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ARTICLE

TO DANCE IN THE DARK: ON THE WORLDBUILDING ARTWORKS OF KINNARI SARIAYA

HELEN STARR

Abstract

This visual essay draws attention to the diversity in the meaning of “*the image*” beyond Occidental visual culture. Written alongside the interactive animations of the decolonial, feminist, Indian artist Kinnari Saraiya, this text opens up a space for the shared commonalities between the indigenous Carib and the Indian poetics of touch and proprioception. The importance of interrogating the historical, cultural and ontological injustices embedded within colonial reality, its mentality and gaze cannot be understated. In the sensory scale of races, a hierarchical world structure was created by the natural historian Lorenz Oken (1779 – 1851) (Howes, 2013). Here, the civilised *European eye-man* who focused on the world with imperial visibility was positioned at the top and at the bottom was the African skin-man who used touch as his primary sensory modality.

This essay focuses on an indigenous concept which is conceptualised here as *skin-thinking*. Skin-thinking *thinks* through the lesser known sense of proprioception or kinesthesia - the sense of self-movement, force, and body position. And skin, unlike the eyes which are closed during our sleep, is always thinking, always processing information from the many worlds we inhabit. We can rethink the concepts of *close proximity* and *co-presence* as we use our fingertips to move through worldbuilding artworks such as, *prakṛtiḥ, nṛtya, laya* (2022 onwards) and *Seven Acts of Nature's Devastating Dance* (2023 onwards). Finger kinesthesia is a form of haptic perception that relies on the forces experienced during touch (Graham-Rowe, 2006). As the rhythm of our fingers dance us, (as informational beings) through these worlds, our mind creates virtual, illusory haptic shapes. Proprioception, our skin-thinking sense is what allows us to see in the dark.

Keywords: Indigenous, Worldbuilding, Decolonial, Kathak, Feminism

Dance is the ultimate expression of what nature contains. It predates history in its origin and yet it is a succinct reminder of what a civilisation has achieved in the particular direction that it has taken. A single pose from a dance tells you of the notions of equilibrium in a culture: the body's points of rest are in implicit conjunction with what the universe must constitute for it.

Upon two basic poses and two basic movements, one can build up whole cybernetics that reveal the nervous system's encoded signs of nature, freeing the body at once from pre-determined governance, to work with or against gravity, discovering new sources of speech.¹

TOUCH UNDER THE MASK

Decoloniality seeks to situate the origins of modernity in the colonisation of the Americas by Europe, pointing out global exploitation in the structuring of colonial and modern, capitalist power. It recognises modernity as an asymmetrical relationship reflective of European power that is based on historical and intersubjective control of the Other. Other Beings, other concepts, other ways of understanding the world. It assigns Eurocentrism as the form of knowledge production and subjectivity on which modernity relies. So, to dance as ritual becomes primitive, to dance for folk is fun and to dance on the stage, *en pointe*, the pinnacle of what modern dance should be.

For the Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter, our origin myths and cosmogonies are the storytelling "grounds" or the informational substrate out of which we establish our individual instances of subjective, conscious experience. The physicality of information, like the gender-neutral *Brahman* of Hindu metaphysics, refers to the single binding unity behind diversity in all that exists in the universe. In other words, the how and the what of what makes us a particular type of human - a particular type of living being.

Wynter highlights the dynamic interaction between our genetic and nongenetic codes—what she describes, respectively, as our *first set of instructions* and our *second set of instructions* -in order to think through how our subjective sense of self and our subjective sense of we [...] is intimately connected to the interrelational activities *between* or *across* the physiological and the storytelling – symbolic [...].²

During the Renaissance, the storytelling of Humanism became constituted through a collective body of philosophical literature rooted in the belief that the rational mind controls the physical body and thus man is autonomous from nature and superior to other living creatures. This problematic philosophy led to a metaphysics of individualism, a non-indigenous formulation of causality and a culture in which phrases such as magic *bullet* make sense.

With the advent of climate change hanging in the air like a storm filled sky, the deeply connected way that each *thing* in the *Every* is entangled between and across everything else in materially specific ways is becoming accepted within popular culture. And, these ever mutable intra-actions, also reconfigure the very arrangement of entanglements of things – like the binding knots of the Inca *quipus*. The embedding of a circle in 3-dimensional space, like the Temple pillars in Indian artist Kinnari Saraiya’s nature goddess worlds is a knot. Complex shapes



Figure 1. AI rendered sketches for *Seven Acts of Nature's Devastating Dance* (2023), by Kinnari Saraiya.

can hold both numerical and narrative information.

The *Talking knots* of Andean culture which predate the arrival of the Incas, have only recently been decoded. These complex writing systems are combinations that can represent key episodes from traditional folk stories and poetry. Some archaeologists even believe that this ancient Inca writing system sometimes served a performative function, in that certain knots and placements would give the actor or storyteller cues about how to bring a certain piece of art to life.³ Visual imperialism was so baked into hegemonic knowledge systems that it did not allow

for the thought that language, that history could be felt, archived and transmitted through touch, through skin.

This essay takes its heart from an indigenous concept conceptualised here as *skin-thinking*. Skin-thinking *thinks* through a lesser-known sense of touch or proprioception – the sense of self-movement, force, and body position. And skin, unlike the eyes which are closed during our sleep, is always thinking, always processing information from the many worlds we inhabit.

We can rethink *qualia of being* concepts such as, close proximity and co-presence as we use our fingertips to move through worldbuilding artworks such as, कनिनर's *prakṛtiḥ, nr̥tya, laya* (2022 onwards) and *Seven Acts of Nature's Devastating Dance* (2023) by Kinnari Saraiya. Finger kinesthesia is a form of haptic perception that relies on the forces experienced during touch.⁴ As the rhythm of our fingers dance us, (as informational beings) through these worlds, our mind creates virtual, illusory haptic shapes. Proprioception, our skin-thinking sense is what allows us to see in the dark.

Rhythm does not privilege singular ways of being but rather insists, in advance, that collaborative engagement is necessary to who and what we are. As we groove –even if alone– we collaborate with tunes, poetics, and styles, fusing ostensible disconnect between science (sound vibrations, physiological movements, flesh and blood) and narrative (musical score, lyric, cultural text). Rhythm is conceptualised as one way to invite collaborative worlding; rhythm lays bare not only emotions and imaginations but also their scientific underpinnings.⁵

Sylvia Wynter called into question the aims and scaffolding of philosophy and science by incorporating radical epistemic shifts such as auto-poiesis and its language application. Put forward by the Chilean biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana, “the term autopoiesis (from Greek αὐτο- (auto-) ‘self’, and ποίησις (poiesis) ‘creation, production’) refers to a system capable of producing and maintaining itself by creating its own parts.”⁶ Maturana, who was also a second-order cybernetics theoretician believed that a conversation, like the webs that emerge from a spider in order to catch a fly, is an inextricable linking of language, emotion, and body in which the nervous system is the medium in which all intersect.⁷ Thus, our body's ability to sense distance through movement is repurposed by our brains to understand and extrude social closeness.⁸ *You feel distant to me. I am above you, you below me.* How we communicate, how we share information is steeped in intra-active phenomenon.

This form of knowledge provides a framework which can help us side-step the Eurocentric reliance on visuality laid out by the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro:

By always seeing the Same in the Other, by thinking that *under the mask* of the other it is always just “us” contemplating ourselves, we end up complacently accepting a shortcut and an interest only in what is “of interest to us” – ourselves.⁹

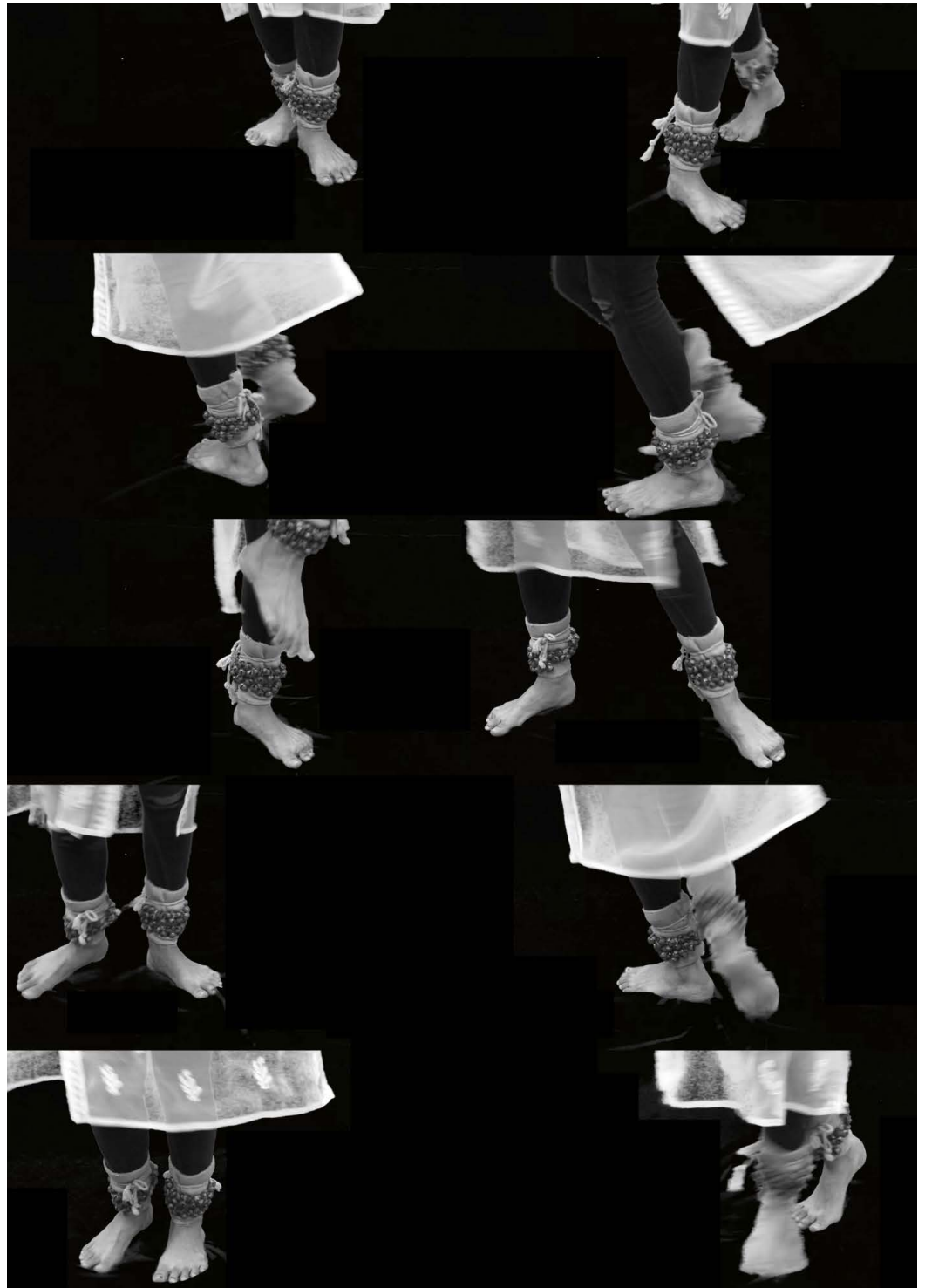


Figure 2. Kinnari Saraiya dancing to motion capture for कन्निर's *prakṛtiḥ*, *nṛtya*, *laya*

THE FRAMEWORK OF DREAMS

A golden feathered Kinnari twirls and spins, hands signing in ancient tongues to the rhythmic beat of small Ghungroo bells attached to its bird clawed feet. Kinnaras are ancient mythological beings who are part human and part bird. Beloved in both Hindu and Buddhist folklore, the golden celestial musicians live in the mythical dimension found beyond the Himavanta forest (Himalayas). Their tourmaline pink and green, lotus-flowered realm was traditionally accessible for humans through

parchments filled with painterly scenes of their serene and idyllic life. Today, the imagined lives of the Kinnaris are emitted into and out of the worldbuilding artwork *prakṛtiḥ, nṛtya, laya* (2022 onwards) by Saraiya.



Figure 3. Kinnari Saraiya, कन्निरर's *prakṛtiḥ, nṛtya, laya* (2022 onwards), still frame.

Many indigenous and ancient cultures have their own metaphysical systems in order to answer perhaps the most poignant question of all. What is reality? What is illusion or (Maya)? In many subaltern cultures domains of consciousness such as, wakeful awareness and dreamstates are the loci to their epistemology. In fact, the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*¹⁰ written around 700 BC includes important passages on dream metaphysics.

When someone falls asleep, he takes the stuff of the entire world, and he himself takes it apart, and he himself builds it up, and by his own bright light he dreams... There are no chariots there, no harnessings, no roads; but he emits chariots, harnessings and roads. There are no joys, happinesses, or delights there, but he emits joys, happinesses and delights. There are no ponds, lotus pools, or flowing streams there, but he emits ponds, lotus pools, and flowing streams. For he is the Maker. [Katr].¹¹

Transformational themes found in worldbuilding worlds such as being able to fly, becoming a different gender, becoming a King or Untouchable, becoming an animal or tree all occur in a multitude of classical Indian texts.

I then begged Visnu to show me what illusion was, and he agreed to this. He took me to a beautiful pond and invited me to bathe in it. I entered the pool as Visnu watched me, and in it I left my male form and became a woman. Vishnu picked up my lute and went away, and I forgot all about my former body.¹²

A dream is a virtual world created without a computer. It is not unique to humans and in fact, all auto-poetic beings from flies to otters to frogs have been found to have the ability to hallucinate other realities.¹³ Our brains are the dreaming machines of our minds.

Illusion and transformation has always been part of the indigenous and Afro-creole culture of Trinidad and Tobago. Through the hallucinogenic technologies of smoke, the embodied rhythms of song, dance and masking, indigenous Trinidadian Caribs mastered the world of the waking dreamscape. Their legacies are reenacted every year in the Trinidad Carnival. "Trinidadian transformations begin with Dimanche Gras." Hill expounds that the performance of masquerade is a "theatre of the streets"¹⁴ where the masquerader becomes the living embodiment of his "most fancied imagination during the two days of costumed street parade."¹⁵

Performed every year are Carnival bands such as *Wild Indian* masquerade inspired by the *Guarajo* tribe of the Orinoco Delta and *Black Indian* mummery led by the descendents of indigenous Caribs who had mixed with the African slaves. These are bands such as *The Warriors of Huracan* who fuse Aruacan Chants with languages from Yoruba and who reenact ancient ties of kinship, chanting to invoke spiritual healing.

THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICAL CHANGE

Here in her multiple magical worlds, Kinnari Saraiya performs Kathak - an exquisitely choreographed set of dance movements. Legs and torso straight and with the story signed through a vocabulary of hand gestures, facial expressions, bends and turns, Kathak is an intoxicating blend of dance, music and poetry. It has been performed by generations of women in Saraiya's family and the Ghungroo bells on Saraiya's feet are family heirlooms from the 1700's. Traceable to 400 BCE, Kathak is one of the oldest indigenous traditions of Uttar Pradesh and brought aesthetics to the politics of the Indian mediaeval times.

Dance was an important part of the oral and performance methods used to disseminate new concepts throughout Indian society. The Kathak dancers, in ancient India, were travelling bards and were known as Kathakas, or Kathakar. Kathak evolved during the *Bhakti* movement that transformed feudal Hindu society, by spreading the doctrine of a new doctrine of spiritual salvation. Salvation, previously considered attainable only by men of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes, became ungendered and recast, made available to all. In the capital cities such as Jaipur, Lucknow and Varanasi, Bhakti devotees taught their descendants, who in turn preserved this learning which included women and lower castes over multiple generations.



Figure 4. Kinnari Saraiya, कन्निर's *prakṛtiḥ, nṛtya, laya* (2022 onwards), still frame.

Kathak symbolises the love between *Atman* (soul within) and the supreme source *Brahman* (cosmic soul everywhere). As stated by O'Flaherty, "By the time of the Upanisads (c. 700 B.C.), the question of the reality of dreams was approached in a more systematic way. These texts speak of four states of being: waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep (all natural states), and the supernatural, transcendent fourth state, the identity with Godhead."¹⁶

In the virtual artworks of Saraiya, in the informational spaces which we inhabit as informational beings we can wonder whether the materiality of information can be conceived as a form of Godhead - a shared dream. Brahman, the single binding unity behind diversity in all that exists in the universe.

My question for Kinnari of the multiple selves, the Kathak dancer, storytelling artist, the curator and my dear friend is... When you dance in the dark... Before the VR headset sputters your dream world to life, as you spin on your feet, skin talking to ground do you sense a Godhead? Brahman? Or what I call Amerindian anima? Carib anima?

The Amerindians in turn never doubted that the Europeans had souls since in their belief system, the immutable soul was found in all things.

The Amerindian was much more interested in what was conveyed or represented by a particular material arrangement such as the fungus-linked roots which generate underground webs, with individuals called Mother Trees at the centre. These linked sylvan communities exchange information, nutrients and water in a literally pulsing network that includes not only trees but all of a forest's life. The Amerindian "anima", which is contained in everything, forests, rocks and people can also be thought of as that bodiless artefact of storage - the digital. Such a framework treats the idea of the soul not as a mere abstraction, but as a physical quantity with the clout to affect the material or particle world.

Thus reframing in terms of (disembodied) information rather than matter and energy, becomes an alternative way of expressing the physical properties of the



Figure 5. Kinnari Saraiya dancing to motion capture for कन्निर's *prakṛtiḥ, nṛtya, laya*.

universe, whereby everything is interconnected and related to each other. And, thus the form of the body, sculpts the nature of a being.¹⁷

CARIB BINDING

This conceptual connection between ancient Caribbean and Indian cultures is reiterated by the account of the Spanish explorer Ramon Pane who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. Pane noted the tiny bell-like rattles of wood containing small stones and the tinklers made of seashells which attached to the indigenous bodies in order to respond sonically to the movements of the performers. Like the Ghungroo bells of the Kinnari dancer, rhythm has always been at the heart of these embodied performances with their ability to transport you to another dimension in time.

We learn new rhythms together every year in the Calypso tents that spring in towers of song across the island. During Carnival season, we call and respond to the voices of our creole Griots, who critique and reinscribe the societal tribulations of the preceding year. Politicians are lacerated with *picong* wit and a wild, particular Trinidadian joy, as black as pitch spills into the warm tropical night air - a *lingua franca* of the soul.

The Lake of Pitch in the south of our island is 76.2 metres deep. It rose to swallow the *Chayma* villagers that dared to eat ancestor spirits housed in the ruby-throated, emerald-chinned and sapphire-winged bodies of hummingbirds. The people who settled in Trinidad 7000 years ago named the island Ierie, or *Land of the Hummingbird* after these tiny sacred birds. Unique among flying animals, hummingbirds used winged beats which have the acoustic quality of a musical instrument in order to communicate with each other. Forgetting these half-human, half bird ancestor souls linked the spiritual with the earthly world, the *Chayma*

Indians prepared a huge feast and covered their dancing bodies with skins of iridescent feathers.

The legend tells that the winged, indigenous god, *Pimlontas*, was so angry that he damned the village by causing it to sink into the earth, then covered it up with *piche*. Even today, every now and then human skeletons rise to the surface of this deep dark stain, myth archived in bones. A bygone reminder to beware the desecration of these magical beings who once flocked to the island in abundance. Before the arrival of Western man who slaughtered them to the point of extinction.¹⁸

Trinidad Carnival is a Ritual of Inversion. Carnival celebrations have operated as mechanisms for inverting, subverting and deconstructing the moral and philosophical bases of societal strictures, conventions and power relations, if only temporarily and symbolically. This perspective situates the significance of masquerade as an aesthetics of politics through which subordinate groups can instigate forms of social resistance against colonial and neo-colonial society.

When we learn the yearly rhythms for the dark of the night. With live music flooding the city streets, we press together, skin to warm skin able to move as one. Our sense of individual self disappears and we become one. This embodied ritual is a healing gift from our ancestors and core to our complex multicultural society which has never been at war with itself.¹⁹

The dancer is possessed when he depicts an event, and he is possessed when he disguises himself... Among the ancient Germans the ecstasy began at the moment when the dancer put on an animal skin. The skin was sufficient to blot out the self and to admit the animal spirit. This ecstasy of mummery accompanies religious life through all the stages of its development to the belief in gods. Osiris, Dionysius, Siva and the deities of old Mexico - God has descended up the earth and becomes flesh in his dancer. And out of the deified dancer is formed retrogressively the beautiful conception of the dancing god who creates the world and keeps it in sacred order.²⁰

Biomechanical, transmedia storytelling, the original technology upon which cosmovisions were stored, offers a path by which performers could step into other worlds. Like the music of most Amerindian and African cultures, ancient Indian music is also typically pentatonic, based on 5 notes. As compared to the later typical 7-note base of most European music which developed during the apex of Mediaeval Christianity. Important histories, concepts and narratives held and kept safe and promulgated in the bodies of ancient people throughout the world.

Evidence comes from Hispaniola where Bartholomew de Las Casas gave an account of a celebrated occasion when Guarionex, paramount cacique of the Magua chiefdom, gifted his (song/dance) areíto to Mayobanex, the paramount cacique of the neighbouring Cigüayo-Macorix chiefdom of Hiabo. The performance ritual was shared in exchange for military protection against the Spanish headed by Francisco Roldán and Bartolomé Colón. Giving Guarionex the "lyrics and dance choreography meant 'that both caciques were to become henceforth kin-related as Mayobanex, in

accepting it, would assume and share the genealogy and numinous power of the ancestors of Guarionex and of the Cacicazgo of Magua."²¹

"Even when Mayobanex's people advised him against lending protection to Guarionex so as to avoid certain defeat and death in the hands of the Spanish, in the end all agreed they had no choice but to honour the pact, because Guarionex 'had taught him the areíto of the Magua' chiefdom."²² This joining of tribes through learnt rhythms and beats creates a resonance where information becomes knowledge and kin-sharing across time takes place. Ancestral way-making becomes possible if one can accept the concept of song-dances like Kathak and the areíto of Magua as tools of extended cognition. That the patterns embodied within you through the sharing of these informational codes reshapes the who and what you are.

Epigenetics teaches us that experiences can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes. This is how embodied knowledge can then be passed down to subsequent generations, creating social behaviours which can impact on kinship groups. Now carved into our DNA, our ancestors' experiences and histories impact our minds and behaviours. These ancestral shades whisper in our ears and nudge us as to what to do and how to behave in order to thrive and survive.²³

"According to the Extended Cognition hypothesis, cognition occurs beyond the limits of the body, encompassing objects from the environment. This was shown as possible in humans, plants and spiders, who actively manipulate their external environment to extend their cognitive capacity."²⁴ "If spider and web are working together as a larger cognitive system, the two should be able to affect each other. Changes in the spider's cognitive state will alter the web, and changes in the web will likewise ripple into the spider's cognitive state."²⁵ Atman merging into Brahma and vice versa - like a water droplet falling into a great lake.

This would make the spider's web, an artificially created physical system "a model example of extended cognition, an idea first proposed by the philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers in 1998 to apply to human thought."²⁶ Just like the Milkweed paths of the Monarch Butterfly, information passed through generations of fragile, tiny bodies creates journey maps from the North to the South of America and back again. Just as it flows through the migratory flight paths of the Trinidadian humming-birds from South America to Trinidad and back again. Ethereal memories, informational smoke held in bodies dream-stained with the tumeric billows.

Embodying us to see things we cannot understand but still know to be true. Recent progress in Western science has opened up a way for these sophisticated epistemological structures to be grasped. While the Europeans relied on the *logos* of social sciences in their investigations of reality, Caribs placed their faith in the natural world. Never losing the understanding that just as our minds impact the material world, so does the material world impact on the mind.

Carib songs, both the melody and the words come via dreams or when a person was alone in the forest of mountains. Most indigenous peoples across

the Americas consider songs to be divine gifts from the gods, hence the almost universal popularity of cobweb shaped dreamcatchers entangled in knots across three dimensions. Dream catchers is also a lovely way to refer to worldbuilding artists like Kinnari Sariya who create dreams in real dimensions from their virtual minds.

As we dance in the liminal trance dark, the indigenous gaze cannot be easily captured by the light of a photographic lens. Perhaps the camera lens can capture a beatified expression or the ecstasy of an expanded pupil - a doorway to the inner eye. But it cannot capture these inner hidden worlds which emerge as bodies move together in accord. Just as a spider casts its web of life, sacred worlds have to be felt - skin to skin, beat to beat, in an ancestral landscape that exists beyond words and across time.

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