

# Guest Author Performing Transformation in the Community University of the Rivers *(Part 1)*

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## Abstract

In this two-part article, I seek to present our emerging Community University of the Rivers through the languages of storytelling (poetry, song, image and theatre) to bring to life the context and pedagogy of Transformance in action, in the Afro-Indigenous community of Cabelo Seco (Portuguese: Dry Hair), founding community of Marabá city, Pará, in the Brazilian Amazon. I use this strategy to ensure that you meet and might identify with my collaborators in our Community University of the Rivers, as living subjects. By privileging human narration, I do not mean to privilege action over reflection, as our dramatic performances and our actors are highly analytical. I am simply embedding theoretical concepts and analyses in our lived experience, valuing oratory, in the search for an aesthetics of transformation. This polyphonic, narrative-based (and less-logocentric) methodology is how all our projects develop, and might be more familiar to practitioners-theoreticians in the 'global south.'

**Keywords:** *Community, Cultural Literacy, Transformance, Art education, Amazon*

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### Introduction

*So much partying  
I almost didn't notice the future already happening  
right there, my love, in front of us  
enclosing our homes  
and videoing our squares.  
But my love, when I heard the giants  
in the voices of our dancing bulls  
playing our tambourines  
stained with açaí, the penny dropped!*

*They're rooting themselves in our culture  
and mining our dreams  
to industrialize and steal the Amazon!  
Let's rescue the future, my love  
and throw the spear for the River Tocantins!*

In 1998, I was granted a visiting professorship at the State University of Santa Catarina in Brazil to develop community theatre as pedagogy. This collaboration inspired artistic and cultural collaborations with Brazil's landless, indigenous, trade-union and university communities, and culminated in a series of national sculptural monuments. I decided to leave Wales in 1999 and in partnership with art educator Manoela Souza, have dedicated the past 17 years to the development of a transformance pedagogy—artistic performance for transformation based in cultural literacy – across Brazil and in collaboration with arts education networks and universities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America and Europe.

More recently, our transformance pedagogy has been applied in the areas of health, security, sustainable agriculture, creative cities and special needs, in the constant (re-)search for an aesthetics of education which cultivates a paradigm of sustainable cooperation through the arts. Since 2009, I have lived in the urban Afro-Amazonian riverside community of Cabelo Seco, where our project 'Rivers of Meeting' prepares children and young people as artists, capable of applying their performance confidence as community leaders and pedagogical practitioners inside their own schools. Deeply critical of the present industrialization of the Amazon, the 'Rivers of Meeting' project has won national awards for its youth-led micro-projects from the Brazilian Ministry of Culture and UNICEF.

From 2004 to 2010, I served as President of the International Drama/Theatre Education Association (IDEA), co-founding and chairing the World Alliance for Arts Education (2006–2010). I am currently president of the Brazilian Network of Art educators (ABRA), member of the Latin American Network of Arts for Transformation and of the International Council of the World Social Forum, and part of the Latin American campaign for 'Points of Culture.'

## Section I

The afternoon before Black Awareness Week 2013, in the Afro-Indigenous community of Cabelo Seco, Camila comes to our window. *Mikael, you know, Eliza's 4 year-old brother, has died. We are stunned. What happened?* Camila, one of our teenage teachers, afro-contemporary costumes piled high in her arms, shrugs and disappears. We cancel her dance classes and all our courses. I text Eliza, one of our percussionists. *What happened?* She replies in seconds. *He died with a bloated belly. He went for surgery and didn't resist. I'll text after I feed the baby.*

In the narrow street, the community is huddled in groups, indignant. In this region of southeast Pará, where the largest iron and gold reserves in the world are about to be plundered, babies still die of worms! Yet, here in Marabá, third most dangerous city for young people in Brazil, where young people are twelve times more likely to be assassinated than in any other region, and where there is not enough space in the newspapers to report the daily genocide, the anger subsides before nightfall and the party quickly revives. The pain just 'vanishes'. To where?

In our *Casinha de Cultura* (Cottage of Culture), Mano and I exchange messages with Eliza who has been moved with her own toddler son, her two sisters and her mother Elizângela, one of our community organizers, from this tiny *cabocla* (afro-indigenous) community between the River Tocantins and River Itacaiúnas to the distant neighborhood of Liberdade, out of reach of the revenge of the man who has just been released for the murder of her teenage uncle. *How are you? And Elizângela? Shall we come over?* Not even time to wait for an answer. *As you like. João Pietro's asleep.*

How to respond, to mark Black Awareness Week? In our Community University of the Rivers, every day is dedicated to recovering, reinventing and nurturing Afro-Indigenous identity, to question the accelerating industrialization of the rivers. It has taken us five years to transform scores of children and teenagers gyrating above empty upturned beer bottles into a community program of youth-led music and dance projects, a street cinema and video collective, supported by the twice-weekly theatre intervention, and 'dialogic English' courses they have requested. From night to day, the federal government program 'My House, My Life' transported a third of the community to a distant periphery, facilitating the transformation of Cabelo Seco into theme park for an international resort. Two of our youth action-researchers are among the disappeared.

I pick a photo of Toím, the teenage percussionist assassinated at the end of January, smiling into my camera, among his group of five marked, 'considered' friends, index fingers and thumbs cocked in celebration of their friendships with those who rule the streets, and their knowledge of how to survive: brazen or naive? Camila's seventeenth birthday was Toím's last party. Could this self-portrait be the image for Black Awareness Week, for our people's gallery in the community square? I study a few other possible candidates, but I know this is the one.



Figure1. Final portrait of Toím (far left) with his four close friends (2012).

I look deep into Toím's eyes. I recall his stare of disbelief when I invited him to help me repair the roof of this cottage, just hours after he had slipped through its ceramic tiles, drugged, at five in the morning, to remove all our technology, and twenty-five years of digital archives, to fund his addiction. *We returned it all Dan, for the first time in living memory, and you ask me to fix the roof!* I recognized the questions in his flickering voice, from Soweto, Derry, Moss Side, the Gaza and the Rhondda. The silences that lowered and lifted his eyes, his alert, on-stage presence even at dawn, and his subtle, caboclo frown of questioning *astúcia* (canny intelligence), well-hidden behind inherited shyness: the only popular resources that might protect the open veins of the Amazon from their brutal industrialization by the largest mining companies in the world.

*Brega* from the square is already permeating every corner of our cottage. I begin to type a sonnet of questions that might accompany the collective portrait.

Guys  
 who erased my memory  
 and enclosed me in shame?  
 Who straightened my *Cabelo Seco* (dry hair)  
 and called me 'Francisco Coelho'?  
 Why do I always smile 'yes'  
 when I want to affirm 'no'?

In this week, my friends  
 from *Barão*, PAC and Pontal territories  
 let's throw the spear  
 for the life of our rivers  
 sing our roots  
 and celebrate  
 our afro-amazonian beauty!

The next morning, Camila passes by. I invite her to look at the proposed intervention, and she reads it aloud. *Massa! Approved!* She rereads, now to herself. I smile 'yes' when I should say 'no'! She understands. Zequinha passes to collect water. We invite the mestre of popular culture into the circle of chairs to study the proposal and he chews his upper-lip in a visceral mix of anger and panic. By the time he speaks, he has found safe, waist-high *capoeira* territory to avoid the risk of public humiliation that his enslaved great-grandparents left in the skin of his lyrics. He'd seen them plant the seeds they'd smuggled out in their hair and the hems of their dresses as they sang the recipes of their great-grandparents. He reads the rivers every day, to see when all this will turn to dust. Toím's daughter, Kaline, will suffer every day she walks by. *It's your decision, but think of the child. She still cries every night. She still thinks Toím is coming home.*

I try to reason with Zequinha. The community needs to see its vanished pain, through a portrait that celebrates and questions, so that it can read the centuries of internalized violence it writes into its children, through the compulsive intimate violence that we hear every night. But Zequinha cannot hear the proposal. Like so many parents on the street, one son has been assassinated and the other is consuming himself. He cannot be sure he will survive the reflection. And Toím was his brother's son, an addict, who lived next door. In the absence of police support, Antonio had walked a thousand yards, carrying his dead son from the public space of his spectacular execution to the community space where the journalists lifted him onto the front page of the papers. *Think of Kaline, Dan. Three years old.* Zequinha leaves, confident he has been heard.

Yolanda, Kaline's grandmother disappears into the small home of Crisiel which faces our cottage. If we now consult her and Antonio, we will undermine Zequinha, our project mediator, the mestre. Five years of confidence. I show the other photos to Camila and she goes to the window and whistles through her teeth. In seconds, Yolanda is in the circle, reading the proposed intervention, suffused with pleasure. I describe Zequinha's concern, as objectively as I can, and she interrupts me. I've explained to little Kaline. *She's was inconsolable. She suffered, yes, but she's calm now. She knows the police murdered her daddy. She looks again at Toím and the marked boys. You must publish that photo. It's so beautiful!*

Zequinha returns, chewing his upper lip, securing a river of grief. I begin to explain how the morning has unraveled. As soon as he recalls the moment Kaline heard Toím had 'traveled', Yolanda is reliving the sleepless months she held her granddaughter to her breast and Zequinha nods gravely to me. *Let's ask Kaline!*, says Camila. In a second, she is leading the child by the hand into the circle. *Who's that?* asks Yolanda, pointing at the photo. *Toím, my daddy!* Kaline smiles, at peace with the world. *And who killed him?* asks her grandmother. The police. We look at the *mestre*. He is watching, fascinated. *Sing your favorite song, my love,* Yolanda smiles. Kaline looks at us all.

*In the sweet waters of the river  
and refreshing waters of the rain*

*the hair of african humanity  
never becomes wet, never becomes wet.*

Then she dances the choreography she has learned watching Camila dance in the little square with *AfroMundi* (AfroWorld). Zequinha roars with laughter and hugs Kaline. *Approved, approved!*

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The last person we consult is Crisiel, a tall, handsome silent nineteen year-old who was obviously once a warrior, but who today just sits. No-one can remember seeing Crisiel lose his calm. *The only male here who never hit a woman*, Camila once remarked. He cannot read books or write with a pen, but he reads the surface of the river that runs behind his cottage, and composes silent poems into nets that he knows will never again catch fish. I call him in from the street and invite him into the circle. He stares at Toím. And he stares. Gradually, we all become aware of Toím's presence. Crisiel has brought him back to life. We all reread Toím in silence, his childhood, making kites, his first kiss. Even the sun stands still, suspended in respect above the founding community of Marabá, once a *quilômbó* (community of slave resistance), now the vulnerable, contested *imaginário* of the region. Is Crisiel crying, inwards? Does he approve? His eyes never change their focus. Slowly, eventually, he walks backwards, out through the door, without removing his eyes from Toím.

## Section II

We sit in a circle of tiny wooden chairs in the kindergarten, Elizângela and two mothers from our community development nucleus, their close friends, Zequinha, two of his brothers, his sister, cultural developers, community leaders, members of his band, and twelve English language students and their teacher from the Federal University. The mothers are exhausted from washing clothes in the river beneath the sun. The circle is tense with uncertainty, expectation, centuries of distance, betrayal and prejudice.

I ask Zequinha and Manoel Gato if they would like to sing, as the hosts. The brothers glance at one another and Zequinha chooses *Cabelo Seco* (Dry Hair), a lyric that he has composed from the introduction to our 2011 Calendar, a narrative poem about our second year of cultural action in the community. Like me, Zequinha wants the university students and teachers to feel the knowledges and literacies that pulse in his fragile but resistant riverside community, carried by the rivers. But he has chosen a gentle song, one that does not protest or confront, nor hide behind playful gesture. He knows that this will not be a course extending out from the university like a *xicote* (whip), held behind the back of a neocolonial plan. It will be an exchange between cultures, between worlds of knowledge, a dialogue between a network of insecure power and a powerless community of solidarity. He chooses a song that might just create a living theatre of reflexive empathy.

Zequinha plucks a few strings and Manoel Gato smiles in recognition. *I haven't been here in 45 years*, he laughs richly, his bulky body spilling over the edges of his toddler's chair. *Even these wee chairs are the same!* He will die of pneumonia,

aggravated by diabetes, in a snap illness, in just a few months, leaving us all staring in shock at his empty chair of daily composition in Zequinha's doorway. He begins to sing, a counter-tenor so pure, trembling with such operatic emotion, that in this very first class, the students struggle to reconcile such beauty emerging from such a huge African frame, in this derelict periphery:

*Nas águas doce dos rios  
e refrescante da chuva  
o cabelo da humanidade africana  
nunca se molha, nunca se molha.*

*Meu cabelo é assim  
de mel com terra e pixaim  
exatamente como a natureza criou  
afro-tupiniquim  
filho do tocantins  
no encontro dos rios  
esse sonho se realizou.*

*Pulsam nas veias ideais  
herança dos ancestrais  
a cultura viva remanescente a brotar  
tanto sonharam nossos pais  
acreditando em quem traz  
a força e a coragem para viver e lutar.*

All the Cabelo Seco residents join in on the chorus of this landmark song, singing with a proud shyness, revealing their personal and community histories in their mixture of emotions, and the emotions of their day. Though they do not know how to read them, the Federal University participants all realize this is no *favela*. This will be like no other course they have given or suffered in class. They watch the two brothers, self-taught mestres, accentuating each word with the weight of centuries of exile, exclusion and simmering rage, cadenced in a complex grammar of exchanged glances, half-smiles and tentative celebration. Manoel Gato conducts an imaginary choir in a dialogue that few understand as pedagogy, making present that which 'vanished', transforming it into what might become.

I thank them both and Zequinha, with no request or verbal agreement necessary, holds out his guitar to the half-moon of students. Kenny, the youngest, almost reaches to take it, but his teacher Jairo, blinded by his desire to belong, grasps its neck and hands out a song-sheet that he has 'prepared for this class'. As the social, political and pedagogical significance of the song is explained, everyone gradually lowers their eyes. Jairo begins to sing, struggling to recompose the circle. He sings well, plays well, but he is climbing a steep hill. Felizmar unsheathes his guitar and sings the second voice. Gradually, effortlessly, the half-moons rejoin and a possible, new community returns.

I ask everyone to form into pairs, exactly where they are sitting, and to point their chairs to face one another, so the chairs conspire to motivate a first dialogic whisper. I then propose the residents invite a visitor from the university to sit beside them. In their first exchange, each pair exchanges the first nickname gained in life, and then, the most important quality each wants to see practiced in this circle. The laughter of intimate revelations, unexpectedly recovered, mingles with shared and new insights. The intimacy spills beyond each pair of wooden chairs, envelops the entire classroom and creates a stage of confidence, each person risking to share what was suffered in school, ached for, imagined, some in this very classroom. No-one is aware of the risk, or of how much time has passed, or that they have lowered barricades into thresholds, until the sound of spinning seeds of the *chek-chek* invites them to give their final two minutes to the person who has spoken least.

A fractional pause, an explosion of resumed conversation, and then, the pairs thank one other, in any appropriate way. That embrace, torture chamber of so many unspoken 'nos', backyard well of lost memory and first homes, unconditional offer of solidarity, defines new hope.

We return to the full moon and listen to a sequence of human and pedagogical rights, announced by each pair.

No need to explain how the complicity was created, nor how this community will be created. Each word is translated into English: *care, respect, patience, playfulness, cooperation, equality, generosity, exchange, affirmation, community*. And we then turn towards the board, where I have chalked up lyrics that might be the participants here looking back through their ancestors' eyes from the banks of Africa, or their ancestors, looking forward to reuniting with fragments of their families in the diaspora. The black gringo lyric holds depths of vanished emotion in its beguiling simplicity.

*I'm packin up  
gettin ready to go  
I'm goin to see  
my people over there  
I'm just packin up  
gettin ready to go...*

I sing, we sing, Zequinha reflects, we pause. I sing, we sing, now Elizângela reflects, we pause, Jairo and Kenny exchange a glance with Felizmar. I return to the beginning of the lyric, and as the dialogic pedagogy unfolds, we hear Manoel Gato's contralto voice finding the harmonies practiced for 45 years in the street, in Zequinha's doorway. We sing the entire verse again, more confident, opening our breasts into an experimental afro-indigenous blues, rhythms now pinpointing reflections, silences, a shared sense of the knotted street, the choking rivers, the stubbly forests, a region that still does not dare to know itself. Here we are, in the epicentre of the Amazon, the great-grandchildren of slaves have chosen to liberate themselves on toddlers' chairs, through Dialogic English.



### Section III

I touch the iPod. *Mindjer Dôce Mel* begins. Segun Adefila, our resident visiting choreographer, stands in front of thirty-two aspiring ballet-dancers, all in black leotards with a splash of colour subversively braided into their hair, around their wrists, ankles or waists. He leans back, opens his chest and sensually begins to rotate his hips to the right, all the joints of his body synchronized to the circular rhythm of the music, while opening and closing his elbows like the handles on a vase, hands on hips, to the regular movement of his breathing. Behind him, as the young *cabocla* women mirror his movements, all begin to smile. Camila laughs out loud, a throaty eruption of joy and understanding spilling out of her loose hand-ripped yellow t-shirt draped across her honed body, imprisoned inside the taut leotard. The shyest laugh to themselves, two gay *caboclo* youth exchange glances of approval, all effortlessly find and integrate themselves into the playful improvisation.

Segun begins a new pirouette which brings him even lower to the ground, arches his back, enlarges the sensuality of his circling hips, brimming with a subtle but unmistakable seduction. In less than two minutes, centuries of internalized tuts and grunts of moral judgement in doorways, windows, mirrors and on street corners are being slinked off, changing the carriage of heads, the contours of backs, the scaffolding of shoulders, liberating breasts, and now more of the young dancers are laughing aloud, but to themselves. They appear a dance company that has been rehearsing for months. Their synchrony is uncanny, and they have all noted it and its celebration of the erotic, without taking their eyes off the body of their Nigerian teacher.

Two hours later, they sit in a circle, elegant, elated, alert. They have created a dance narrative about *Cabelo Seco*, each excavating and contributing elements of their childhood and adolescent experience and perception to the stage. The netting and cleaning of fish, the building and repairing of canoes, the sudding, scrubbing and wringing of clothes slapped onto the surface of the River Tocantins and River Itacaiúnas and then pegged between banana and *açai* trees or electricity posts. Each gesture and fragment of lived experience. All have all been woven into a choreography of shared knowledges, values and pride of producing and sustaining life, lightened by hopscotch, flicking stone-marbles, jiggling kite-strings to play the wind and skipping elastic gates, even lowering their gyrating open thighs over upturned beer-bottles in a humiliating dance of impish sexual availability.

How do you feel, asks Segun. I translate. All the young artists have willingly dedicated themselves to years of silent, disciplined obedience and humiliating public castigation, but no-one needs to be coaxed. Words emerge from different points in the circle: *free ... elated ... liberated ... proud ... capable*. Camila smiles. *Now I know myself. I never knew my life could become dance. In reality, that there is so much dance in our life*. She begins to cry, too suddenly to conceal, but lets the tears fall. *I can breathe. My skin is lighter, looser. I feel so much ... desire!* A circle of laughter of complicity and recognition. Like anything is possible!



Figure 2. Camila discovers transference through dance (2011).

A full year later, Camila stands poised in perfect stillness, on the points of her toes, her body that iconic symbol of authoritarian aristocratic grace. *Lambarena's* exhilarating transition from Bach to Africa begins to shake her statuesque purity, unsettling first her feet and then gradually pulsing through her ankles, calves and thighs, her belly, her breasts and her head, her entire being trembling into terrifying disequilibrium. Camila looks at her own body as it teeters into disorder and asymmetry, her hands, elbows and arms falling and opening to find a new centre and steadying herself from falling, a look of horror, shame and fascinated excitement flickering across her eyes and lips until she has discovered how to balance all the moving liquids within herself.

Her workshop of primary and secondary school teachers watch spell-bound, forgetting to breathe. Gradually, over what seems to be an eternity, balancing between helplessness and discovery, terror and intention, Camila descends to stand flat-footed on the stage, her arms and hands transforming her into a human vase. Her entire body begins to pulse, now from the abdomen and womb, as she throws herself to all the corners of the world, a bold declaration of fertility, daring anyone to ever again even try to imprison her needs and potentials in an icon of voiceless submission and subordination.

*Ok. Before we talk about what you've read from the outside, let's read the interior, from within. Please stand up again, everyone, and find a place behind me.* The teachers fill the stage behind their seventeen year old teacher from the Community University of the Rivers. Camila has already warmed up the space, agreed principles and embodied the aims of tonight's workshop. The teachers are not afraid. Some of them taught her when she was a rebellious child. A few taught her this morning. None have ever seen her out of school uniform.

#### Section IV

Zequinha is late. However much he plans, the watch on his wrist still ticks to emotional rhythms which follow the tides of the Tocantins, Itacaiúnas and Araguaia, where arranged meetings by boat or on land were for so long determined by the confluence of the rivers, the movement of the moon and the fish. And tonight, Zequinha's rhythm is reflexive, slowed by an unexpected early afternoon meeting with the Secretary of Culture who has offered his homeless first-born son, Elvis, a new guitar, if he will give up crack and *cachaça* and realize his potential as a remarkable guitarist. Both Zequinha and his son know this gesture is calculated to enslave them to the Secretary and distance the *mestre* from the Community University of the Rivers, but neither can refuse. They need the patronage. This might be the final intervention that saves Elvis from demons that inspire and torture him, the muses of his remarkable creative intelligence and the chorus of accusation, judgement, complicity and self-hatred that compel him to be victim, despot, torturer and chronicler. And the *mestre's* wife wants an indoor toilet and needs to brick their backyard inside windowless walls to protect her from Elvis and the 'considered' boys.

While waiting for Zequinha, Évany has tuned her guitar and is practicing arpeggios and experimenting in how to translate *jongo* and *samba* into how she plucks the chords. Like her aunt, she may never grow taller than the adolescent she is now, but just in the last year, she has become a striking cabocla woman whose glowing beauty and fierce percussive intelligence create an onstage presence no audience forgets. The coordinator of the art education research nucleus from the nearby Federal University enters the workshop, followed immediately by a cultural entrepreneur, a teacher-mother returning to study and a mature student, and all unsheathe their guitars, mildly surprised to find Évany in the *mestre's* chair.

They are immediately drawn to her unselfconscious intense and virtuoso experimentation, forgetting that she is just 14 years old. Évany welcomes them with her dazzling smile and guides them with her eyes to sit in the circle of chairs. Just as Zequinha has guided her and his other pupils the day before, she then lures them into the rhythm of the exercise she has been rehearsing, transforming it into the pedagogical performance of an easy dialogue between her pupils and the creation of a community of exchange, solidarity and cooperation. She studies the strumming, plucking and fingering of the four as they watch hers, pausing to correct the position of the university professor's fingers, demonstrating the transition between arpeggios to the cultural entrepreneur and the teacher-mother, showing the student how to correct her posture to improve her coordination, and gradually leads them into an improvised *jongo*.

Zequinha enters almost at the very end of the workshop, too scarred by the violations he inherited and suffered to apologize, too respectful and aware of all that he sees before him to even smile his approval. He sits and watches. Technically, Évany is still finding the exercise, but she is also creating it. But she is also developing her own way of teaching, itself a manifestation of the confidence

she has acquired onstage, based on Zequinha's five years of precise artistic formation within a pedagogical circle of storytelling and story-making, passed across centuries in backyards beside the river. Zequinha does not unsheathe his guitar. He is learning from Évany, how to improve his teaching and how to integrate her percussive sensitivity into plucking techniques. They stop suddenly and Évany laughs out loud, a rich, throaty, uninhibited arpeggio of pleasure, shyness and pride, which mingles with Zequinha's laughter and then the laughter of all present. No need to speak. Everyone knows what this circle has created, is creating.



Figure 3. Évany teaches mestre Zequinha in a dialogic exchange (2014).

Zequinha nods, genuinely happy. *The confluence of the rivers. The rivers decided that I should arrive late.*

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