. By listening to recordings of environments inhabited by different species of the Amazon and the species themselves, we can perceive the animals and plants, at least for a few moments, not from a power position but from a space that attempts to nuance these power structures and subvert the mechanisms of nature domination, which, in Western societies, is considered either an economic or an intellectual resource. Then this is an opportunity to start rehearsing different ways of learning that may lead to change paradigms and power structures that are sustaining a vast part of the ecological ravages in the world.

### **Appearance Two: Boiúna the Sacred Anaconda of The Amazon**

After Xingu emerges on stage for the first time—what I have called the ‘first appearance’—and when the moment of active listening is over, image projection starts taking place in the black box. This indicates the beginning of the second part of the performance where the artist acts as a shaman who re-enacts and updates the mythological repertoire of the Amazon. This repertoire is based on the myth of the Boiúna, the sacred anaconda, told by the inhabitants of Altamira and intertwined with Gabriela’s performance (act and dancing).

The Amazon region is inhabited by several species of snakes. The most powerful of its kind is the anaconda, a reptile that can measure more than 10 meters and weigh around 100 kg. Boiúna refers to a mythical, black, and gigantic anaconda that inhabits the rivers of the Amazon. The qualities of the anaconda are so astounding, that it is one of the most significant mythological animals in the cosmovision of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. The anaconda Boiúna is also present in the Brazilian folklore culture and in the imaginary of the *ribeirinhos*, the mestizo populations that live near the Amazon riverbeds.<sup>16</sup> Because the Boiúna myth has different versions, it has been described by anthropologist Hugh-Jones as a “tree with many branches” (41). In one of the many versions of the myth, a Boiúna snake approaches an Indian woman who bathed every day in the same meander of the river and leaves her pregnant with two creatures half reptilian half human. From this encounter between the anaconda and the woman, twin siblings Cobra-Maria and Cobra-Norato were born. These siblings are the incarnation of the

opposite forces existing in nature (destruction/creation, life/death, etc.). Forces that are at the same time complementary. Cobra-Maria is the personification of destruction, while Cobra-Norato embodies life, and he is responsible for restoring the damage done by his sister (Mattos Fonteles 9). In another version of the myth Boiúna is conceived as a female entity. The story tells of a young woman who has a sexual encounter with a Jesuit and later gives birth to a little girl on the banks of the river. Ashamed of having begotten and fearful of her family's reaction, the woman abandons the child to her fate, and she bleeds to death trying to escape her destiny. The little baby girl becomes an anaconda or Boiúna who lives in the river. On full moon nights, she takes the form of a woman to look for a partner to satisfy her sexual appetite. The second version of the myth circulates in Altamira, and people tend to say that the curse of this poor abandoned creature can only end when she gives birth to another human creature. Moreover, as it can be seen in the performance, in the collective imagination Boiúna is the mythical creature capable of creating cracks in the submerged infrastructure of the hydroelectric plant, which will eventually cause its collapse and destruction.

In the transition from the first part of active listening to the second part of the performance, the overwhelming noise caused by the construction of the Belo Monte dam slowly fades down. Only one lighted speaker remains on the thrust stage with the sound of Xingu's water running. Then, Gabriela undresses and lights a candle, another low-tec ritual tool par excellence (Bernstein 14). This part of the performance is divided in three moments: (1) *Dona Herondina*, where the enchanted-narrator that tells the story of Boiúna and the women activist who were in the front line to defend Xingu; *Seu Quebra Barragen* (or the Dam Breaker), in which the enchanted-narrator shows images of the construction of the dam and plays the voices of the dwellers expelled from the Xingu islands, the leaders of the Xingu Vivo movement and the indigenous communities such as the Araweté and Juruna; and (3) *Aliendigenous* (aliens + indigenous), which is a fictionalised narration of the fight between the Progressians and the Aliendigenous whose objective is to Amazonize the world, or put the Amazon in the centre of our attention. And finally, the epilogue and the release of the ritual-performance, which consist in the fictional breaking of the dam. This part of the performance, more complex in terms of the elements that are displayed on stage, opens a space for connectivity, catharsis, and healing. A sort of communication with the river happens in the epilogue of the performance when the artist invites the public to make noise to send energy to Xingu to fight against Belo Monte. Catharsis and healing take effect when Gabriela distributes chisels and

hammers to the seven volunteers to destroy a rock placed in the centre of the stage (Fig. 1). Meanwhile, an image of a dam breaking is projected on one of the walls of the theatre. Here we are experiencing a key moment in the performance because this is one of the strategies adopted by the artist to vent the emotions produced by the noise of the destruction of the Amazon Forest. She invites all the audience to participate by making noise or even dancing in the thrust stage to create a sense of community through ritual and move people to action. By ritual performance, I understand the moment of active listening and the combination of elements such as sound, light, performance (acting), dance and audiovisual projection that come together on stage to create a collective experience focused on a common purpose. This final objective, as mentioned above, is the destruction of the Belo Monte dam projected for the year 2042, albeit, of course, the action is situated on a fictional level. However, only the symbolic break of the Belo Monte dam by hitting a rock with different tools at the end of the performance can reenact and relieve the anger and the pain caused by listening to audios that document the destruction of the tropical rainforest and Xingu.



Figure 1: Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha and Xingu, *Altamira 2042. Low tech tool for catharsis*, 2019. (Photo. Nereu Jr.)

By the same token, during the first and second part of the performance, *Dona Herondina* and *Seu Quebra Barragen*, another interesting strategy employed by the artist is the appearance that mirrors the mythological repertoire of the Amazon. This strategy results in a coherent *mise en scène* that came from the interconnections between the audiovisual material and the re-enactment of the Boiúna myth narrated by inhabitants of Altamira, all of

this assembled by the constant repetition of a chorus extracted from a religious cult chant called “*Dona Herondina II*” that repeatedly floods the acoustic space.<sup>17</sup> In this moment of the performance, the image of Raimunda’s and her husband João also appears in a video projection. She for example, tells the story of Boiúna, the abandoned young girl that became an anaconda. Gabriela, as if she were the reflection of a mirror, translates the myth into body movements. During this part, the artist is wearing a device-mask made up of two speakers, while also another speaker hangs from her belly (Fig. 2). The artist dances and walks through the space personifying the woman who died giving birth to one of the many Boiúnas. With spasmodic movements, lying on the floor in labour position, Gabriela takes the hand of one of the volunteers to help her during labour. Then she ‘gives birth’ to an anaconda and she immediately wears a device made of a big cascade of blue, red, and green LED lights (Fig. 3).



*Figure 2: Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha and Xingu, Altamira 2042. Boiúna appearance during the performance, 2019. (Photo. Nereu Jr.)*



Figure 3: Gabriela Carneiro da Cuhna and Xingu, *Altamira 2042*. *Boiúna*, the sacred Anaconda in the mythological repertoire of the Amazon, 2019. (Photo. Nereu Jr.)

In this moment she performs as the cursed *Boiúna*-women. The mythological background of the Amazons provides the content for the ritual-performance that develops the *mise en scène* and the different appearances of *Boiúna* either in the acoustic space or in the visual field of the theatre. I see the mythological repertoire not only as a cultural legacy of the indigenous people, but also as a common heritage, a set of stories and knowledges that are collectively preserved. From my perspective, the reference to the *Boiúna* myth in the performance is not only a way of honouring and recognising the indigenous communities that defend and sustain the webs of life in the Amazon. The presence of *Boiúna* on stage is also the embodiment of the essence of life in a fruitful dialogue with the notion of the non-human animal manifested and characterised through the powerful mythical anaconda. The anaconda, then, is not a metaphor of life; the anaconda is life in itself and a powerful sacred presence that embodies the necessary strength to overcome the battles that are still to be fought in the Alto Xingu, because as *Altamira 2042* recognises we are fighting a war between two worlds and two models, one that quantifies, commercialises and destroys (*progressianos*) and another that fights to sustain the web of life (*aliendigenas*).

## Conclusion

As Una Chaudhuri acknowledges, the ecological crisis is also a crisis of values (25); faced with the sixth mass extinction, it is urgent to rehearse more ethical behaviours towards other species and relearn different ways to become more

attuned to the environment. As I have argued, ritual-performance and active listening can be engaging and thought-provoking artistic tools to achieve this purpose. In specific contexts such as the ritualised experience triggered by *Altamira 2042*, art and performance practice can offer suitable environments to awaken our senses and explore other ways of perception and learning. *Altamira 2042* confronts us with the destruction of the tropical rainforest, the riverine ecosystems and the earth-beings that inhabit the Amazon. The potential of performance and ritual and their correlations lies in the possibility to reactivate certain marginalised and broken interrelations with nature or, in Haraway's words, in the opportunity of making kin with other critter companions, earth-beings and non-human species that allows partial recuperation for what we have already lost. We can no longer afford the luxury of losing, because if we lose the ability to ritualise now, we will also condemn humanity to lose a way of communicating with nature.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The concept of indigenous cosmopolitics developed by anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena derives from the term "cosmopolitics" coined by philosopher Isabelle Stengers. Indigenous cosmopolitics claims for a different politics of nature, where Indigenous epistemologies must take place in the conversation. It also refers to a dispute to define nature—usually seen as a resource—with white, male, Eurocentric theories that came mostly from the scientific field. For a general discussion and extended reflections on the concepts of cosmopolitics and indigenous cosmopolitics, see Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," and de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*.

<sup>2</sup> A further threat to Xingu and the Brazilian Amazonian rainforest is Volta Grande, a mega-mining project promoted by the Canadian company Belo Sun. The project is currently suspended, however, as there is an ongoing legal fight, there is a possibility that it could be reactivated. In September 2012, an article pointing out the relationship between the hydroelectric power plant and the further establishment of mining projects was published on the Raoni.com website. Raoni Metuktire is an indigenous leader head of the Kayapo tribe rooted in the core of the Amazon. He has been fighting for the protection of the Amazon rainforest and the riverine ecosystems since the 1960s. Facts about the hydroelectric power plant and the ongoing mining projects can be corroborated in the webpages of environmental associations such as Xingu +, Movimento Xingu Vivo, Amazon Watch and in the Kayapo's leader own webpage Raoni.com.

<sup>3</sup> See Descola, *La Nature Domestique: Symbolisme et Praxis dans l'écologie des Achuar*.

<sup>4</sup> The political message of the artist is also conveyed in the *Manifesto for the Amazon, Center of the World*.

- <sup>5</sup> The Araguaia guerrilla was a social movement in opposition to the civil military dictatorship that was established in Brazil following a *coup d'état* in 1964. The movement was sponsored by the Communist Party and developed mainly in rural areas of the state of Goiás, today, Tocantins. The conflict lasted approximately two and a half years and it is considered one of the most violent episodes in the history of modern Brazil, culminating in the death and forced disappearance of almost all the combatants. In addition, to repressing the movement, the Brazilian government carried out a campaign of denial and erasing of the events, to the extent that it is considered “the most impressive phenomenon of historical *denial* of contemporary Brazil” (Teles 483). In this sense, the aspect of memory rescue in Gabriela’s work and practice are also an example of her commitment and political activism.
- <sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.maculture.fr/entretiens/altamira-2042/> 31, Mars, 2022, 16:59.
- <sup>7</sup> The Festival d’Automne in Paris produced a video that shows different shoots of the artwork developed on stage. To watch an excerpt of the performance *Altamira 2042*, you can access the following web site: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2r7Uq5rPLk>
- <sup>8</sup> In 2022 I interviewed Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha in Toulouse, France. During this conversation she explained to me her working method. This interview is not published yet, and it is part of my personal archive.
- <sup>9</sup> See Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, and Denis Renó, “Transmedia Journalism and the New Media Ecology: Possible Languages.”
- <sup>10</sup> As explained by Erika Fischer-Lichte theater and performance is always made by real bodies (actor, actresses, performers), as they are presented in real spaces, and happen in real time. In this sense theater and performance are real and present a unique experience, however I am thinking here the notion of the real also in the sense of what happened and is still happening in the Amazon region; the artist is documenting a catastrophe via a decolonised ethnographic practice through audio recordings and non-transcribed testimonies.
- <sup>11</sup> About the self-referential quality of the performance Erika Fischer-Lichte explains: “The concept of performance which Max Hermann developed corresponds, in many respects, to the theories of performativity elaborated by the philosophers John L. Austin (1975) and Judith Butler (1990a) in the middle and end of the twentieth century. They all agree that performative acts/performances do not express something that pre-exist, something given, but that they bring forth something that does not yet exist elsewhere but comes into being only by way of the performative act/the performance that occurs. In this sense they are self-referential.” (Fischer-Lichte 27)
- <sup>12</sup> This is ongoing research that is part of my doctoral dissertation.
- <sup>13</sup> Elaine Brum narrates this episode and how the company Norte Energia S.A burned Raimunda’s house without even warn her.
- <sup>14</sup> In 2022, I experienced the performance once again in Toulouse, France and Lausanne, Switzerland. This time, with the help of ethnographic methods I expanded the research to know more about the audience perception of the performance. Thanks to the participation of 19 people and an online questionnaire, I can convey the opinions expressed in this article.

- <sup>15</sup> Constance Classen's "Other Ways of Wisdoms: Learning Through the Senses Across Cultures" focuses on how other societies learn through other senses, and how this non-sight orientated way of learning also leads to different approaches to the non-human. In her analysis of the Desana people, she writes: "For the Desana the sound of every bird call, the colour and scent of every flower, the taste of every fruit is imbued with a message about the social and cosmic order. The Desana believe, indeed, that sounds, colours, flavours, and odours are powerful sources of energy. Together these different sensory energies form a radiant network with which the Desana must carefully interact to continue to thrive in their forest environment" (Classen 274-275).
- <sup>16</sup> Several indigenous groups of the Amazon share a common mythological background. According to Niels Smith, the myths about the anaconda can be found among widely separated groups, to mention a few examples for the Waiwai that inhabit the Mapuera and upper Essequibo rivers in Brazil, the anaconda symbolizes river and fertility. Like the myths told by the *ribeirinhos* of Altamira, among Desana people, there is also a myth that portrays a seven-headed snake that seduced a young girl. And the Arapaso, an indigenous population from the Eastern Tukano linguistic family located in the lower Uaupés River in Brazil, consider themselves descendants of an anaconda that transformed into a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman bathing in the river (93).
- <sup>17</sup> The song that Gabriela chose for the performance "*Dona Herondina II*" came from the double album "Ponto de Santo." This song is from the second album intitled "Caboclos e Encanterias do Amazônia." The music was created in the context of the Mina-do-Pará cult. The Mina-do-Pará also known as Tambor the Mina is a syncretic religion mainly practiced in *Maranhão* and the Amazonian rainforest, among other parts of Brazil. In this traditional religious practice, people worship several sorts of divine entities such as the caboclos or caboclas. Dona Herondina is a cabocla, a warrior woman that became the protector of the forest and the animals. "*Dona Herondina II*" can be described as a traditional cult chant which take part of the Brazilian ritual music influenced by the African cultural diaspora resulting from the enslavement of people from the African continent. The song came from a double album released in 1996 by the collection "*A música e o Pará*." This album is the vol. 8 and its part of a bigger project focused on the Afro-Brazilian traditions present in the Pará state carried out by the anthropologist Anaíza Vergolino.

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