

Kopenawa's Shamanic Parrhesia:
Wasp Spirits vs. White Climate Epidemic

ABSTRACT:

In a 2014 article in *The Guardian*, an Indigenous shaman of the Yanomami people of the Amazon rainforest named Davi Kopenawa offers a devastating critique of white society. It is formed of excerpts from multiple interviews, which form the basis of his memoir *The Falling Sky*, compiled and translated by his French anthropologist collaborator Bruce Albert. Here I bring the dual lenses of philosophy and dance studies to explore how Kopenawa's lifelong interaction with white people facilitated his reworking of Yanomami shamanic discourse into a parrhesia against the "epidemic fumes" of climate change, on behalf of the Yanomami of the Amazon, white people, and all the beings of the earth.

Keywords: parrhesia; shamanism; Davi Kopenawa; Yanomami; Amazon rainforest; climate activism

I. Shamanic Parrhesia in *The Guardian*

In his 2014 article in *The Guardian*, "‘People in the west live squeezed together, frenzied as wasps in the nest’: An indigenous Yanomami leader and shaman from Brazil shares his views on wealth, the environment and politics," former environment editor John Vidal explains that the parrhesia therein from Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa is "taken from his autobiography and conversations at Survival International's offices in London" (the latter being a human rights NGO that specializes in Indigenous land rights).¹ Vidal recalls his first meeting with the Kopenawa, during the latter's first visit to London, as follows:

As we went down the escalator into the London Underground I could see he was nervous.

All these white people rushing around under the city must be spirits or ghosts, he said.

When we emerged, he was himself nearly white, shaken from his cosmological introduction to Britain.

According to Yanomami cosmology, the spirits are a class of beings who used to live on the surface of the earth, but who have since been buried by a previously fallen sky; thus, by going

¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/dec/30/western-living-yanomami-shaman-brazil>.

underground Kopenawa would be entering their realm, which is considered enormously dangerous since the spirits are believed to hunt and eat humans in exactly the same way that humans hunt and eat other species. But since Vidal does not mention this context, that leads the reader to falsely imagine Kopenawa as comically anxious and fearful, when in fact he is a courageous cultural ambassador of the Yanomami to the Global North, having (in Vidal's words) "been dubbed the Dalai Lama of the Rainforest," and "considered one of the most influential tribal leaders in Brazil." Thus, despite Vidal's implied sympathy for Kopenawa and his cause, this introductory section reaffirms a racist stereotype of Indigenous persons, thereby undermining the authority Kopenawa needs for his words to have their desired political effects.

After this brief reminiscence of his first meeting with Kopenawa, the rest of Vidal's article is divided into fifteen brief topics, whose main points I will now rehearse. First, Kopenawa sees England as overpopulated with spirits, perhaps because its people's "ancestors did not take care of the forest in which they came into being the way ours did." Second, he criticizes how the English have "innumerable possessions but their elders never give them to anyone," unlike the Yanomami, who demand generosity from all, and especially those with exceptional resources. Third, Kopenawa decries the global impacts of capitalism, perpetuated by white people who "do not seem concerned that they are making us all perish with the epidemic of fumes"—the latter being Kopenawa's shamanic ontology of the pollution behind climate change—"that escape from all these things." Fourth, Kopenawa finds New York frightening, especially in its treatment of the poor, remarking that "These white men are greedy and do not take care of those among them who have nothing." Fifth, he relates the pathological symptoms of his experience in big cities: "Whenever I stay there too long I become restless and cannot dream." Sixth, he excoriates white people for continuing to exacerbate climate change: "they

constantly devastate the land they live on and transform the waters they drink into quagmires!” Seventh, he challenges the racist stereotype of his Yanomami people as “warlike,” and denounces how white people make war in large part “to grab new land for minerals, to tear minerals out of the land.”² Eighth, he contrasts white peoples’ pathological greed with the more natural erotic attunement of the Yanomami: “They go to sleep thinking about it like we doze off with the nostalgia of a beautiful woman.” Ninth, he objects that white people’s politics “is nothing but mixed-up talk, the words of people who try to deceive.” Tenth, he criticizes alcohol abuse as facilitating a (pejorative) animality: “They drink beer and, having become ghosts, face off like chickens or starving dogs until they have killed each other.” Eleventh, he laments how “white people work in a ghost state and constantly swallow the wind of factory and machine fumes.” Twelfth, he criticizes the word “environment,” objecting that “What they refer to in this way is what remains of everything they have destroyed so far.” Thirteenth, he claims that meaningful speech is impossible for white people, living where the “roar of the machines and motors stands in the way of all the other sounds.” Fourteenth, he expresses wonder at white people’s appetite for destruction: “But where do the white people get this fierce desire to destroy the forest and its inhabitants?” And fifteenth, he bemoans how these tragedies span lifetimes and generations, observing that once white people’s “hair is white they disappear and the work – which never dies – survives them without end.”

Telescoping these critiques, the overall pattern is that “white people”—which for Kopenawa also includes Latinx people such as his fellow Brazilians—are more like the evil spirits of the Yanomami than like other human beings, as evidenced by pathologically extreme appetites

² As Alpert explains, “in the United States,” the Yanomami “had become (in)famous as the ‘Fierce People,’ predisposed to almost Hobbesian warfare, as in Napoleon Chagnon’s book (1968)” (427).

for death, destruction, and sickening, more specifically like the most mindless and greedy of the dangerous species in their world, namely wild pigs.

The reader familiar with Kopenawa and anthropological scholarship on him (as opposed to my own background in philosophy, where there has been, to the best of my knowledge, no engagement with him whatsoever), would likely want to balance my inventory of his bracing parrhesia with his celebrated diplomacy. This is the dominant theme, for example, of a special issue of *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* devoted to reviews of *The Falling Sky*, Kopenawa's 622-page memoir, transcribed and edited by his longtime collaborator, French anthropologist Bruce Alpert.³ It is also the centerpiece of the anthropological analyses of Aníbal G. Arregui.⁴ Though I grant the central importance of what Arregui calls "environmental diplomacy" to Kopenawa's work as a whole, in the present investigation I am concerned exclusively with the dimension of his work that aligns with the concept of parrhesia, which as I understand it requires a bracing and unvarnished directness that is inherently incompatible with diplomatic speech's necessary indirection, artifice, subterfuge, and even "betrayal," as Arregui notes (194). In other words, I am suggesting that part of Kopenawa's power is his parrhesia, which requires moments that risk his diplomacy in pursuit of a truth sharp enough to cut the bonds of apathy and entitlement, which continue to imprison most white people in the immobility of their vicious status quo.⁵

³ Davi Kopenawa & Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013).

⁴ See, for example, Aníbal G. Arregui, "This Mess is a "World!" Environmental Diplomats in the Mud of Anthropology," in *Indigenous Perceptions of the End of the World: Creating a Cosmopolitics of Change*, ed. Rosalyn Bold (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 183-202.

⁵ For more on the necessity of painful encounters to expanding white people's moral imagination, see Joshua M. Hall, "The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination: Lonely Delegation in Richard Wright's Haiku and *White Man, Listen!*" *Evental Aesthetics* 7(1): 2018, 62-89.

A different aspect of Arregui's analyses, though, is of central importance to the present investigation, namely an emphasis on the dancing dimension of Kopenawa's shamanism. While neither the special issue of *Hau* nor Arregui's essays emphasize dance explicitly, Arregui does emphasize three aspects of Kopenawa's communication that directly resonate with my own Figuration philosophy of dance.⁶ In brief, Arregui (1) affirms Kopenawa's "gestures" and "positionings" (two of the central aspects of dance in Figuration); (2) centers "the space in between these bodies" and the spontaneous improvisation of Kopenawa and his allies' publicly performed activism (like the improvisational Afro-Latin jazz dance of salsa that inspired Figuration); and (3) triangulates the "equivocal" discourses of colonizer and Indigenous with the material crisis of an injustice-imperiled earth (like the explicit social and ecological justice compartment of Figuration) (183, 184, 190, 196). In part for these reasons, I have elsewhere channeled Kopenawa's parrhesia into an assemblage of reconstructed spiritual practices of the global disempowered, which I call "Spirit/Dance" (to which I return in in my conclusion).⁷

II. Dancing Parrhesia in *The Falling Sky*

Having begun with Kopenawa's foray into the world of contemporary journalism, in Vidal's article in *The Guardian*, I now turn to *The Falling Sky*. I begin with a summary of Kopenawa's account of Yanomami shamanism, central to both his life and the book. In brief, Yanomami shamans ingest a hallucinogenic substance, namely *yãkoana* powder derived from the sap of local trees, to generate visions of "spirits" (as Albert translates the Yanomami word

⁶ For a summary of Figuration and its application to reconstructive decolonizing practice, see Joshua M. Hall, "Afro-Latin Dance as Reconstructive Gestural Discourse: The Figuration Philosophy of Dance on Salsa," *Research in Dance Education* 22(1): 2020, 73-87.

⁷ Joshua M. Hall, "Introducing Spirit/Dance: Reconstructed Spiritual Practices," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (forthcoming).

xapiri).⁸ Kopenawa's descriptions of these spirits suggest a cross between the Euro-American concept of "fairies" and "angels" (the latter being what "the missionaries call" these spirits, according to Kopenawa) (208). Crucially for the Yanomami, the spirits' entire being, as well as their communications with the shamans, consists of elaborate dances, which Kopenawa compares to images television, movies, photographs. This suggests that the spirit dances might be the figurative dances of lines and colors, on surfaces of in imagination, and thus potentially more accessible to white people.

More precisely, when fed by the *yãkoana* powder (i.e., when the shaman inhales the tree sap powder), the *xapiri* literally alter the shaman's body to render him capable of receiving and understanding their dancing messages. These spirits' dances are performed on shiny reflective surfaces (which Kopenawa calls "mirrors"), onto which the spirits descend, along gossamer-thin lines, from their palatial mansions in the skies. "As fine and translucent as spider webs or fishing lines," Kopenawa relates, "the *xapiri*'s shining paths will become fixed along our arms and legs" (referring to the limbs of an experienced Yanomami shaman) (378). "Then the spirits will come down along them to tear our chest and open a large clearing in it where they will be do their presentation dance," Kopenawa concludes, the interpretation of which dance is the shaman's constant, lifelong occupation (378). According to Yanomami oral history, the first ever shaman was the son of their creator god, *Omama*, who instructed his son in the shamanic art, in part, as follows: "Hold up the sky so it does not fall apart" (32). Kopenawa updates this warning as the imperative to avert a global climate catastrophe, to which he has dedicated his life. "Following

⁸ The translator elaborates on the *xapiri* in an endnote, as follows: "Any existing being has an 'image' (*utupë*) from the original times, an image which shamans can 'call,' 'bring down,' and 'make dance' as an 'auxiliary spirit' (*xapiri a*). These primordial image-beings ('spirits') are described as miniscule humanoids, wearing extremely bright, colorful feather ornaments, and body paint. Among the eastern Yanomami, the word for 'spirits' (plur. *xapiri pë*) also refers to shamans (*xapiri t ë pë*). Practicing shamanism is referred to as *xapirpruu*). These expressions refer to the fact that, during the shamanic trance, the shaman identifies with the 'auxiliary spirits' he is calling" (490n3).

on from” this mythical first shaman, Kopenawa claims, “many of our elders became shamans,” and “He taught them to make the spirits dance” (33).

From Albert’s outsider perspective, though, this practice initially looked unrecognizably different. “The [shamans] appear to be doing everything possible to impress their hosts with the exuberance of their performance,” he writes, recalling his “first experience of the elaborate chants, sumptuous ornamentation, and impressive *choreography* of such shamanic opera” (437, emphasis added). For Kopenawa, too, the core of the spirits is dancing, as is clear from his own simple explanation of the same event: “They were making the spirits dance together” (437). Thus, the dance of the spirits is performatively identical to the dance of the shamans. To this, I would add that this gestural, nonverbal language of dance is also important in the context of Kopenawa’s parrhesia, and represents a discourse that is at once more intuitively accessible (as motion in the shared spaces of our world) and also more resistant to verbal translation, equivocation, and the other modes of metaphysical and cosmopolitical discursive encounter that dominate the concerns of the special issue of *Hau*. As Albert notes in his reply to these reviewers, one must not lose sight of the life-and-death dimension of this work for Kopenawa, the same person whose bodily and cultural vulnerability are vividly expressed in the true form of the spirits and shaman’s work, namely dance (336-337).⁹

In support of this emphasis on dance’s gestural language, Kopenawa constantly emphasizes that the purpose of this spirit-dancing is a form of linguistic communication. “It is these spirits’ words that I make heard,” he insists, and “not just my own thought” (314). As Albert puts it in his afterword, “the ‘I’ of Davi Kopenawa’s account also embodies the voices of many shamanic ‘images’ of animal ancestors and cosmological beings” (447). Therefore, Albert

⁹ Bruce Albert, “*The Falling Sky*: In Lieu of a Response,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4(2): 2014, 335-337.

suggests, these interviews with Kopenawa amount to “shamanic intercultural exchanges” (448). And these exchanges’ central message is a completely original new “shamanic prophecy about the smoke of gold, the death of the shamans, and the falling sky,” created by Kopenawa in inspired conversation with his father-in-law, who remains the chief shaman of their community. This prophecy, Albert describes in an appendix as “joining shamanism with ethnohistory,” and “our cultural collaboration in defense of the Yanomami cause” (440, 441). More specifically, “by initiating Davi Kopenawa in shamanism,” his father-in-law “was able to work with him to elaborate a cosmological and political interpretation of the white world’s encroachment, one that proved very effective for defending Yanomami rights in general and his community’s rights in particular” (474). As a result, “By the end of these 1980s, these statements were carried by all the major media in Brazil and internationally” (475). Finally, Kopenawa “compelled the Brazilian government to pass a decree that officially guaranteed the Yanomami land rights” (475).

Shifting from the medium of Kopenawa’s parrhesia to his audience, he objects that white people “don’t think very far ahead,” and therefore beseeches them as follows: “I would like the white people to stop thinking that our forest is dead and placed here without reason,” and to “make them listen to the voice of the *xapiri* [the spirits] who play here incessantly, dancing on their glittering mirrors” (12). The source of this difficulty, more precisely, lies with the words of white people, which in Kopenawa’s view are ontologically deficient. With these words that are “are so different,” he concedes that these white folks “are probably clever,” and yet “they badly lack wisdom” (13). Humorously, he later claims that the sound of this white talk derives ultimately from “*Remori*, the ancestor of the big orange *remoremo moxi* bee,” who “gave white people their twisted tongue” (164). “Doesn’t their talk,” he prompts, “resemble the buzzing of

the bumblebees?” (164). By contrast, “the words of *Omama*,” the highest divinity in the Yanomami religion, “are very old, yet the shamans constantly renew them” (13).

Lingering on the subject of language, Kopenawa relates that white people are responsible for his own first name. “It was they who named me ‘Davi’,” he writes, “before my own people had even given me a nickname to follow the custom of our elders,” an example of what he calls white folks having “distributed their names to us without restraint” (18). This is important because, for the Yanomami, “it is an insult to pronounce someone’s name in his presence or that of his people” (18). Additionally, white people are indirectly responsible for Davi’s last name, because even though “Kopenawa” is “a real Yanomami name”—which refers to a species of wasp, and “comes from the wasp spirits who absorbed the blood spilled by *Arowë*, a great warrior of the beginning of time”—the spirits “gave me this name,” he relates, “because of the rage inside me to face the white people” (19).

Kopenawa then elaborates on this experience with his namesake wasp spirits, in the following passage:

My wife’s father, the great man of our *Watoriki* house at the foot of the Mountain of the Wind, had made me drink the powder that the shamans extract from the *yãkoana hi* tree. Under the effects of its power, I saw the spirits of the *kopena* wasps come down to me. They told me: “We are by your side and will protect you. This is why you will take the name Kopenawa!” It is so. This name comes from the wasp spirits who absorbed the blood spilled by *Arowë*, a great warrior of the beginning of time. My father-in-law made their images come down and gave them to me with his breath of life. Then I was able to see them dance for the first time (19).

Not again the centrality of dance. As with the *kopena* wasps, many other animal species possess spirits, according to Yanomami, as do other natural phenomena. “The sun and moon,” for example, “possess images that only the shamans can bring down and make dance,” Kopenawa explains. “They have a human appearance, like us, but the white people cannot know them” (29). The reason for this inability is that the white people’s way of thinking is other. Their memory is clever but entangled in smoky and obscure words. The path of their thought is often twisted and thorny. They do not truly know the things of the forest. They contemplate paper skins on which they have drawn their own words for hours. If they do not follow their lines, their thought gets lost (23).

Turning from the words of the white people to the perspective on the Yanomami expressed therein and shaped thereby, Kopenawa writes that “Today, white people think we should imitate them in every way,” but “this is not what we want” (22). Except, that is, on the following condition: “I think we will only be able to become white people the day white people transform themselves into Yanomami” (22). Until this hypothetical mutual transformation, though, one Yanomami difference that Kopenawa is anxious to maintain is that the spirits’ words “become new again each time they return to dance for a young shaman,” whereas white people “contemplate paper skins on which they have drawn their own words for hours” (23). Kopenawa’s contempt for this method notwithstanding, in the hopes that white people’s “thought about us will cease being so dark and twisted and maybe they will even wind up losing the will to destroy us,” he consented to having his “account drawn in the white people’s language so it could be heard far from the forest” (23). On this note of practicality, however, and returning to the issue of names, he notes that this last, ethnic name is one whose meaning must remain unknown to white people: “They want to know what our name Yanomami means,” but “We

want to protect our name,” in part because “Sometimes we are scared that the white people will finish us off” (25).

In an appendix, Albert describes the worst of this white savagery against the Yanomami, what has since become known as the Haximu Massacre, as follows:

Twelve Yanomami are savagely assassinated: two adult women, an old man, a young woman in her twenties who was visiting from *Hoomoxi*, three adolescents, two baby girls (a one-year-old and a three-year-old), and three boys ranging in age from six to eight years old... One of the old women, who is blind, is kicked to death. A baby sleeping in a hammock is wrapped in a scrap of cotton fabric and knifed to death (483).

Later, the “Haxima Massacre was legally characterized and judged as an attempt at genocide,” which “ruling was an unprecedented act in the history of Brazilian jurisprudence regarding the massacre of an Indian group” (487).

To explain white people’s distorted perspective on the Yanomami, Kopenawa zooms out from the present to their cosmological ancestry, which includes what he calls “the *napënapëri* spirits of the city white people’s ancestors” (161). These spirits, he elaborates, “look like white people, but compared to them they [the spirits] are very beautiful,” as well as being “wrapped in uniforms,” with their eyes “hidden by shining metal skins” (that is, eyeglasses) (161). Despite these differences, however, ultimately these “white people’s spirits are the images of” a “group of Yanomami ancestors carried away by a flood and turned into outsiders by *Omama*” (162). In short, these white people’s spirits are “The ghosts of the first white people,” who “taught today’s white people to build airplanes, machines to capture songs, and image skins” (162). Moreover, these white *xapiri* are the only ones who “truly know the *xawara* epidemic smoke, for it comes from the white people,” and for this reason “tirelessly protect” white people “from the

epidemics that spread there,” which is “why the white people do not die of the epidemic fumes as much as we do!” (162). Thus, unbeknownst to the white people, they descend from the Yanomami, being merely a lost, forgetful, and devastating once-Indigenous people.

Perhaps because of this shared Yanomami origin, at one point in Kopenawa’s life, when the “epidemic beings, whom we call *xawarari*, had severely struck and wounded” him, “the spirits of the white people’s ancestors” came down to Kopenawa and “rushed in to battle the *xawarari* beings who threatened to devour” him (163). This deliverance by the white people’s spirits, moreover, established a long-term relationship between them and Kopenawa. “Since then,” he relates, “I have continued to call down these white people’s ancestors’ *xapiri* who so valiantly avenged me” (163). Crucially for his climate change activism, this working relationship continues to empower Kopenawa to “share their words with those who listen to me when I become spirit myself” (163).

Going back in time to his own first encounter with white people, Kopenawa admits that he “found them frighteningly ugly and my heart was beating hard in my chest” (175). Though “the elders of the time feared the white people’s anger and their epidemics,” at first, by the time of Kopenawa’s writing, “our children no longer fear the white people” (175). His memories of white people’s earliest injustices against his people give him the anger “that has never left me since” (177). “It is the anger,” Kopenawa elaborates, “that makes me fight today against those outsiders who think only of burning the forest’s trees and soiling its rivers like hordes of peccaries [wild hogs]” (177). This rage only deepened as Kopenawa lost first his uncle, and then his mother, to [literal] epidemics from the white people” (198). Additionally, a Brazilian missionary, who had preached against extramarital sex, slept with numerous Yanomami women, impregnated one married woman, and took a young girl for his wife, which ultimately cost the

missionary his religious position, and persuaded the Yanomami that the Christian god does not exist (200). In particular, Kopenawa's stepfather, after failing to save his friend's life through a Christian healing, "began denouncing" the gospel "as a lie of the white people" (204).

Though thus disillusioned regarding religious white people, Kopenawa later accepted employment with the secular government officials from FUNAI, the National Indian Foundation of Brazil. He remembers that he "liked living with the white people and carrying out the tasks they gave me," and that he "really wanted to know them better and even imitate them" (212). In fact, this desire went still further. "I told myself: 'why not imitate the white people and become one of them?'" (213). Pursing that goal, Kopenawa "constantly observed them in silence, paying tremendous attention to them," being "already used to wearing shorts," and also familiar with "flip-flops" (213). Then, during a long hospital recovery from tuberculosis, Kopenawa became fluent in Portuguese, and "lost my fear of speaking to white people" (218). Once cured, however, he "decided to come back and live in the forest on my own," where, "little by little the desire to become a white man disappeared from my mind" (219).

Even worse than the missionaries and government officials, though, were the gold prospectors, whom the Yanomami call "land eaters," or "'outsider peccary spirits,' because they relentlessly dig into the ground and burrow in the mud like wild pigs looking for earthworms" (263). In his inaugural experience with political activism, Kopenawa marshaled a small group of Yanomami warriors to block the prospectors' efforts. Initially proceeding "to encircle the white people's camp, bows taut, ready to shoot our arrows," they found themselves outnumbered, and thus were forced to return later to the prospectors' camp with a larger force (264). In the meantime, the land eaters killed "the man whom I called father-in-law," after which they hung his body "in the forest," which moved Kopenawa to the grim conclusion that "the white people

who want to take our land are evil beings” (269, 270). Refusing their bribes to “make a great chief” of him, Kopenawa threatened them as follows: “Leave before you make us angry and before your mothers have to mourn your death!” (273). Eventually, Kopenawa and his fellow warriors kidnapped the leader of the land eaters, painting him “from head to toe with a black dye made of annatto pulp and soot,” after which he “never tried to come back to our home, nor did any other *garimpeiro* [prospector] for that matter!” (274).

The thing that makes the land eaters evil in Kopenawa’s view, and not merely humanly vicious, is that their actions go beyond the level of ethics, to the level of metaphysics. To wit, Kopenawa describes the “minerals and oil” sought by the prospectors as “evil and dangerous things, saturated with coughs and fevers” (282). The reason for the minerals’ inherent toxicity, according to Kopenawa’s reconstructed shamanic discourse, is that today’s “forest is the flesh and skin of our earth, which is the back of the old sky *Hutukara* that fell in the beginning of time” (238). Thus, the metal that “*Omama* hid in its soil is its [the old sky’s] skeleton, which the forest surrounds in human coolness” (283). More specifically, “What the white people call ‘minerals’ are the fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars, which fell down at the beginning of time” (283). Worse still, underneath this oil and these minerals is what Kopenawa calls “the father of gold,” whose spirit “appears to us as an underground mountain in the depth of the ground in order to hold the earth in place and prevent the thunder and lightning’s anger from tearing it apart” (286). If this gold-being is ever unearthed, Kopenawa claims, “The sky will fall apart again, and every last one of us will be annihilated” (287). In the meantime, when the gold’s “blood evaporates in the big pots of white people’s factories,” then “As it dies, it lets off the dangerous heat of its breath,” or “gold smoke,” which “poison fouls white people’s bodies

without their knowing” (288). And this, finally, is “the same *xawara* epidemic smoke, and it is truly our enemy” (288).

III. Conclusion: Spirit-Dancing Allies

Fortunately, however, Kopenawa can name at least some genuine white kindred spirits and allies in the cause to save the rainforest. “Chico Mendes,” he writes of the celebrated labor, environmental, and pro-Indigenous leader, “was a white man, but he grew up like us, in the middle of the forest”; and as such “refused to cut down and burn all its trees,” having instead “taken the forest for a friend and loved its beauty,” wanting the forest “to remain the way it was created” (394). Hearing Mendes’ words for the first time, Kopenawa

instantly thought: “This man is truly wise! His breath of life and his blood is like ours.

Maybe he is a son-in-law of *Omama*, like we are?” Then I wanted to talk to him, but right before I could meet him forest-eating white people killed him in an ambush (395).

Moreover, there is at least one entire group of white people in Kopenawa’s memoir who emerge virtuous, namely the Pro-Yanomami Commission (CCPY), whom he introduces as some “other white people,” different from FUNAI, who “had also started talking about defending our forest” (252).¹⁰ The difference, in part is that FUNAI “had never told me that I had to fight for it [the forest] myself!” (253). But CCPY did, and it was they, Kopenawa continues, who “started helping me to travel and speak in the big cities to defend our land” (253). According to his reconstructed shamanic discourse, “the ancient white people once drew their land to cut it up” with the cartographic lines of their maps; thus, today, “the white people’s thought remains full of

¹⁰ As one of the creators of this organization, Albert describes the CCPY as “an NGO that fought for almost thirty years to defend the rights of the Yanomami until they founded their own organization—the *Hutukara Associação Yanomami*,” of which Kopenawa “has served as president” since “its founding in 2004” (435).

forgetting,” not knowing “how to dream or make their ancestors’ images dance” (255). The Yanomami believe that they can communicate with the ancient white people’s spirits, however; for example, “the images of oxen and horses, the white people ancestors’ first pets, also came down and let us hear their worries about the burned land of the big farms alongside the roads” (257). Reaffirming the centrality of this spirit dancing communication yet again, Kopenawa admits that “If we did not know anything of the *xapiri*, we would also know nothing of the forest, and we would be as oblivious as the white people” (257). Perhaps, then, if white people can remember or relearn the spirit, they can help solve their climate crisis.

On this note, of the three main global religious traditions on which Spirit/Dance draws, I have published the most about the one closest to my own predominantly Indo-European ancestry, namely the Dionysus Mysteries (which scholars have shown to be intimately connected to the Hindu sect of Shivaism).¹¹ This Indo-European focus is intended, in part, to honor the current Dalai Lama’s advice to westerners to dig for buried spiritual treasures in their own traditions, rather than rushing abroad to forage for those resources in unfamiliar traditions (such as his own Tibetan Buddhism).¹² To summarize the results of my previous research on the Dionysian Mysteries, I have attempted to show how (1) since Nietzsche’s pivotal writings, most scholars and writers have ignored or suppressed Dionysus’s androgyny and his advocacy for women, queer people, the poor, foreigners, the city, democracy, and peace; (2) a marginalized line of scholarship recovers Euripides’ figuration of Dionysus’ (and Shiva’s) political progressiveness along exactly these axes of gender, race, class, nationality, etc.; and (3) numerous attempted

¹¹ For more, see Alain Daniélou, *God of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus*, reprint edition (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1992).

¹² See Tenzin Gyatso, *The Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings*, trans. Thupten Jinpa (New York: Wisdom, 2005).

wars of liberation in Ancient Rome were fought under the banner of Dionysus, including the slave revolt of Spartacus, whose paramour was a priestess of the god, preaching that Spartacus was divinely chosen by him for a mission of liberation.¹³ The main point here for Spirit/Dance is that there is a major political dimension to the Dionysian (and Shaivite) tradition that has been suppressed in Western history. This is vividly illustrated by the fact that, during ancient Athens' largest annual Dionysian festival, a standing reward was offered for anyone who brought to the city the decapitated head of a tyrant. Despite this rich political history of social justice revolution, many popular figures in the Global North that were originally derived from Dionysus have been censoriously stripped of that inheritance and its associated political valence. For example, the name of Irish playwright J. M. Barrie's titular character, "Peter Pan" is an intentional allusion to "Pan," the closest Roman equivalent (albeit also significantly watered-down politically) to the Greek "Dionysus."

In sum, the most important contribution from the Dionysian Mysteries to Spirit/Dance is the positing of dance as central to its spiritual practices, more specifically that a community healer should not only be a dancer, but also incorporate one or more literal or figurative kinds of dancing into their healing work. In short, certain kinds of dance are inherently healing, and a community healer should heal through dance. As for the second tradition on which Spirit/Dance draws, Vodou's most important contribution thereto is the positing of the community healer's dance as necessarily channeling an indefinite number of spirits into an improvisational community performance. In short, the dance of healing involves, not just one dancing healer, but indefinitely many figurative fellow-dancers; each seeming solo is, in truth, an ensemble. This is one reason why the dancer's openness to spontaneity and creative adaptation in healing is

¹³ For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Pregnant Materialist Natural Law: Bloch and Spartacus' Priestess of Dionysus," *Idealistic Studies* 52(2): 2022, 111-132.

essential. And the most important contribution of the third tradition, Kopenawa's shamanism, to Spirit/Dance is its positing of not only the community healer, but also the spiritual figures whom they channel in their dancing, as essentially dancing beings. In short, these interpreted dances constitute the fundamental form of spiritual communication. Moreover, these healing dances are not mere catalysts for revolution; they are the revolution itself, which has already begun as soon as the dance has begun, and will end if the dance does. Finally, this revolutionary healing dance must always be sustained, because it is necessary if our existence as the 99% is to become bearable, including in the context of impending climate catastrophe. In other words, it is not too late to dance; it is only too late not to start dancing.

Returning, on this note, from Spirit/Dance to Kopenawa, and by way of conclusion, though he has since found additional would-be white allies, he challenges them to match their actions to our lofty environmental rhetoric. "Now that the white people have invented their 'ecology' talk," he cautions, "they must not only repeat it in vain to make new lies out of it" (396). Instead, "They must really protect the forest and all those who live there" (396). This is Kopenawa's fondest hope, including for admittedly selfish reasons. "If the white people became wiser at last," he hopes, "my mind could become calm and joyful again," at which point he "would hide in the forest with my elders to drink the *yākoana* until it made me very thin again and I forgot the city" (399, 400). In the meantime, though, tirelessly holding up the fragile sky, Kopenawa concludes his memoir with praise for the spirits, in whose honor I conclude my own effort here as well:

They are valiant and magnificent. Their songs make our thoughts grow and keep them strong. This is why we will continue to make their images dance and defend their houses

as long as we are alive. We are inhabitants of the forest, and this is our way of being.

These are the words I truly want to make the white people understand (423).