

I believe the artistic languages – of theatre, particularly – contain the most useful tools for revealing and distancing us from the contradictions within our subjectivities and our ‘structures of feeling’, towards the development of new reflexive, independent and cooperative subjectivities. I am not proposing that theatre can solve the world, nor offer a new methodology. Nor am I proposing that what I understand to be ‘cultural literacy’ can alone transform the aesthetics of individualism and competition – the cultural forms that presently mutilate our subjectivity, define how we see and feel, and threaten the very future of the world – into an aesthetics of cooperation. The organised social struggles for economies based on solidarity and participatory democratic societies are fundamental. But I am proposing that without ‘cultural literacy’, based in a pedagogical understanding of the ‘drama of self-determination’, we cannot implement or sustain any new social alternative. Without wanting to, we remain the complicit but passive ‘performers’ of authoritarian and violating dramas, in part because we do not know how to consciously and sensitively ‘read and write’ the language of performance, and through this, intervene in the ‘theatres of oppression and complicity’, to transform them.

The dramas of the past, the centuries of stories that we inherit, revive and adapt in the making/accepting and narrating of our own ‘I’, inevitably shape the barricades and fortresses within our subjectivity, which tend to appear more through what we do and make than what we say and write. However, the dominance of the written and spoken word – certainly part of the European rationalist educational culture of colonization – leaves us less literate, even illiterate, about what we might refer to as the languages and performances of our ‘mindful-bodies’, our emotions, and our uses of space and time. For this reason, we see less of ourselves than we dramatise to others, or can explain and change. This blindness to the ways in which we immunise and protect ourselves – so profound in men, who throughout history have determined the subjectivities of power, and been determined by them – jeopardizes reflexive empathy, care and dialogue, the subjective reflexes of a solidarity-based humanity. However, this blindness (the lack of a consciousness of ‘ourselves in performance’, on the stages we inhabit), on the collective stage of cultural literacy can be decodified and sensitized, making possible the liberation of dialogic reflexes of identification and recodification, and the cultivation of new critical, reflective and cooperative relations and ‘mindful-bodies’. I want to explain the drama of self-determination before I illustrate it through a living project.

We begin to become conscious of the *other* in the reception of our smile, itself an unconscious invitation to dialogue. Our awareness of our self as being different from our mother, however, begins from the moment we start to identify and recognize the effects of our actions in the mirror of her responses. In this way, through this identification, we begin to question and creatively experiment with the relationship between our movements and their effects, observing and slowly starting to interpret the causes in our world. This enables us not only to imagine our effects upon others, but also to read and imagine a relationship between their actions and intentions. So we develop our sense of self in dialogue with ourselves and through others. We may not think of ourselves in this way, but this makes every space we enter and imagine a *dialogic stage* of interactive performance, focused observation and critical reflection. In this sense, becoming human is inherently theatrical. We make theatre, for ourselves and others, to become social.

To begin with, we feel and imagine that the entire world is our stage or that our subjectivity is the whole world. As we begin to recognize that other selves exist, we discover our world is only one of the shared stages that interact with countless others in the world. We learn initially we must live our desires within the stage conventions of the drama of the home. But as our experience extends and is interpreted – from within hunger and pleasure across the boundary

of our skin into the dramas of gender, family, school, work, community, region, nationality and (now, with globalization) the continent and the world – this first identity is reinterpreted to guarantee that we learn to live our desires according to the laws of private property and its dramatic conventions of competition, conflict, and *disidentification*. Within a network of interlinking social stages, we study and rehearse the roles and learn how to interpret them, to act in the Theatre of Conflict. We are allowed to play with these roles, even to experiment with them critically, to modernize them within this theatre, providing we do not weaken or transform it.

The transition into our first dialogic empathetic drama (of humanizing structures) forms our political unconscious. The transition into our second competitive alienating drama (of dehumanizing structures) forms the politics of our creativity. These two learning processes of humanization (losing our world to discover our stage), and dehumanization (crossing the threshold of our stage to enter the Theatre of Conflict), structure the politics of our imagination. How we enter and pass through these processes will profoundly not only shape our capacity to respond to the world; it will also determine our capacity to interrupt our determined subjectivity to enter the transformative stage of personal and collective self-determination.

As we are not educated to understand ourselves or the world in these performative terms our *performance-awareness* is intuitive, non-analytical or deliberate, and not solidarity-inflected. This intuitive 'performative awareness' has to be colonized and recolonized, continuously, to interrupt the dialogic and empathetic reflexes of identification which live in the labyrinths of our political unconscious. But this dialogic solidarity exists as a foundation of knowledge, recorded in the boundaries of our subjectivity, intimately linked to the two learning processes of humanisation and dehumanisation. This psycho-social knowledge, and the way it which manifests itself socio-culturally in our everyday lives, needs to become conscious, for us to enter the process of self-determination. I call this process of performative self-conscientization, *cultural literacy*. It might also be called the 'poetics of transformance'.

Extract from ***Alfabetização Cultural: a luta íntima por uma nova humanidade*** (2004), by Dan Baron Cohen

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The mosaic of self-determination **Land is Life** that is presented below was carried out in an agro-ecological school in a small farming community in the state of Santa Catarina, southern Brazil, between September 2001 and January 2003. It is an example of what we call *cultural literacy*. With the involvement of 90 pupils aged 10-16 years of age, together with the participation of their teachers and families, a huge collective book, made up of recycled discarded ceramics fragments, was collectively conceived and 'written' onto one of the school walls. It records the pedagogical drama or 'transformance' of self-determination.

The project process divided into four phases: **Workshop phase**: September – December 2001, 4 months (24 workshops per class, 90 minutes per workshop). **Design phase**: March 2002, 12 hours (Two 90 minute workshops per week and per class and one 3 hours integrated workshop for representatives of each class to generate the collective proposal). **Production phase**: March – July 2002, October – December 2002, 9 months (6 pupils every 90 minutes, 6 hours per day). **Evaluation phase**: December 2002, 2 days (Two 90 minutes workshops per class).

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## Land is Life – the mosaic of self-determination



### **Step 1: Consultation**

Manoela and I explain our pedagogic proposal to the school community of ninety young people and their families. We have been invited to develop a residential project inside their agro-ecological school, not just because the school is committed to developing new pedagogical proposals, but because the community is fragmented by conflict and the pressures of survival and we have worked with them for more than three years. The project is designed with the parent-teacher association to last at least a year, and to begin in consultation with the entire community and with a training workshop for

all the teachers, to ensure it is both embedded within the cultural life of the community and as a pedagogical interdisciplinary contribution to the existing curriculum. Here, inside a family home, we show slides to stimulate parents' questions and to listen to their anxieties, to anticipate any possible resistances and involve the families in the design of the project's aims. After passing through the community, we propose the production of a community mosaic. It will survive decades of rain and sun, and affirm the ceramic history of the region. A nearby factory agrees to donate rejected imperfect tiles.



### **Step 2: Creating a pedagogic stage**

We begin by turning the classroom into a dialogic stage where there is no audience. In the very first workshop, the young participants aged ten years old interview one another: *Who are you? Where do you come from?* Immediately, some assertively reply: *I'm Brazilian!* a reflex we find in every part of Brazil which avoids some uncomfortable facts within the country's historical identity: the genocide of some five million indigenous people over the past 500 years; or the probability of direct descent from raped indigenous women or those who were responsible

for centuries of violence against millions of black slaves. We mark the stage with white tape to define an area of agreed principles of respect for time, the right to question and remain silent, respect for each voice, and how we will document the process.



### **Step 3: Developing the authority of each person**

Storytelling through 'intimate objects' enables the knowledge and more intimate voices of each participant to emerge. The girl in the middle of this storytelling circle is narrating her history through an object of importance she has selected from her home. Everybody around her is transforming this circle into an intimate stage, affirming her voice by listening with their eyes, drawing her out as an 'author' through their collective focus and a sequence of non-judgemental individual questions. In this way her *authority* grows. Each person

narrates aspects of their story, responding to questions inspired by their 'intimate object' until the world it contains has been collectively revealed. Gradually as the six participants tell their stories, a complex empathetic picture of the world emerges. Each circle of six then selects one of the *intimate objects* as the group's *collective symbol*, a process which decodes their world, to better understand it.



This not only enables the ninety young people to create their own vocabulary for a collective mosaic; it also allows them to acquire and practice new intercultural skills unselfconsciously in participatory democracy and cooperative learning, by learning to be both actor and spectator on a non-judgemental space. They are becoming aware of the powerful theatrical properties of time and space, and the principles of dialogue, and how to use them democratically. They are also learning history, geography, language and culture!



#### **Step 4: Preparing the body**

Through the lightest introductory massage, we begin to 'open the body' so that its inter-textual memory can 'speak'. Some male participants resist. We dramatise this resistance to reveal the causes and as they remember that Christ and Che Guevara used touch to heal, they relax and choose to enter.



We first began with speech, the most established 'language', where participants are most 'at home'. Now, more relaxed and building on the empathetic, reflexive solidarity they have established through their stories, they begin to listen to the repressed or internalized histories within the body which they have inherited, and which they may be using unconsciously as *barricades* to protect themselves in a dangerous world. They begin to listen to codify the cultural archeology present in the respiration which transports their voice. They are now learning to listen more consciously to themselves, 'reading' their own and each other's 'performance' and discovering how to use their own body as an amplifier.



#### **Step 5: Codification**

They are ready to read the internalized world through dialogic mask-work, by touch. Each young person is learning to work dialogically to support and be supported by the other, becoming emotionally literate about the intimate self in order to build a new self-aware community.

Documenting what has been found within the self. There is so much to write!





Following this process of expression and reflection, the collective documentation of what has been 'read' is summarized into key adjectives within four agreed 'worlds' of performance: the home, the school, the countryside and the city. This process itself democratizes the typical monological, authoritarian 'voice' of the blackboard.

### **Step 6: Decodification**

Through image and forum theatre participants study their own and each other's psycho-emotional worlds to identify common themes and concerns. Here, you can see an image representing the history and diverse (accepted and unacceptable) desires of women: to be mother, teacher, ballerina and vet.



Here you can see a dramatization of some of the intimate conflicts that occur within the community. Despite their desire to build cooperatives, many families are deeply divided by unresolved histories, mistrust, power inequalities and reflexes of silent self-protection. Cooperative functions and community events draw fewer and fewer families. Naming and rehearsing solutions to these conflicts will enable participants to understand and meet the intercultural challenges of building a new multicultural community of unified purpose.

Here, young participants represent their fear of assassination caused by the massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás, which their movement (the MST: Landless Workers Movement) suffered on the 17th of April 1996. Such anxieties might inhibit them from choosing or even being able to participate as equal and confident members of their own cooperatives, and later, as citizens in their own country. The scenes are revealing, but also reveal a fear to ask questions. We decide to decelerate the process, to build self-confidence through personal mosaics.







### **Step 7: Aesthetic preparation**

'Scrunching up' the new sheet of paper (and the awe its whiteness inspires) to prepare for the design of an individual logo. Before entering the collective process, the young people are invited to represent their individual identity. But first, in order to draw experimentally, they need to free themselves from fear of making mistakes in public, passed down through generations of migration, violation, exclusion and submission. They draw on the symbolism uncovered in their storytelling and dialogic mask-work.



Transferring a montage of intimate symbols from within their own emotional and geographical landscape into a unified image to create their own logo of *self-determination*.



Here they are learning to 'speak' the artistic language they will use for writing their collective mosaic, by building a personal mosaic. They work for three hours a week in two ninety minute workshops. It is impossible to get them to stop, to go into other classes. There is no need for discipline. It has been replaced by the extraordinary motivation every human being seems to possess to protect, define and create his or her own identity. Even when inhibited by violated self-confidence, this force seems to revive quickly in the appropriate conditions.

This is the only teacher from the agro-ecological school to participate in the *cultural literacy* preparatory stage of the project. Sadly, Rejane was unable to prevent the project from being remarginalised to time allocated for religious education and art. The project has been designed with the teachers to begin with a training course to enable them to participate as co-facilitators in an interdisciplinary project. But as the teacher-training workshop drew near, one powerful (and fearful) male teacher argued the case to prioritise traditional disciplines, then managed to repeatedly defer the workshop until it was too late. The young participants observed this knowingly.





The individual mosaic: Here are examples from the 80 individual mosaics that were created as preparation for the collective process. They were created by some of the 10 year old participants. Though each mosaic celebrates a personal landscape, by implication it also celebrates their parents' struggle for survival and democracy. These mosaics were turned into gifts for each home, building or deepening the relationship between the school and the community.



### **Step 8: Collective production**

The evaluation of the storytelling processes that generated the individual mosaics was conducted in 'dialogic trios'. These same trios are now used to discuss three questions which will define the criteria for the collective mosaic: *Why make a collective mosaic? Where? And for whom?* While one person speaks, another documents and questions, and the third sits silently but actively listening as a focussing and amplifying audience. The trio then rotates roles so that each person develops the skills of inter-cultural dialogue and mediation.

Participant-coordinator: Having gone through the dialogic trios and understood the process of how to identify guidelines, Roderigo enters as *internal coordinator* to work with 10 and 11 year-old pupils. At 12 years old, he possesses an empathy and intimacy we no longer possess, and discovers how this can be used to stimulate the participation of his companions. He demonstrates the potential to transform all pupils into co-educators within a dialogic pedagogy.



Selecting proposals: The trios form into new circles of six to develop collective proposals. These are presented and explained on an ever larger stage.





Creating the community proposal: One Sunday morning, three representatives from each class join a workshop which will integrate all the collective designs that have been generated into a community proposal for the school and its wider community.

The community proposal (below): The young people have selected the open book as the symbolic structure to integrate all their ideas. They include (on the left-hand side) an image of the neighboring polluted city as representation of the past present, beside an image of a camp in the shape of a heart – the heart of their Landless Movement – weeping over the destruction of nature, as a page turning from the present into the future. They have represented the ‘future in construction’ on the right-hand page, with an eco-pedagogical agricultural proposal for renewing the city.



The participants inevitably fore-ground their own rural experience and context, but by so doing, they offer an interesting perspective on the future of the post-modern city.

For us, from a pedagogical perspective, by far the most interesting element is the participants' decision to locate themselves as authors and subjects of their own futures, and as artists within their own artistic representation!



Evaluation of the final design: In pairs, the young people help to bring out each other's opinions of the collective proposal before it is presented to each family and turned into a mosaic. It is approved both by the school and the families.





Preparing the wall: Breaking up the surface of the wall to guarantee the mosaic will remain for at least a generation. The possibility of future relatives being able to see and touch their creativity and knowledge within the mosaic they were creating was highly motivating for the young people and their families. It reveals how the cultivation of self-esteem cannot be separated from the experience of being admired by others, from the past and/or from the future, as well as in the present. We are beginning to understand the social value of beauty and the performative nature of self-determination.

Projecting the design: at night, we coordinators transfer the design onto the wall. Unfortunately, the participants live too far from the school to be able to participate in this step of the process. But during the next day, they firm-up the design and then modify it throughout the process.



Intimate production: The entire school participates in the production phase. Working slowly in a trio for 90 minutes each month, each participant continues to participate fully in the curriculum. Though history, geography, culture, language, mathematics, and agricultural production and policy have all found its way into the design and making of the mosaic, the interdisciplinary project remains rigidly marginalized as 'art'.

Relationships in transformation: However the pedagogy continues to impact socially and culturally throughout the process of production. Here Aline can be seen teaching her mother Maria, the two working together in the construction of a cultural monument which, in practice, is changing how they see and understand one another. These family relationships are among the hardest to transform. Had we had more time, we would have organised *cultural literacy* workshops for the parents in every corner of the community, before integrating them into the process of collective production.





Relationships in education: The head teacher learns from one of the youngest participants how to create a mosaic. This inversion of the traditional pedagogic relationship builds a new self-confidence and intergenerational, intercultural respect in both.

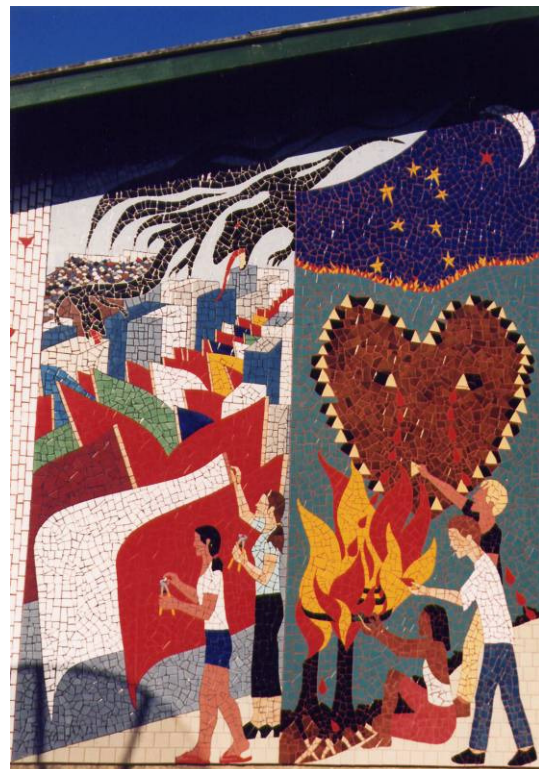
Inclusion: The self-declared illiterate school-cook arrives at the school wall: I cannot read or write. I will only disrupt the work. But this woman, who reads the wind, land, sky, rain and the very health of her cows from their milk discovers that, like her children at the school, she too is creative, artistic and a producer of culture. She stays for three hours working beside them.



Confidence as producers: Now in the final stage of the production, the young people grout the mosaic to guarantee its resilience, now working, chatting and making decisions together, confident of their abilities.

The collective book: The first page has developed considerably from the original design. Monsters of pollution rise out of the factories beside the *favelas* (poor urban communities) to prey upon the cities and gaze threateningly at the social movements, clutching new technology in their claws and their mouths. The young people use these vultures to represent the threat to speaking openly and critically in the 21 century. The young participants include a celebratory self-portrait of themselves as artistic producers.

Second page: The celebration of interculturalism and multiculturalism. The boy at the top of this portrait holds a tent: he will go on to 'occupy' other non-productive lands in the process of democratization. The boy in the middle holds a falling tear which represents one of the nineteen MST peasants massacred at Eldorado dos Carajás: he will cry, affirming a new masculine sensitivity. And the sitting girl at the bottom of the page holds a genetically-unmodified (agro-ecological) seed, a seed with which she will use to replant the future.







Third page: Now that the land is productive and each family has a home, the more intimate social change can be prioritized. Two young people can be seen in the foreground discussing a heart. It is not clear who is holding or releasing the cutters, nor what is being said. This is deliberate. In this way, the young artists have created an open image, a pedagogical invitation to other pupils, teachers and their community to write their own dialogue into the mosaic and by so doing, to participate in the writing of this collective book. Beside them, a young black kid on tip toes releases a golden bird. Why? This is another pedagogical provocation which future history teachers can use as a text for students of all generations.



Self-respect: This image reveals not just the mosaic's quality but also the social/pedagogical relations between transformation of personal experience and ideas through artistic languages into an object of socially-valued quality, and the production of self-esteem.



Evaluation model: The teachers that have actively contributed to the process sit with representatives from each class to discuss and modify a proposal of how to evaluate the entire project that has spanned two years. The proposal has been designed through consultation with every participant, using slides and storytelling to recover their memory of each phase. We discover that by revisiting each phase of the collective process, the participants have more vivid experience to bring to their analytical evaluation. Many have grown beyond recognition since the beginning of the project but retain strong visual and emotional impressions.



Re-dramatizing the process: By performing what they remember of the entire process, the young participants recover other body memories which they did not realise they had 'remembered'. In this way, exchanging what they recall, they renew and rediscover the full range of experiences they have lived. This is then presented to the community in the form of a celebratory performance on the day of the 'publication' of their collective book. When the 'pedagogic mosaic' is unveiled, their parents move slowly towards it to touch it. Some cry. Others just smile. Then they begin to interpret it together.





Decodifying their experience: Once again in pairs, the young people analyse the key moments of learning for each of them throughout the project. These are then creatively transposed into poems, testimonies, images and dances as ways of both sharing them publicly and sustaining the process of transformance.



Transformance: On the large stage of their classroom, in the full circle of their contemporaries, each participant speaks of their greatest moment of pleasure and challenge. We had expected to hear about the development of solidarity, self-esteem and friendship during the evaluation. But we had not expected to hear how – in being able to glue and unglue the broken fragments of tile onto the wall, remove, re-cut and re-glue them again and again – participants had learned to overcome the fear of making mistakes *in public*. In this way, they could

bring together what they had seen in their 'mind's eye' with what they were producing practically, without the fear of being judged. They were experimenting publicly without fear of humiliation, without the fear of 'social exile' or 'annihilation'. In this sense, they were learning not only how to actively build democracy, but how to intervene. And they had discovered the transformative power of their own performance: *just as we took abandoned ceramic fragments and recycled them into a new mosaic, so we took fragments of our excluded histories and recycled them into a new sense of community...*



The final mosaic: A collective book written by young authors for their community, celebrating cooperation, cultural democracy, the cultivation of a new humanity and the development of a pedagogy of transformation.

## Cultural Literacy and Transformance

Cultural Literacy is an arts-based pedagogy which begins from the premise that all human beings are and need to be dialogic, theatrical and create their own culture to become social, but suffer a pedagogy of rationalised conflict to become competitive and competent according to the values of colonialist cultures whose (mainly European) pedagogy, even in crisis, to this day still remains dominant.

As an alternative, this pedagogy proposes the cultivating of new dialogic, sensitive and cooperative subjectivities, capable of individually and collectively intervening in an authoritarian world towards the learning and making of participatory democracies. This cannot be achieved however as individuals, seated in a competitive academic classroom process. It requires all our sensory intelligences to create new ways of active listening, reading dialogically and writing cooperatively.

This arts-based pedagogy therefore doesn't limit itself to verbal languages, which in many cultures tend to hide (unconsciously) more than they reveal. It uses theatre, dance, sculpture, painting and the literary arts to reveal and voice the knowledges and histories of the body, towards a questioning self-reading of our subjectivity, through and with others. In this way, it seeks to reveal the histories of subjugation, self-sacrifice and exclusion that are inscribed into our daily gestures and reflexes, to transform and heal them into resources of personal and collective self-knowledge based on a lived and 'performed' experience of transformation. This ensures confident intervention in the present to avoid reproducing the past, and cultivates the intercultural sensitivities and 'performance-awareness' that are necessary to building new communities of solidarity and participatory democracy.

For these reasons, the pedagogy begins from the transformation of all spaces of education (particularly school classrooms) into intimate dialogic theatres, to cultivate human beings capable of acting on any social stage to create a just, cooperative, and democratic society. It affirms the importance of the continuous participation of children, young people and adults in artistic projects which offer the experience of collective creation and production, to recover and rewrite their cultural histories and aspirations. This not only enables participants to learn participatory democracy, but to leave symbolic marks of their passage through the world, as a contribution to the history of humanity and to the wisdom of future generations. In this way, artistic production and cultural literacy are essential to the cultivation of social care, solidarity, and responsible citizenship.

To realise these objectives, this pedagogy proposes the reconceptualisation of the arts as our creative and democratising human languages of reflection, expression, experimentation and production. But it is not offered as an extra curricula or pedagogical option. It is conceived as the pedagogic foundation for the formation of every educator, to be able to work in dialogic pairs. This might be called a 'pedagogy of transformance'.

**Dan Baron Cohen (Brazil 2005)**

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