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Narrating the Amazon

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As the largest tropical forest and one of the biggest carbon sinks in the world, the Amazon plays an indispensable role in keeping our planet habitable. Although the threat facing the Amazon region is well-known, it is hard to truly grasp the severity of the situation through scientific facts alone. Inter-cultural exchanges and discarding longstanding colonial perspectives can help bridge that gap.

The theatrical production *Antigone in the Amazon* by Swiss director Milo Rau is both a presentation of Sophocles' tragedy and the story of its adaptation in Brazil with Indigenous actors. This doubling of elements is reflected by an experiential doubling: European actors perform part of the action on stage, while scenes set in the Amazon are pre-recorded and projected onto a screen, which the actors introduce and comment upon. Antigone's death scene is seen twice, once live and once on video.

In narrating the myth of Antigone, Milo Rau also incorporates a recent historical event: the 1995 massacre of Eldorado do Carajás in the northern Brazilian state of Parà, when the police killed 19 demonstrators from the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement, MST). One of the movement's banners hangs above the entrance to the theatre stalls during the performance.

The story of the MST workers who were killed after occupying a private ranch is very different from that of Antigone, who defied the laws of the city of Thebes by burying her brother Polynices, found guilty of attacking the city. Both, however, concern the conflict between civil order and legal principles, which they bring into question. The transposition of this Ancient Greek play to a different geographical and historical context consequently highlights its current political significance and relevance: the modern-day struggle of Indigenous peoples and workers against the exploitation and appropriation of the Amazon is of decisive importance to the fate of the planet.

The play, however, is interrupted when an Indigenous performer's statement is read from the stage, explaining how she refused to come and tell her story in a production intended for a European audience. The problem of how you can tell the story of the largest forest on the planet arises. Who can do it? How do you balance the perspective of observers external to the Amazon and that of Indigenous peoples who have inhabited it for centuries?

Policies and savannisation

The Amazon, the largest tropical forest on Earth, is home to 10 per cent of the world's known species. Ecologically, the Amazon basin plays a fundamental role in cooling and humidifying the atmosphere. It stores the equivalent of 15-20 years of global CO2 emissions. Over several decades, however, more than 20 per cent of the Amazon region has undergone deforestation or desertification due to agricultural exploitation (plantations and pastures for intensive farming) and mining. This process, combined with global warming, has reduced the forest's humidity and its capacity to absorb CO2. Various studies predict that approximately half of Amazon land is at risk of turning into an arid savannah within thirty years, causing global consequences. Moreover, Brazilian livestock farming, concentrated in the Amazon, is responsible for 3.4 per cent of global emissions.

Rainforest aerial view, Brazil. ©gustavofrazao/depositphotos.com

Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019-2022) led to an unprecedented acceleration of deforestation. His government first turned a blind eye to illegal land grabbing, then legalised "reclaiming" land portrayed as uncultivated and uncivilised, negating the existence of Indigenous communities as forest inhabitants for thousands of years.

Bolsonaro's racism and his denial of climate change, supported by the interests of multinational companies operating in the Amazon, are a blueprint of the policy followed by other political leaders such as former US President and current White House candidate Donald Trump. Since Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's return to power in 2023, there has been a decrease in the rate of deforestation, and Indigenous communities have gained greater representation. But the exploitation of the forest has not ceased., and the situation remains a prime example of the very close relationship between politics, economics, and the environment the world over.

Listen to Amazon voices

Given this context, Milo Rau's production necessarily focuses on a Western audience. The director says that "the symbolic order of the Western world must be challenged and changed from the outside, from the margins of the capitalist system."

Rau's approach aligns with a centuries-old tradition of representation and discourse evoking the Other, aimed at questioning European perceptions: from the cannibals in Montaigne's essay *Des Cannibales* to the "noble savage" in John Dryden's theatre; from the American in Voltaire's novel *L'Ingénu* (The Sincere Huron) to the "natural man" of Rousseau's *Sur l'origine de l'inegalité* (Discourse on Inequality); as well as many well-known characters and tropes from twentieth-century ethnology.

Understanding the reality of the people these texts refer to – their ruined civilisation, and their occupied territory – imposes a duty to reconstruct their authentic perspectives beyond the limitations of Eurocentric narratives. Recent attempts include David Graeber and David Wengrow's historical research in *The Dawn of Everything*, their book on missionary testimonies of

Indigenous North Americans, as well as the Anagoor collective's film *Todos Los Males* ("All Vices"), which attempts to reconstruct the Incas people from *The Amorous Indies*, an eighteenth-century opera-ballet by French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. But what stands out in Milo Rau's experiment is how listening directly to the word of Indigenous peoples is now an inevitable step to avoid falling back into a colonial mindset.

The risk is still evident in a lot of contemporary ethnology, even when it intends to reverse the attitude of superiority that permeated the discipline a century ago, to "decolonise thought", and to re-evaluate Amazonian perspectives on reality. A re-examination of "animism" in the work of French ethnologist Philippe Descola is one such example. Descola considers animism a "schema" of thought fundamentally different from "naturalism", which is dominant in the Western scientific world. The former attributes thought to other animals that is in all respects analogous to human thought. This concept aims to preserve the intricacy of the original Indigenous vision that Descola's mentor, Claude Lévi-Strauss, already admired, which denies the exceptionalism of humans in nature.

Such re-evaluations which have led various ethnologists to celebrate the "ecological" wisdom of Amazonian peoples tend to overlook their history. However, scholars such as Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn have shown, reaching an understanding of the millennial history of Amazonian civilisations can help highlight the profound changes that native populations have undergone over centuries of interaction and clashes with Western people. Anyone who visits the Amazon region today will notice the impact of these frictions: the various traditional forms of animism, often emphasised in the context of tourism, are just one aspect of composite societies undergoing rapid transformation, whereby colonial knowledge and technologies are becoming increasingly prevalent in daily life (I have, for instance, noticed this in the fact that Amazonian peoples wear mass-manufactured clothing, use mobile phones, manage ecolodges, and organise legal proceedings against those who pollute their land.).

Moreover – as ethnologists recognise – animism and science cannot be considered exclusive forms of thinking that respectively belong to Amazonian and European mentalities. On the one hand, the inhabitants of the Amazon understand scientific thinking. And, on the other, magical thinking, myths, and animism have all taken profound root in Western societies. The risk is that in the effort to "decolonise thought", the defence of animism and its re-evaluation from an ecological standpoint may inadvertently perpetuate colonial-era myths surrounding archaic societies of "savages" as set, fascinating tropes.

From the forest to the city (and back)

For centuries there has been a two-way movement of people: that of Indigenous people who travel to the cities to study and buy and sell goods; and that of white people – government officials, missionaries, miners, journalists, ethnologists, tourists – who enter the Amazon region with various aims. Only from this exchange is a reciprocal understanding possible.

The Falling Sky (2020), co-authored by shaman Davi Kopenawa and ethnologist Bruce Albert, serves as an example. Kopenawa, from the Yanomami people, who live between Venezuela and Brazil, was a key figure in struggles that ultimately led to the Brazilian government officially recognising indigenous land rights in 1992. During his lifetime he learnt Portuguese within a Christian mission, lived with white people working as a kitchen hand, and then became an interpreter for the National Indigenous Peoples Foundation (FUNAI). He observed a different society, and then decided to return to the forest. Kopenawa compares his experiences in public speeches , which have turned him into an international personality. Faced with the ongoing deforestation and illegal occupation of Yanomami land for mining, Kopenawa decided to have his words transcribed in books, or "paper skins" as he calls them, in collaboration with Albert.

In his speeches, Kopenawa contrasts the words of white people, "people of merchandise", with the traditional words of his own people, which inspire protection of the forest. He fears that young Indigenous people are being tempted by material possessions, that they "worry too much about commodities and white people's talk" and are becoming "afraid of the power of yãkoana powder" and no longer see spirits. (Yãkoana is a hallucinogenic powder obtained from tree resin, traditionally consumed to produce visions of forest spirits. These visions are the foundation of all Yanomami cosmology, which is founded on respect for the living forest populated by spirits.)

In short, Kopenawa fears that young people may be tempted to work with white people to afford commodities and abandon hallucinogenics. This position should be understood in its historical context: the destructive arrival of white people who brought with them deforestation and epidemics that decimated Indigenous peoples, is proof that preserving the Yanomami "word" is a matter of survival. However, Kopenawa's message is not only intended for the younger generation of Yanomami. By comparing different societal principles, i.e., the value placed on commerce and that placed on the forest, the production of goods and exchange with other living beings, Kopenawa encourages dialogue with, and raises a challenge to, European civilisations.

From this double perspective, Yanomami cosmology also acquires an ecological and political value. Kopenawa emphasises this point in *The Falling Sky*, playing skilfully with the use of the word “ecology”:

In the forest, we human beings are the “ecology.” But it is equally the xapiri [the spirits of the forest], the game, the trees, the rivers, the fish, the sky, the rain, the wind, and the sun! It is everything that came into being in the forest, far from the white people: everything that isn’t surrounded by fences yet. The words of “ecology” are our ancient words […]. The xapiri have defended the forest since it first came into being. Our ancestors have never devastated it because they kept the spirits by their side. Is it not still as alive as it has always been? The white people who once ignored all these things are now starting to hear them a little. This is why some of them have invented new words to defend the forest. Now they call themselves “people of the ecology” because they are worried to see their land getting increasingly hot.[1]

Some ethnologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have emphasised the problem of translating between different perspectives on the world. As Kopenawa’s speech on ecology shows, the translation of words, though inevitably never without options and potential misunderstandings, is definitely possible, based on our shared biology.

State violence

The white Brazilian journalist and writer Eliane Brum has taken the opposite path to Kopenawa: she moved from the metropolis of San Paolo to Altamira in the heart of the Amazon. Altamira is a town of forest exploiters and people displaced by the construction of the Belo Monte dam across the River Xingu, which destroyed their homes. Brum went to live on the frontier of a scarred and contested land, a foreigner neighbouring the perpetrators of crimes she writes about as a journalist and activist. Her experience, told in *Banzeiro Òkòtó*: *The Amazon as the Centre of the World* (2023), is above all corporeal: falling ill, as is inevitable in the forest, is a reawakening for the “city body, accustomed to pretending it doesn’t exist so it can robotize itself in front of a computer”.

Protest against the Belo Monte Dam. Photo by Diego Cavichiolli Carbone viaFlickr.

Brum compares the violent destruction of the forest to the rape of many Indigenous women during Brazil’s military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. She conveys the rhetoric of the exploiters, who described the forest as a “human desert”, refuting the

existence of Indigenous civilisations. Erwin Kräutler, a missionary and bishop of Xingu from 1981 to 2015, celebrated the completion of the first section of the Trans-Amazon highway, which was built to bring life to that desert, by felling a 50m walnut tree. Brum bitterly recalls this symbolic episode, observing that the place of celebration is known in Altamira by a revealing name: *Pau del Presidente* (the President's Dick).

The Amazon is therefore described as a victim of sexual violence perpetrated by the state, which Brum experiences personally: "The contamination of rivers with mercury and pesticides – this became a lived experience of violence within my own body as well, within me."

The story's epicentre, Altamira – not far from the site of the MST workers' massacre – has global importance for Brum. The Amazon is at the centre of a conflict between the "forces of destruction" represented by the policies and industries of white people, and the "forces of resistance" embodied by forest peoples. These include both the original inhabitants and those who came later due to internal migrations in Brazil, such as the *beiradeiros* (river people). The forest is also the place of conflict between values and interpretations. For instance, the riches of Westerners are viewed as poverty: true poverty is not seen as the lack of accumulated riches but being alienated from one's desires, like when working for a master. For inhabitants of the forest, "life is about living, not hoarding things". Poverty is not a lack of goods but "not having a choice".

As a white writer, Brum poses herself a question in the Amazon similar to that of Antigone: who can narrate the forest? Writing has been used as a tool of oppression, building barriers and legitimising appropriation – a process that has never stopped – through law and other codes. Turning writing into "a tool to denounce violence" opens up an inevitable contradiction.

In his essay *Ethnophilology*, Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg states that sciences such as philology and history from colonising civilisations, can be used to increase the awareness of those who are oppressed. Brum's field work is centred on gathering words directly from forest peoples through projects like *Sumaúma*, an independent trilingual web and radio news platform based "on both cutting-edge climate science and traditional Indigenous thinking." Brum's ambition is to bring democracy to those who have never truly lived it: not only to forest peoples but also to other entities that make up the forest. Lawyers and public prosecutors should not only deal with the rights of the human population but also "act in the name of a nonhuman person or a forest or river or mountain, or even the oceans".

Here, animism and Western law merge. Brum's project involves first-person narrative writing, where discourse is embodied within the stories and emotions of individuals.

From words to actions

Kopenawa and Blum write of a way to cultivate a new awareness of the Amazon which has global political implications and potential. Re-establishing an intercultural dialogue that goes beyond myths of the past, adapting the education of Westerners to Indigenous knowledge, and recognising the social and economic connections that tie us to the Amazon are indispensable steps toward political action that could aim to achieve more than reducing environmental damage.

As American philosopher and activist Dale Jamieson, founder of the Department of Environmental Studies at New York University, has said concerning climate change: "There is no alternative to the facts, no substitute for the evidence, no replacement for reason." And yet, says Jamieson, "even if we manage to think that something is a threat, we are not as reactive as if we *feel* it as a threat."[2] Only reason can enable us to understand what is really happening, but without feelings, reason is inert. Environmental knowledge alone is not sufficient to create a different feeling towards nature. Art and storytelling, shamanic beliefs, theatrical productions, journalism, and activism all have a role to play.

Translated by *Alama Adria*.

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