

## ALIEN NIGHTS: BETWEEN THE FANTASTIC AND THE ORDINARY IN THE SPECULATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ACREAN CINEMA

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the film *Alien Nights* (Sérgio de Carvalho 2022) based on Juan José Saer's proposition of fiction as a "speculative anthropology". The approach analyzes the making of autochthonous and alien alterities by the discussion of imagistic and narrative construction of Rio Branco – considering the city as a central character of the movie – and of the other characters of the film, considering Michael Taussig and Tzvetan Todorov; the relation between ways of life, violence and the ordinary, in a dialogue with Veena Das and Donna Haraway; and the copoiesis of masculinities, femininities and kinship, which engenders ways of inhabiting the world and staying with the trouble.

**KEYWORDS:**  
Speculative  
anthropology;  
Anthropology of  
cinema; Acrean  
cinema; Urban  
violence; Youth.

### INTRODUCTION: MARTIAN DREAMS, ALIEN NIGHTS

In the evening of August 20, 2022, overturning expectations of the Brazilian cinematographic scene, the Acrean movie *Alien Nights*, based on the homonymous book by producer and director Sérgio de Carvalho, wins the Best Brazilian Movie by the Film

*Critics Jury at Gramado Festival. Gabriel Knoxx (best leading actor), Chico Diaz (best actor in a supporting role) and Joana Gatis (best actress in a supporting role) were also awarded. Among others, Alien Nights beat Mars 1, Brazilian nominee for Best Movie in a Foreign Language at the Oscar 2023 – which was not among the finalists –, a movie about Deivid, a black boy and talented soccer player who dreams about becoming an astrophysicist like his idol Neil deGrasse Tyson and being part of the first colonizing expedition to the planet Mars. After the prize in Gramado and its repercussion, Alien Nights joined several festivals, before entering the commercial movie theaters' circuit at the end of March 2023 and becoming available at Netflix in May 2023.*

If, in Mars 1, dreams of colonizing other worlds transcend the reality of a poor boy from Belo Horizonte, Alien Nights reverses the perspective, investigating how contemporary forms of colonization (or invasion) create alien realities in the daily life of Rio Branco and its youth, whose dreams might be the possible way to keep inhabiting the landscape where they were born, but that less and less seem to belong to them in face of *facções*<sup>2</sup> warfare and an uncertain future.

This article aims to analyze the feature movie Alien Nights following Juan José Saer's claim of fiction as "speculative anthropology". It will approach the making of autochthonous and alien alterities through the movie's imagery and narrative construction of Rio Branco – considering the city a central character of the movie –, and the other characters, in light of the works of Michal Taussig and Tzvetan Todorov; the relation between ways of life, violence and everyday life, in a dialogue with Veena Das and Donna Haraway; and the copoiesis of masculinities, femininities and kinship which engenders ways of inhabiting the world and staying with the trouble. This analysis is based in three occasions in which the movie has been watched: in Rio Branco's mall, after its release in theaters, in company of Rio Branco dwellers; in São Paulo, in company of Paulistanos that had been in Rio Branco; and after the movie became available on Netflix streaming service, which enables to pause the movie, for instance, to transcribe the rhymes<sup>3</sup>.

As a brief synopsis, Alien Nights presents, by an array of characters, the effects of the presence of *facções* in Rio Branco. Paulo is a young cis man of indigenous heritage struggling with addiction. Sandra is a young black

1 Mars 1 won the best feature movie by popular jury, screenplay, soundtrack categories and the special prize in Gramado.

2 *Facções* and *comandos* are Brazilian contemporary names for drug cartels or gangs, with local and national networks, a particular organization structure with sector, divisions, bylaws and decision channels, with leaderships both in and out of prison.

3 I thank the movie's director, Sérgio de Carvalho, who kindly sent me the English subtitles, so I could quote movie lines and rhymes as they were officially translated.


cis woman, the mother of Paulo's child, who works and raps at Rio Branco slam scene and dreams to move out of Rio Branco to go to college to study medicine. Rivelino is a black young cis man who sells drugs, circulates in the slam and the graffiti scene and has a non-public relationship with Sandra. Kika is a black travesti<sup>4</sup> woman, friend and coworker of Sandra, and also a participant of the slam. Alê is a white cis man, with a drug sales point in his house, aided by Rivelino, a dealer who refuses the violent methods of the faction. Beatriz is a white woman from the Northeast of Brazil, and the mother of Rivelino. Marta is an indigenous cis woman, living in the city outskirts and attending the local Pentecostal church, while anguished about her son Paulo comings and goings. In the plot, Paulo sinks deeper and deeper in addiction and debt and the "family" (the faction) condemns him to death. Rivelino, frustrated by the non-profitable operation with Alê and pressed by his mother and girlfriend to choose a grown up's path, succumbs to the temptation to join the facção but, refusing to kill Paulo as an initiation rite, ends up being chased and killed. Paulo, on the other hand, finds an escape route among his mother's kin, being cured by ayahuasca shamanism. Beatriz and Alê, unable to save Rivelino, become closer in the end, sharing their sorrows and solitudes.

### **ANTHROPOLOGY AS FICTION, FICTION AS ANTHROPOLOGY**

In one of his several articles debating the distinction between anthropology and ethnography, Tim Ingold defines ethnography as a descriptive task, which produces an account of the life lived or experienced by a people, in a time and place. A good ethnography is sensitive, contextually nuanced, richly detailed and has some limitations in its descriptive fidelity requirements. Anthropology, on the other hand, is a fundamentally speculative discipline, close to philosophy; however, it is a philosophy produced in the world, in conversation with its several inhabitants, a "generous, open-ended, comparative and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world which we all inhabit" (Ingold 2017, 22). As such, Ingold claims that anthropology and artistic practices have a crucial common aspect, to bring actions and works to presence, so we can address and answer them, directly (ibid., 25).

The debate on description, interpretation and analysis and their interdependence is complex (see, for instance, Strathern 2014), but I would like to keep Ingold's idea of speculative anthropology, to partially

4 As the actress' self-identify, considering the specific Brazilian meaning of *travesti* as a gender identity, reason why I chose not to translate the term as *transvestite*.



connect it to the speculative fabulations of Donna Haraway, sewed by the author to the feminist fabulations and scientific facts as a way to figure, make noticeable, consider, represent stories in which we can inhabit with others in a responsible and responsive way, becoming-with one another. In *Staying with the trouble* (2016) Haraway intertwines “string figures”, as a cat-cradles game, figurations that cross different scenarios and inhabitants of the Anthropocene. Haraway actually rejects the term Anthropocene, proposing substitutes that recognize the difference between the multiple human ways of cohabiting this world, and identifies the one that is actually leading us to destruction – plantationocene and capitalocene would be more precise terms, to which the author counterposes the term cthulhucene, evoking the ctonic possibilities of inhabiting the world as terrans. Some of Haraway’s figurations demand fabulation, a storytelling that enables to create ways of inhabiting a world which is falling into catastrophe, making kin through different ways of relating, and build refuges to preserve our companion species. The world inhabiting topic will be further resumed, with Veena Das.

In a curious manner, it is possible to connect Ingold and Haraway to Argentinian writer Juan José Saer’s claim that fiction is speculative anthropology, an idea with which he concludes the essay *El concepto de ficción*. Saer begins examining some self-assumed non-fictional genres, such as biographies and autobiographies, to show how the concept of truth is uncertain and gathers uneven and contradictory elements. Saer maintains that truth is not the contrary of fiction and that it is not possible to stablish a hierarchical dependence between both concepts without falling into a moral fantasy. The author therefore proposes that while “making a leap towards the unverifiable, fiction infinitely multiplies the possibilities of the process” (Saer 2009-1997, 2). The double character of fiction merges, in an inevitable way, “neither falsehood nor truth, as the opposite that excludes. Rather, it is about the problematic concepts that embody the main reason of being for fiction” (ibid, 4).

Through partial connections with those three speculative anthropology propositions – Ingold, Haraway and Saer – I suggest considering the feature movie *Alien Nights* as a science fiction work, not only due to the invocation of the genre by the aliens on the title, but also due to the speculative character that investigates conditions and possibilities of Amazonian urban live in face of facções warfare, which is also a war of worlds; the possibilities of becoming-with others inhabiting the same world and other worlds it elicits; and the necessary merging of empirical and imaginary that enables to multiply the approach to the topics that the movie inquires.

## ACRE AND THE ALIENS

While watching the movie for the second time, at Cine Petra Belas Artes (a theater dedicated to non-mainstream movies) in São Paulo, my friend, an economist from São Paulo, who had been in Acre several times in the last fifteen years, commented that “the title had to mention something about aliens to make people watch a movie about Acre. Aliens or dinosaurs”. She was referring to jokes that place aliens, dinosaurs, weird beings or exotic stereotypes from Amazonia and its indigenous peoples as dwellers of a place somewhat imaginary, as resumed in the popular tease: “Does Acre exist?”. Coming home from the theater, my other companion, who has lived in Acre during an immersion period in one of the daimist religions, showed me another movie about the state, actually named “Acre does exist”, available on Youtube. It is a documentary produced by a group of people from São Paulo travelling by car from São Paulo to Acre, who talk to a set of characters, such as rubber tappers, Daime adepts, indigenous people, bar owners, students and teenagers with plots of love to tell. A documentary aiming not only to prove that “Acre does exist”, but to make it intelligible to a public from the southeast who knows very little about the state, in an almost pedagogic tone that can’t avoid producing some exoticisms of its own. In other words, the naturalistic feature of the documentary, merging languages of objectivity and discovery, but not engaging in symmetric and responsive relations with its different characters, present the people from Acre as others to be explained, who live different from the familiar universe of the southeast (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro...), which is the parameter of normality of contemporary Brazil mainstream.

Alien Nights yield very little to didacticism as it constructs its alterities, so that some of its critics pointed out that the movie is “somehow opaque” (see Araújo 2023). As the early mentioned documentary, Sérgio de Carvalho’s feature movie is more focused on presenting characters rather than develop a deep plot, and so its script was criticized in some reviews. The first hosts of the narrative are the boa snake and the hatxã kuin chants, familiar to those who had taken part on a nixi pãe (ayahuasca) ceremony with the Huni Kuin indigenous people, but unknown to the broader audience. The snake scales dominate the zoom image and pulse, in an offbeat rhythm with the chant repetition, producing a visceral effect. We are within the dream of Paulo (Adanilo Reis), just before he suddenly awakes at a shed with little rays of sunlight entering through the plank’s gaps. Paulo opens the window and vomits, perhaps a cleanse provoked by the emetic effect of the forest medicines, or as an after effect of other psychoactive substances. Substances whose control of the traffic and distribution circuits turned Rio Branco in a facções warzone, also a war of worlds – a trope shared by colonialism and science fiction. Paulo, as we would find out along the scenes, lives between his indigenous roots and the slum’s urban life, shared with other young characters of the movie. Paulo returns to his mother’s

house, Marta (Chica Arara), asking for money and shelter, and finds her listening to gospel radio shows. As he tells her about the snake dream and describes her as a demon who wants to get him, Marta scolds him and asks him to go to church with her. In a scene at the church, Marta listens the preaching of a life of peace and freedom from the common evils that haunts the slum peripheries<sup>5</sup>: unemployment, drugs, ubiquitous afflictions of capitalism. It is only a fraction of the cosmological movements between forest and city, worlds along which Marta, Paulo and the snake fare.

Other worlds are invoked in the next scene, after Paulo's presentation, in a two-story house porch with a view to some of Rio Brancos' districts. Alê (Chico Diaz), a drug dealer, plays a guitar singing a Raul Seixas song and sharing a joint with his helper Rivelino (Gabriel Knoxx). Alê wants to take Rivelino to Peru, to visit Machu Pichu, which is the flying saucer bus station according to the old hippie, who claims that it is necessary to know the many worlds inside our worlds, and not stay only in this plan. Rivelino listens to his boss as he spray paints a canvas, portraying a flying saucer over Rio Branco, abducting people and invading the city with an outer space alterity. In other scenes, Rivelino is going to paint the same flying saucer on city walls with a stencil, among other graffiti and murals. As he evaluates the canvas being painted in his porch's drug shop, Alê asks Rivelino to draw some stars in the dark sky, as it is necessary to gaze those other destinies besides planet Earth. Rivelino, in turn, answers that he hardly knows Rio Branco, so why should he go to Peru? Then, Rivelino raps the rhymes he was working on, engaging tropes of slum, social inequity, a youth with little perspectives. His rap is interrupted by screams at the house gate, an addict aching for drugs, although already in debt with Alê. He scolds him, with an almost fatherly advice, and sends the guy away with some product. Rivelino resents Alê's tolerance, comparing it to the strictness of the dealers of the "family" (the *facção*), which actually have a lucrative business. Alê replies that it is not possible to call the *facção* a "family", as family does not work like that, with "kids killing kids".

The critic Inácio Araújo, reviewing the movie to the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, claims that the fantastic is the alien in the movie. He writes:

In fact, within this mix of forest and desert, this non-place, the narcotraffic infiltrates among the white, black and indigenous peoples – those aliens – as easy as the originary peoples are dispossessed of their culture and thrown into a Pentecostal church (Araújo 2023)


<sup>5</sup> The term periphery in the Brazilian context refers to a geographical location (the city outskirts, but also a place far from the Brazilian centers of money and politics, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília), to a socioeconomic profile (an impoverished area, a slum, a ghetto, but not necessarily a *favela*) and a stigmatized lifestyle that reclaims its name in empowerment discourses.



The critic's feeling about a non-place is caused by, in his words, "the opacity", the movie's choice of not explaining the landscapes it builds. The concept of opacity belongs to certain branches of Discourse Analysis and, as the cardinal work of Ismail Xavier on cinematographic analysis, has a polysemic sense along with its conceptual pair, "transparence". Opacity can refer to an intrinsic thickness in every speech, to a presentation mode that reveals the dispositive operation and conveys reflexivity, or to a way of meaning that retains ambivalence and does not reveal itself. Without disagreeing with Araújo in this point, I consider that the imagistic and narrative construction of the speculative anthropology of *Alien Nights* engages visuality practices that aim at the same time to embody the vision and refuse common tropes of the making of Amazonian alterity to the rest of the country's frame, since it shows Rio Branco as slum, peripheral, autochthonous and invaded by other alterities.

We see an Amazonian city in the beginning of the 21st Century. Large avenues with giant palm trees composing a landscape project of uncertain accomplishment are the connection between an outskirts world of wooden board houses, with outside waterspouts and stick storage platforms, streams and alleys; and the central areas where gentrification and degradation melds. Rio Acre divides the First and the Second District of Rio Branco and is the background of some scenes. Nevertheless, the film settings refuse the heritage buildings, the power scenarios (see Zukin 1991), the obvious landscapes, the temptation of an overview of the forest and the river. There is no bodyless vision in the movie. In several moments, the hand camera follows the characters, as it chases them in their correes (errands, habitual ways and actions, jobs). The city reveals itself as it is fared, although not from the perspective of a pedestrian, an observer, but in a vision Bruno Latour calls *oligopticon*:

By this neologism I mean narrow windows through which, via numerous narrow channels, we can link up with only some aspects of beings (human and non-human) which together comprise the city. [...] Ultimately, a city cannot be the framework within which an individual moves, simply because this framework itself is made of nothing more than traces left by other individuals who have moved about or are still there, in place. Favoring the point of view of the pedestrian, the person strolling, wondering around, prevents us from understanding what is so particular about living in the city; it cuts us off from those channels that precisely enable us not to distinguish the frame from the person moving about within it. A space can become more real only if we are able to follow these channels. (Latour 2009)



In *Alien Nights*, young men wander the high zones of the city, with motorbikes purchased with drug money, while dealing in the outskirts alleys and stilt house clusters not reached by urbanization and gentrification projects that build a massive quantity of standard low-income houses, or projects that raid Rio Branco and other Amazonian cities. The bar that serves as the faction headquarter is by the river in the Gameleira zone, one of many historical buildings gentrified during the Labor Party's government terms in Acre, to be consumed as a cultural and touristic landscape. A landscape whose previous memories are portrayed in photographic murals at the New Old Market, which is a setting absent from the movie. In the colonial imaginary and the narrative tropes that make it, both Amazonia and its indigenous peoples are usually in opposition with the city, and their copresence is almost an oxymoron (see discussion at Fiori 2018, chap. 2).

It is worth observing the way Araújo uses the category of fantastic as the movie aliens, highlighting a scene at the end of the movie in which Rivelino's execution, as a punishment by *facção* members, one that he had just joined, after he refuses to kill Paulo and help him to flee, is cut by scenes of pulsing red and blue flickering lights. Lights that also daze Alê, while he is searching for his apprentice even after they part ways. During his search, Alê finds aliens, although not the ones he was expecting.

The fantastic is one of the designations of speculative fiction, a literary genre in a classification logic that does not precisely follow the definition given by Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov (1970) defines the fantastic genre as standing between "uncanny" and "marvelous", as the fantastic occurs in the uncertainty over an event that apparently cannot be explained by the laws of our world. The uncertainty and hesitation in the interpretation of facts between real and imaginary builds the fantastic character of a narrative. In turn, "fantastic realism" has defined some Latin-American 20th Century literature, with Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez as its most famous name, author of many narratives set in Amazonian landscapes where reality, and even everyday life, seems fantastic to others in the way they are portrayed.

The concept of fantastic realism returns to anthropology. Michel Taussig, in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* summons the magic realism in his analysis on terror and cure in Colombian Putumayo.

Cultures of terror are nourished by the intermingling of silence and myth in which the fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious flourishes by means of rumor woven finely into webs of magical realism. It is also clear that the victimizer needs the victim to create truth, objectifying fantasy in the discourse of the other (Taussig 1987, 8)



In Taussig's wide analysis on the colonialist terrors of caucho, the multiplication of narratives and rumors create the actual terror that they were talking about, through an epistemic murk. Teresa Caldeira (2000) engages the concepts of culture of terror and epistemic murk to describe the "talk of crime", which creates urban landscapes in webs woven by fear and the reiterated production of stereotypes of dangerous and criminal people and places.


Taussig writes about Putumayo, in Colombian Amazonia, based on Roger Casement's reports, Joseph Conrad's fiction and his own ethnographic work, decades later. Caldeira writes about São Paulo, the prototype of a violent megalopolis in Brazil (besides Rio de Janeiro, given each one's specificities), based on ethnographic work and the analysis of news and data on urban violence.

Alien Nights, in turn, creates dialectic, juxtaposed images that disturb the comprehension of reality and the fantastic in Acre. The autochthonous inhabitants of Amazonia persist in their presence and remind others of their agencies. The aliens are not the indigenous, the boa snake and the ayahuasca. The war of facções, as an actualization since the end of the 20th century of the colonialist conflicts in Amazonia, now emerges in the local and international markets of illegal psychoactive substances (in Acre, mostly the coca paste, used to produce cocaine and crack) is the alien undertake of the world, dispossessing many, recruiting others, in the antipode embodied by Paulo (the addict) and Rivelino (the dealer apprentice). Of course, without disregarding the way the aliens dwelling, the imaginary and the night sky lights seem, told and retold by Acreans and outsiders<sup>6</sup>.

## **VIOLENCE AND THE ORDINARY**

Paulo, Rivelino and other characters have grown up and experienced dispossession processes together. We know by a dialogue with his mother Beatriz (Joana Gatis) that Rivelino, who is 17 years-old, is a school dropout. Besides his wall art, the slam and drug dealing, his desire focuses on Sandra (Gleici Damasceno). His love rhymes are mocked by his friends. "He is in love" - they tease, while he asks to borrow the motorbike to "take his baby for a ride". Sandra has a toddler son with Paulo, works in a gentrified area restaurant with her friend Kika (Kika Sena) and dreams about studying medicine in Bolivia or in São Paulo. "I even talked with the

<sup>6</sup> In the episode "Vozes do Além" [Voices from beyond], of the *Rádio Novelo* podcast, online since September 21, 2023, the Acrean Victor Manoel narrates changes in life in Cruzeiro do Sul, Acre, after the growth of narcotraffic, mentioning the movie *Alien Nights* and his own childhood memories, and insists on considering the lights in the sky and UFOs in his alien gallery.



Slam girls there, to stay with them”, Sandra tells Rivelino, waving webs within hip hop and peripheric worlds. The South of Brazil and Bolivia are alternatives for young people wishing to go to Med School when they know they don’t stand a chance at SISU (a sort of Brazilian ACTs) to be accepted at the Universidade Federal do Acre (mainly occupied by outsider students without any goal to remain in the state), nor money to pay for a private course. Rivelino does not foresee any study or professionalization as a future project and gets upset by his mother’s pressures to “quit moonlighting”, go back to school or get a job. He is also annoyed by Sandra’s criticism, as he questions her about why they don’t take on their relationship. “I know you believe I’m one of those guys” he complains. She denies, but answers “But I’m gonna give it you straight. You keep hanging around, from here to there. You don’t know where you are going”. With the two significant women in his life, the mother and the girlfriend, questioning his way of life, Rivelino gets tired of Alê’s non-profitable model of drug dealing, who in the end forgives Paulo’s debts and erratic behavior, as Paulo says he wants to “go back” – to his mother’s home and a clean life. Giving up Alê’s pointless paternalism, Rivelino decides to seek the benefits promised by the organized narcotraffic facção, joining another “family”.

Many researchers, from different theoretical and political perspectives, have written about the rhetoric of fast gains and a luxurious, yet short, life that seduces peripheral and slum youth to narcotraffic. As Bruno Paes Manso and Camila Nunes Dias write:

Deep down, there is a battle for souls going on. Each individual, throughout their life, lives moments of decisive choice that may define their trajectory. In this masculine world [...] there are many crossroads. The benefits offered by crime are seductive, even if illusional – a life full of adventures, sensual women, money, cars, bikes, drugs and parties. It comes at a high cost: probably premature death or prison. The growth of the drug market shows that young men are led to follow this path. The discourses defending “thug life” as a way of resistance to the “oppressive system” help to forge a collective and political sense to the decision – even if, fundamentally, the criminal is aiming to earn money, with less effort, in self-benefit (2018, 327-8, my highlights)

This quote from the book *A Guerra: a ascensão do PCC e o mundo do crime no Brasil* (Manso and Nunes 2018) (in free translation: *The War: the growth of PCC and the world of crime in Brazil*), presents some interesting counterpoints to think on the plot of the movie. The idea of choices in an individual life trajectory is close, for instance, to Gilberto Velho’s concept of “fields of possibilities” emerging from lifestyles and value configuration

in which an individual circulates, in books such as *Individualismo e Cultura* (1997) and *Desvio e Divergência* (1985) (focused rather on the middle class of Rio de Janeiro than on peripheral or slum trajectories). I will address the configuration of values and lifestyles of the masculine world in the next section. If the idea of field of possibilities allows us to escape some voluntarist traps or merely pragmatic concepts of atomized and rational individuals<sup>7</sup>, as strictly liberal interpretations would lead us, it also allows us to dodge socioeconomical determinisms that would condemn all peripheral and slum youth to the gravitational attraction of criminality, a stance that builds the ideological imaginary that enables all sorts of rights violations in peripheral and slum communities. However, to consider only fields of possibilities is not enough to understand the ways of life and death that takes place there, as well as the relations between daily life, ordinary and violence.

Veena Das, in the first chapter of *Life and Words: violence and the descent into the ordinary* (2007), discusses in dialogue with Wittgenstein and S. Cavell the issue of language as a feature of human sociality and the anthropological emphasis in a dense description of the forms of life in order to understand it. Das retrieves from Cavell the critique to the conventional notion of form of life, as “it not only obscures the mutual absorption of the natural and the social but also emphasizes form at the expense of life” (Das, 2007, p. 15). The notion of form of life allows to inquire the limit of “what or who is recognized as human within a social form and provides the conditions of the use of criteria as applied to others” (ibid.). Das evokes Foucault’s biopolitics and Agamben’s bare life concepts, to show the way the biopolitics state produces bodies that are possible to kill without sanction. Das analysis unfolds in the sense of identifying how recognition of one “other” as being part of the community or not and being part of life itself or not is something woven in the daily life itself. In this sense, violence is sewed in the daily life fabric, whether the one lived in the present, or past events that are made present and sometimes are presented as poisonous knowledge, not enunciated, but sometimes showed by voices and their silences.

The presence of *facções* and violence that inscribe themselves in the peripheral forms of life in Rio Branco, added to the structural violences of racism and social inequity experienced by the peripheral youth, inflects the notion of field of possibilities in the process of intelligibility in the movie character’s trajectories, in their different experiences of dispossession, exclusion and resistance. Sandra, Kika and Rivelino objectify this experience of violence and exclusion in the words, sounds and body expression of the slam, which transforms the small semicircle

<sup>7</sup> It is worth to keep the strong Simmelian influence in Gilberto Velho’s work in mind.

bleachers built in public squares and parks in the agora of a city where the notion of public sphere was never fulfilled. At the point of 49 minutes of the movie, two teenagers battle their rhymes, presenting their verses (not entirely transcribed here as the mixture of sounds in the scene hides some words):

...dominates the majority  
But if it didn't exist The kids wouldn't love each other  
Don't get a job to make your day  
But do armed robbery On the highway

...it just grows,  
Unemployment is rising no space at the daycare  
If I rap, it won't change I feed on rap  
I don't even dream of retiring Cause I know there's no time  
for this

...for the poor  
To kill his hunger Go after the money  
And the kids who discover the taste of hunger  
At eight years old play the role of your father

...It's ironic  
The councilor's pocket is so full and we only have an empty  
pot  
Fury speaks louder more than any phrase of love  
And it hits everyone it's got no gender or color!

However, there is something expressed acutely in other interactions. Close to minute 28, Paulo comes near the slam, filthy and starving, looking for Sandra, and he gets sent away by Rivelino. He shows up again, a few scenes later, begging for drugs at Alê's selling point and is once again kicked out by Rivelino, being beaten up until Alê intervenes, the point of rupture between Alê and Rivelino, who runs to join the "family" of the facção. Paulo seeks shelter first with Sandra – who cleans his injuries, but doesn't let him stay at her place –, then with his mother, Marta. Paulo is almost crossing the border of the bare life, becoming killable, as he is turning into a "nóia" (junkie), a category that rips apart his relations as son, boyfriend, father, friend.

Rivelino, in turn, crosses this same frontier as he establishes relations with the family. Presenting himself at the drug den, then at the headquarter of the facção, he declares that he wants to join the family, that he already works selling drugs and he knows the bylaws of the facção. He, then, "wears the shirt". But the last step is taking part in his first execution. Following other guys of the facção to a hill with a water tank in the

shape of a flying saucer, he is called to the task of shooting Paulo. He is already in the "space of death" described by Taussig (1987) but begs for his life. Rivelino hesitates, while his "brothers" urge him, screaming and threatening him, and he uses his gun to stop his peers and free Paulo. They both run away being accused of "vacilão" ("fucking rat", a traitor) and, because of that, are sentenced to die.

Rivelino tries to scape, asking his mother to take him to her birthplace, to see the ocean, although he is incapable of giving details about the death threat he is facing. Beatriz, who understands the stakes too late, asks Alê to find Rivelino, in vain. Rivelino is caught, surrounded in one of the alleys he used to graffiti, and taken to be executed in front of the water tank/flying saucer, a place where the bullet shot by a new member of the facção is equal to an alien abduction by this threatening alterity that had invaded the state. Paulo also seeks help from his mother and the indigenous kinship network in the city, and is brought to a shamanic cure that reveals that the boa snake wasn't there to chase him, but to bring him back to a world that is possible to be inhabited, under the samaúma tree. The imagistic counterpoint between the water tank/flying saucer and the samaúma tree (a tree sacred to indigenous people of the region, in a raw definition) conveys the pair alien – autochthonous, both these worlds accessed by the characters from Amazonia and the peripheric slums, as they make and inhabit their forms of life.

The movie ends with a written message informing that "since the invasion of criminal groups from Southeastern Brazil to Amazonia, increased by 183% the children and teenagers murdered in the last ten years in the state of Acre". This message, although it is a resource to instantiate the issue of organized crime violence in the state, making this a movie on "social matters", also marks the great silences of the movie, which does not inform the names of the facções and, more crucially, does not bring a single element of state responsibility in the production of this scenario, ignoring both the law enforcement violence and the outrageous growth of imprisonment in Acre.

The War, previously mentioned, informs that in 2013 the facção "Bonde dos 13" was created in Acre, later creating links with the facção "Primeiro Comando da Capital" (PCC), from São Paulo, that has a national and international scope. Although Alê insists that it is "boys killing boys", the movie doesn't address the crucial point of territorial and market dispute between "Bonde dos 13" and "Comando Vermelho" (from Rio de Janeiro), which has advanced over the state capital and countryside in recent years, making the rates of violent crimes blow up, and also doesn't show the systematic police violence and accelerated expansion of the

imprisonment system and devices of repressive public security. An event that sews this violence in Rio Branco's daily life was, on October 20th, in the Francisco de Oliveira Conde prison facility, when "Bonde dos 13", allied with PCC, ordered uprisings in three blocks to attack "Comando Vermelho" members, resulting in several deaths inside the complex and other murderers in the city (Manso and Nunes 2018, 22, 28-29). Bruno Manso and Camila Nunes Dias narrate that:

After the split between PCC and CV in 2016, followed by uprisings in Brazil's prisons, the rivalry intensified between Acrean criminal groups. The conflicts in 2017 would arrive with the proibidões [a.n. similar to gangsta] rap and funk, narrating the history of the group and its leaders. Rivals would record the killings with cellphones and share them in social media (ibid., 277)

This proibidão aesthetic emerges at 27 minutes of the movie, within the slam circle, precisely when Rivelino kicks off Paulo, and the scenes intertwine. The rhymes start:

...An achievement to me.  
A gang's child  
I joined the gang, dude.  
I'm on the crew, Jude.  
Listening to "Babylon"  
This to me is "Mucilon"  
I'm rapping since I was a kiddo  
Privilege of being close  
To who's always on top

After the word "facção" (gang in the subtitle translation), the circle interrupts the beat and becomes silent. The rapper questions if they are not going to keep the flow and the Bboy says he "doesn't have to". "Are you forgetting who we are?" asks the rapper from the facção. After some argument, Sandra asks "Are you fucking with us? What's up with you? Did you forget why we are doing this here?". The facção members leave in their motorbike, in the next scene, to the Second district of Rio Branco. The expulsion of Paulo, the "junkie", and of the facção members by the slam circle is juxtaposed, purifying the slam of the association with addiction and the facções and keeping it as a resistance and empowerment space of the peripheries, even if other rhymes mentioning "robbery" are not perceived as something bad, as politicians have full pockets, and their own plates are empty. Alien Night characters, as the movie itself, establish some anathemas that are, notwithstanding, part of forms of life portrayed as poisonous knowledge and that, in one way or another, will outbreak in the events of their lives.



### **FAMILIES AND BROTHERS, SONS AND MOTHERS, TOUGH LOVE**

In two moments of the movie, Alê is the one who questions the label “family” used by the facções. In the first talk with Rivelino, previously described, and in his clash with Serjão, a leader of the facção, in their headquarter bar. Pointing his finger, Alê says “Put this in your head, Serjão! This isn’t a family at all. All those boys are killing each other. They are killing each other. You’re killing for nothing. I met you when you were 12. This guy, nine. This one, eight. They’re just boys. You are killing yourself. Put that shit in your head”. Serjão, repeatedly ordering Alê to put down his finger, sums up “Is it crime chasing progress, isn’t it?”. Alê, speechless in face of this signature of the ways of the facção in Serjão’s statement, only insists “Rivelino is just 17 years old” and backs off, gesticulating his fingers as a gun pointed to the facção members and himself, in an ambiguous gesture between threat and the claim of the irrationality of fratricide violence. My companions at the movie criticized this scene as implausible, as someone entering the drug house without the proper “proceder” (procedure, slum etiquette) would not escape alive or, at least, would have his death sentence.

Nevertheless, the scene is useful to illustrate possible differences in intergeneration concepts of family. Mentioning that he knew the facção members since they were kids, as well as in his behavior with Rivelino, Alê assumes a fatherly role, in his own fashion, as someone who can advise and teach. The family of the facção does not have fathers; they have “brothers” (and “sisters-in-law”), while they are wearing the shirt (being loyal). To break the laws, the bylaws, to tear the shirt, ceases kinship. Anyway, it is a universe of faulty and absent fatherhoods. Nothing is known about the fathers of the young people, Paulo, Rivelino, Sandra and Kika. Paulo is the father of Sandra’s toddler, but also incapable of assuming the father role. He is the one who needs care. Rivelino feels, in his coming of age to adulthood, his manhood potency questioned by his mother’s demands “you should help me, I don’t know, quit moonlighting. Get a real job. Get back to school”, as well as Sandra’s demands, and surrender to the call of the male world and easy money promises of the facção, even if shortly, and as his own bane. Demanded to assume a provider male role, he chooses the violent and ephemeral masculinity of crime.

In this peripheric slum space, what holds the daily life are the different femininities that encompass, but are not limited to, motherhood. Beatriz raises Rivelino alone, which does not stop her to go to parties, dance, drink and find pleasure in other men’s bodies. Sensing the danger Rivelino is falling into, she asks Alê to fire him and, later, asks Alê to try to save her son from the facção. It is in Alê’s arms, in the last movie scene, that she lays her sorrow for the dead son. Beatriz and Alê, two white people, two

outsiders, living in Rio Branco for a long time, but with the roots they tried to grow sewed by recent events.

Sandra, in turn, dreams to study medicine and dives into the slam. When questioned by Rivelino to leave her kid (Paulo's son) to go to university, she silences between possible and unsure answers in face of her solo parenting, like almost all women. As she plans uncertain futures, Sandra works besides Kika, who also lives in the world of the slam with her and other women. At 25 minutes of the movie, another young black woman shouts speedy rhymes at the circle:

Today I'm free for my joy  
I keep rhyming, releasing my flow  
They call me Black and I know who I am  
I'm a beautiful Black girl!  
You left me breathless and nothing I say will be in quotes  
My body will be my scream,  
even if it's silenced!  
Because I feel what happens  
if I come across the dark night  
and only the light from the fifth pole will keep me safe  
Uncertain, but likely that on the third day  
A naked and scarred body will be found  
Whose face we never saw,  
but certainly loved  
But a woman taken by a man's cruel thirst  
It's beautiful, right?  
Why not women?  
Why not fags?  
Why not Black women?  
Why not Trannies?  
Raped lives!

This non-existence, this non-place of women that the rhymes question, and as questioning refute it, inscribe the women as this other – as pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir, for instance – non-alien, but insistently present in face of a male violent world. And, more importantly, the verses address the sensible issue of the voice, an important concept to Das. Not a synonymous of enunciation, as the understanding of the voice is not the same of the discourse, but what animates them, gives them life (Das 2007, 06). To focus on the voice is to raise correlated questions, as the silence and the ways voices can be heard, what spaces are open to speech. The movie slam, as I have described, silences the voices of the *facção*, that nonetheless became audible through the living bodies, bikes and guns of its members, and in the death sentences and gunshots that produce the dead bodies of the “kids”, as Alê phrases it. In women's verses, on the other hand, it is said

that their bodies are their screams, even if silenced, evoking the gender violence and femicide also endemic in the state. The silenced body, as it is dead, is capable to proclaim this violence, and has in slam women their spokes-persons, fulfilling the task described by Haraway (2016) that there shall be speakers-of-the-dead in a world in extinction. However, if what matters is what gives voices their life, it is also by the contact with life, in the ordinary, that it is possible for the recognition of the other and of the voices that enounce to exist, as every relationship requires a repeated attention to ordinary elements. Das comments how, in matters of pain, there is some inexpressibility that prevents it to be communicated by voice and by language; it is necessary to let others' pain to happen to oneself to recognize it. The women of *Alien Nights* do not die along the movie but are witnesses and spoke-persons of other deaths, other absences, of many pains, while they inhabit and stay with the trouble, in Donna Haraway's words, in a world of violent and ephemeral masculinities, that will not share the work of parenthood and the weaving of daily life.

In a scene, almost an interlude of the movie, Kika and Sandra are seen in close-up, talking by Rio Acre's side

KIKA: I get so calm when I'm around you.

SANDRA: You give me strength, Kika. I'm so proud of the woman you've become. [silence, Sandra's smile fades in melancholy] When did we get lost? We all grew up together.

KIKA: Do you remember when we were girls? We always managed to get everything we wanted.

SANDRA: I remember.

KIKA: This will pass. We're together.

SANDRA: You're my hope, Kika. My hope.

KIKA: I'm nothing. It's just the strength of the orishas, dear. Check it out.

Kika starts to sing, in a melodious tune that differs from the rhymes of the slam or an Umbanda chant; closer to singers like Pablo or Lynn da Quebrada, which have been disturbing binary gender classifications in Brazilian pop music.

How I want to see the sea  
To dive so deeply and find  
Yemoja, Yemoja  
Yemoja gave me strength to fight like a mermaid  
Yes, a mermaid. A beautiful mermaid.  
I'll be a fish I'll sail, dive and discover  
My strength, My effort, My effects

The scene ends with an accomplice kiss between the two girls, who stand up and shout to the river, reinvigorated. It is worth noticing that the


entity called by the song is Iemanjá, queen of the sea, mother of the waters, that guided Afro-Atlantic histories embodied in the black bodies that arrived in Acre since the 19th Century to be explored with empty promises of enrichment (as the narcotraffic promises are) in the rubber tapper era or during the exile to the state. Even far away from the sea, the Iemanjá song embraces Sandra and Kika as a mother, offering a universal motherhood that at the same time sews a mediation between world where it is possible to be a mermaid – this hybrid being, half human, half fish; hybrid as the dissident genders that Kika embodies, unknowingly evoking an Adrienne Rich's poem<sup>8</sup> – and to be a fish, shifting perspectives and claiming agencies.

Other female and motherly figures enmesh in Paulo and Marta dynamics, along with other beings. Marta lives in the outskirts, in a wooden shack, and spends her days listening to Pentecostal preaching in a radio. She hides it when she hears her son knocking on her door. Paulo seeks her, asks for money, saying he is hungry, but refusing the meal she offers. The money, obviously, has other purposes. Paulo, coughing and shaking, tells his mother the devil is chasing him: “a snake, big, beautiful eyes, it's so strong”, Marta interrupts: “Stop it and let's go to church”. Pressured by her son “I'm screwed up, mom, you know what's gonna happen to me, don't you”, Marta gives up. In another scene, two indigenous women and a man wrap fish in banana leaves to grill. One is Marta's mother, Paulo's grandma. Marta and Paulo are there, silent, exchanging looks, Paulo showing the bruises he got. Paulo sits in the ravine by the river, lost in

.....  
8 Two strophes from *Diving into the wreck*:  
*the thing I came for:*  
*the wreck and not the story of the wreck*  
*the thing itself and not the myth*  
*the drowned face always staring*  
*toward the sun*  
*the evidence of damage*  
*worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty*  
*the ribs of the disaster*  
*curving their assertion*  
*among the tentative haunters.*

*This is the place.*  
*And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair*  
*streams black, the merman in his armored body.*  
*We circle silently*  
*about the wreck*  
*we dive into the hold.*

*I am she: I am he*  
Homi Bhabha dialogues with this poem and Rich's investigation on feminism and gender in his discussion of hybridity in the essay *On Writing Rights* (1999). Haraway underlines that Adrienne Rich's radical feminism leads to an insistence in the organic, opposing it to the technological (1985, 174). The figure of the mermaid brings, for sure, different hybridities than Haraway's cyborg, implying different ontologies and cosmologies. Kika, trans woman, Iemanjá's spoke-person at the margins of Rio Acre, and who is interpreting herself in the movie, makes her own string figure through the “complex political-historical layerings of her ‘biomythography’” (ibid.)



his thoughts. After the scene where Rivelino asks to enter the *facção* the indigenous women are seen bathing in the river, giving a bath to a baby who does not yet know he will live between worlds. Marta, in turn, is at the church, listening the pastor say that the truth will set them free. “How many people have ruined marriages? How many people have children on drugs? How many people are trying to kill themselves? But the Bible says that Jesus came for us to live a life of peace and joy!” The pastor preaches and makes his congregation repeat, but Marta moves her lips, barely voiceless. The pastor continues “Jesus is on a planet called Earth, and he is saying here clearly that he is the way, he is the truth and the life”.

There are other terrans, other autochthonous beings, that arise as a path to Marta and Paulo. When Paulo flees to his mother’s house, being saved from death by Rivelino by the water tank/flying saucer, he screams “let me in, mom, they are gonna kill me”. Marta’s voice resurfaces, going to her own mother’s, calling her in their native language. While Beatriz sends Alê to talk to the *facção* and try to save Rivelino, Paulo drinks a cup of ayahuasca (nixi pãe to the Huni Kuin, uni to the Yawanawa) blessed by his grandma. The aliens, the *facção*, take Rivelino. Marta, with her eyes in a red urucum paint, sings with Paulo in her lap, guiding him along the spiritual paths with the force of yuxibu. In his *miração* (ayahuasca vision), Paulo, accompanied by his grandma, is entirely painted with black jenipapo, with a headband woven with *kenes*<sup>9</sup>, embraced with the snake under the *samaúma* tree, close to its giant buttress roots. Beatriz is shown next, in the last movie scene, having already lost Rivelino, and being held by Alê. It is not made sure that the shamanism has saved Paulo for good, from the addiction and death by the *facção* – those alien threats – but it surely deflected the danger. The boa snake, that in Huni Kuin myths teaches the knowledge of the nixi pãe, fulfills this interspecific cosmopolitics with indigenous peoples inhabiting the city, with the forces of the forest.

## **CONCLUSION: THE ALIEN AND HIS DESCENT TO THE ORDINARY**

If, as Saer states, fiction can be a speculative anthropology, that takes truth and falseness as problematic and indissociable concepts, and that merges the empirical and the imaginary; also, as Ingold states, the speculative role of anthropology is a critical investigation on the possibilities of human (and other companion species, would add Haraway, with which we make the response-ability for this world), the anthropological fiction experiment of *Alien Nights* allows this transit of perspectives between worlds and beings, without asking to suspend the pact of verisimilitude (see Pina

<sup>9</sup> Indigenous drawings made by women in beads, basket and fabric weaving and body paint, taught by different spirits.

**TRANSLATION:**  
Ana Letícia de Fiori.

Cabral 2003) that would make the movie apart from “real world”, but giving the “supernatural” the status of inhabitant of these worlds, and revealing in this meshwork who indeed are the aliens in the successive updates of colonialism in Amazonia. This is possible due to this reciprocal absorption of violence and ordinary that manifests in the lives, choices and death of the movie’s characters. A necessarily partial anthropological experiment, which leaves outside crucial elements as the state violence and the role of the prison system in the structuration of facções and the deprivation of masculinities. But that has the merit, as stated by the prize the movie received in Gramado and other festivals, to build other relations of alterity between Acre and Brazil, revealing the state as peripheric, both between the city and the forest, and the aliens and fabulous reptiles.

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