

# Dialogic Performance:

## *Towards a Pedagogy of Transformance*

Dan Baron Cohen\* (Brazil)

### Abstract

This article relates performance literacy to storytelling as a foundation for the making of democratic narratives and communities. It explains how the aesthetic potential of all public space is shaped by the relationship between historical memory and imagined communities, and how both affect the intimate dialogic performance of everyday life. From these foundations, the article argues for the decolonization of our internal dialogue through intercultural literacy to nurture participatory democracy and a new paradigm of education based on sustainable transformation and cooperation.

**Keywords:** *Education, Dialogic, Pedagogy, Transformation, Sustainability*

\* Dan Baron Cohen, President, Institute of Transformance: Culture & Education, Avenida Braz de Aguiar, 564, Edifício Braz de Aguiar, 1103b, Nazare, Belem, Para, CEP 66035-000, Brasil. voice: 0055-91-3222-8021, email: transformance@hotmail.com, website: www.transformance.org.br

### Stage Presence

When I am asked in Brazil *where are you from?*, I pause for a fraction of a moment, before I answer. This question is asking more than just where I live. It is beginning the age-old process of identification on meeting to discover what we seem to have in common and whether our differences might threaten this community. It is interpreting whether we have any living histories or desires whose ‘chance’ meeting might unknowingly and even unintentionally provoke a dangerous confrontation in the space where we have crossed paths. For the histories or imagined futures that link nations, classes, genders, races and generations (and how their effects accumulate, overlap, confront, disperse and return) are lived or imagined by and through individuals and their communities in real places and through real everyday objects.

For this reason, no place (or object within it) is just made up of the three objective dimensions of its physical form. Its form also contains the two subjective and potentially dangerous dimensions of memory and imagination – their histories, and their imagined futures – that can be ‘seen’ in its spaces, surfaces and depths, depending upon who is interpreting their *presence*. It may well be that these histories and imagined futures have been recorded in physical objects, as in the circles carved into the stones by the Guarani Indians where they cooked, on the ocean coast where I am writing. But my *focused gaze* – my curiosity, my desire to see, the knowledges I bring to this interpretation and all that has shaped my receptivity – reveals the indigenous *presence* within the stone. This focused gaze – seeing, reflecting, interpreting – constitutes our transforming *aesthetic power*.

This *aesthetic power* is clearly always culturally shaped, but it is not just formed. It is *forming*. We can imagine, give form to something that is not real and real at the same time. The theatre, most obviously, is based and depends upon this *aesthetic power*, which transforms the real into fiction and the fictitious into the real. The more people who agree to focus their *aesthetic power* on the same space, the more powerful this collectively focussed space becomes. The Pataxo Indians strung the five bows in their monument to 500 years of resistance with invisible strings. Those who do not know this symbolism might read the *presence* of defeat in the bows. But those who look at the monument with the knowledge of its storytellers can not only read the *presence* of the invisible strings; through their *aesthetic power* they can transform the physical circle defined by the bows into an *aesthetic space* which in turn, depending on how it is focused, transforms anyone who walks onto it’s stage into warriors who ‘never reveal the secrets of their struggle’. Just by imagining the gaze of others, looking out and within simultaneously, people might step into this stage and transform their ‘performance’.

### Intimate and Public Dialogue

In the fractional pause in our public dialogue, I read the eyes and ‘comportment’ of my questioner to interpret his<sup>1</sup> subjectivity, his *presence* and how he is reading mine, to decide how I will identify the two stories I inherited with my name, and

<sup>1</sup> I have chosen not to write his/her though I mean to refer to both men and women, to raise questions about the relationship between gender and performance in relation to public and intimate space.



The national monument: '500 Years of Resistance by the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil' a collective sculpture which provides an aesthetic space for the performance of history and transformation (Bahia, Brazil, 2001, 10m x 8m).

the story I am making. My intuition – that fusion of my emotional, corporal, perceptual and spatial intelligences – reads everything within this space we are now focusing through a dialogue between each other's *presence*, and guides the tone and strategy of my public voice – providing I trust it, can hear its intimate dialogue and act upon it.

People have always had to be this alert in moving between different communities, particularly communities with unresolved, dangerous living histories. But today, this is how we move through our own streets and, increasingly, through our own homes. It is how we survive the globalizing culture which is shattering entire continents, nations, classes, communities and families into isolated individual fortresses of fear. It is how we compete across and survive the physical, psychological and increasingly digitalized boundaries that separate those who eat and those who serve, those who work and those who beg, those who buy and those who make, those who kill and those who starve. Today, no matter where we are from, if we do not have this performance-sensitivity to the *dialogic* effects of our presence, we may well unintentionally provoke a fatal confrontation. This is the aesthetics of contemporary survival.

I smile and reply: *Wales. Canada. But now I live here in Brazil.* I offer an invitation to the question that crosses his eyes: *It's quite a story.* Most who have heard of Wales respond: *the United Kingdom* or *the land of Lady Di*, and I reply with another smile: *is Brazil part of the USA?* With a question, I've gently revealed my anti-imperialism and even proposed an empathetic bridge of solidarity. With the smile and the question I have invited further dialogue.

You might think this sensitivity to historical and imagined space, public and intimate voices and performance is over-stated, the over-cautious concern of a refugee or a prisoner with a past to hide or a future to protect, or the exaggerated self-consciousness of a stranger visiting a new country. Perhaps my sensitivity has been heightened a little by all of these experiences, as well as by my experience within the theatre. But I would argue this over-sensitivity is only making explicit what has become habitual, even deadened or lost in our everyday relations of dislocated and accelerated communication. This 'performance-sensitivity' or *presence*, however intuitive or professionalized, is what we identify in all the 'actors' we notice in our lives, those who assume a 'performative' role on a public stage. It is more commonly misunderstood in its negative form of shyness and over-sensitivity to 'being in public', a self-protective performance based on our direct or inherited memory of how the focused power of a public space (like the classroom, playground, street, workplace or even the *home*) was once abused. How much of this *performance sensitivity* is missed when we lower our eyes (in reflexes of self-defense)? We need to demystify theatre to understand and democratize the performance of power.

### The Dialogic Triangle

Most Brazilians are curious to know about everyday life in Wales and London. They want to use this rare opportunity to find out about the food, the weather, the average wage, the men and women, corruption and the quality of life in Europe not just to check or extend their knowledge, but to see themselves and their world through my eyes. This is part of their own silent, intimate dialogue. As the stranger, I am expected to identify myself. Now I can return the question or ask about the community.

As soon as my question has left my lips, another fractional pause and set of silent intimate dialogues have been activated. Within seconds, we have inverted roles and I am learning about the person before me and about myself, and we are establishing not just a dialogue between two stories, but the possibility of a shared dialogic story in the future. This has been symbolized and facilitated through the transformation of the aesthetic space between us. We have already focused this space into an intercultural stage of reflection, interpretation and performance. It is now being reformed and adapted to include two different stories, two different kinds of performance, and two different kinds of interpretation and expectation.

Even though we have only exchanged a few words, in just one meeting we have transformed an existing space into a complex stage of simultaneous rehearsal, interactive performance, spectating and self-spectating. And through the way in which we use this space, we can quickly and profoundly sense and judge our equality or inequality. How we re-cognize this first relation depends upon how we understand the relationship between our stories. But in this first interactive drama of identification, we have both summoned up our pasts to imagine a series of possible futures to create a place of possible dialogue, community, decision-making and agreement – even if that agreement is that it should be our last! If this drama

of three interacting dialogues occurs between just two people, imagine the dialogic potential and activity of a space full of people!

### Colonization: The Mutilation of Intimate Dialogue

But what if we have inherited lost or destroyed histories and have no ‘past’ to draw on, apply and share? What if we have inherited only fragmented, confused, contradictory or condemning colonial histories that engender self-doubt, self-disrespect, self-loathing and self-effacing self-representation? How can we build this drama of identification and community, or participate in its construction as equals? Without *knowing* ourselves, without understanding and decolonizing the histories that we carry within mindful-body – our language, our gestures and our corporal memory – our capacity to question and transform the racist and sexist reflexes in our everyday performances let alone to resist the seductive performance of consumerism, is radically weakened.



Trainee teachers ‘read’ themselves as performers of living history, through the mindful-body of the other, during a Transformance workshop (Pará, Brazil, 2007).



Community organizers dramatize thresholds they need to cross to work together (Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2001)

In the ten years I have lived in Brazil, I have been fascinated by certain national cultural reflexes. The non-verbal gesture of the *xicote hurry! hurry!* is intriguing. Is this the *presence* of internalized threat and subjugation from within centuries of colonialism? What are the subjective legacies of this culture? The word *saudade* is another fascinating national linguistic gesture. What are its origins? Does it carry the *presence* of acute memories of separation and loss of community: what are its subjective effects? What are the effects of the loss and (in some cases) the prohibition of the maternal tongue upon the capacity to speak, to write, to think self-confidently?

What is *present* in the cultural reflexes *fica a vontade, mas comer mais!* (as the visitor groans with the excess he has eaten), *mas e cedo ainda* (when the visitor looks ready to leave) and *desculpa qualquer coisa* (after offering faultless and excessive generosity)?

By contrast to the increasingly global, neo-liberal reflexes of privacy and isolation, these reflexes of expressive empathy reflect generations of poverty, humility and sharing present within the rural culture of solidarity. This is still the dominant 'structure of feeling' which, after centuries of repression and struggle, is now manifesting itself in Brazil's national cultural and educational policy. Given the country's living interculturalism (within the identity of almost every individual), it is impossible to know to what extent these cultural reflexes also reflect the nation's African and Indigenous pre-colonial cultures. But certainly, these qualities of empathy and intimacy are precious resources for cultivating and sustaining democratic community, and are deeply threatened by neoliberal policy and the micro-technology<sup>2</sup> and totalitarian culture of consumerism.

However, it is important to read these cultural reflexes critically and dialectically, to also see them as an unintentional performance of a more repressed Brazilian *presence*, the dramatized and overlapping historical experiences of the refugee, the slave and the hunted-in-hiding. These reflexes perform the deepest desire to be accepted and not be suspected, to avoid giving or taking offense, of saying no or disagreeing, which makes facing and solving difficulties with others almost impossible. Brazil may keep its conversation light and its party going so as not to risk discovering an intimate story that was deliberately hidden long ago. But the democratization of Brazil and its resistance to globalization are going to profoundly depend upon the development of a pluralistic, dialogic stage of self-esteem onto which its grandchildren born of rape and genocide can step without shame, onto which its black and mixed-race grandchildren can step without wishing they wore white skins, and onto which its white youth can step without having to laugh *I don't know* to the question *what is your history?*

### Decolonization: The Rebuilding of Intimate Dialogue

*Wales. Canada. But now I live here in Brazil.* I have given my public response. But in spaces of proven solidarity, care, sensitivity and principle, I can tell my more intimate stories. I can speak of the cracked, torn and bleached photos of my great uncles and aunts from Poland who perished in the ovens of industrialized

<sup>2</sup> What are the subjective effects of the sustained consuming of unresponsive narratives that neither requires the telling or the exchanging of stories nor the active expression of listening and making of sense? The islands of communication are certainly producing new languages and critical intelligences. They must also be nurturing new skills in critical listening and reading. But are they nurturing a dialogic culture? Quite apart from the ideological and psycho-emotional effects of the predominantly Euro-American celebration of ruthless violence and invulnerability, is there any relation between the increase of violence in young people of all social classes and their hours and years of non-expressive monologic communication? It may still be premature to define the effects of the new technologies. But it is possible that even at their most interactive, their compulsive and monological qualities neither enable us to develop and practice our own *authority* nor allow the exchange of stories as metaphors in the process of making new collective and democratic stories.



*Storytelling circles to perform the histories of 'intimate objects' from everyday life to develop dialogic authority and performance literacy: a pedagogy for intercultural education and transformation (Santa Catarina, Brazil, 2001)*

destruction that left a thirst for justice and a silent cry for the right to remember in the names and gestures of those who witnessed from afar, that I inherited. And excavating even deeper still, I can tell the story of an early childhood that tiptoed round a profoundly disabled sister whose silent helplessness unknowingly formed her siblings into activists, scientists, doctors and artists of the emotions.

I resisted both stories for decades, for paradoxically different but ultimately identical psychological-emotional reasons. The larger racial story nurtured a deep respect and ache for human freedom, but in self-subjugating, self-ghettoizing and self-valorizing memory to thousands of years of persecution and resistance. My relationship to my sister more wordlessly nurtured emotional responsibility and care towards the helpless, at the expense of my personal needs. Both stories in the populist and careless mouth of the playground and empire post-war street corner became the means of mocking our Welsh and Canadian class difference. And because they were so intimately a part of my identity, both intimate stories found refuge behind the more public, more lucid, more detached and more masculine barricades of nationality and class.

I learned to tell these intimate stories through the courage of friends in Manchester, Derry, Rhondda, Palestine and Africa whose communities had also been ruthlessly and calculatedly denied the memory, language or right to know themselves. I could see in their eyes why they hid their intimate unspeakable stories of colonial self-hatred and violent inarticulate emotional and sexual self-pity behind proud and articulate anti-colonial street murals and anti-imperialist banners of protest. They could not bear the agony of being judged by their own for the cruel contradictions within their own compulsive subjectivity, and could not bear the torture of their own self-judgment. But gradually, during the years that we worked

together, their intimate stories inadvertently became metaphors for mine, and mine for their's. And we discovered a fascinating fact of performance: in learning to tell our intimate stories in public, we simultaneously had to hear and learn to tell them to ourselves. By breaking our silence in an intimate space of principled but empathetic solidarity where we could reflect analytically and creatively, not defensively and dogmatically about the politics of our subjectivity, we were able to find the voice and the courage to break our silence in a space of judgment.

As I learned to tell these intimate stories, I recognized why I had resisted them for so long. In part, they had denied me the right to create myself. But in part, they also associated me with Israeli imperial expansionism, the repression of the Palestinian people, and the helplessness inaction of victims. I refused to be judged for what I myself neither believed in nor accepted.

But I had also resisted these stories because I could not explain them to myself. I had no ideas which could explain in personal terms why we need to recognize what we ourselves have internalized within our *immunization* to know what needs to be transformed to avoid reproducing our oppressors within our own subjectivity. I had no access to the instruments which explain how victims of any holocaust can become tyrannical and ruthless human rights advocates, and illuminate our *structures of feeling* to convince us to actively choose to integrate this subjective dimension into the larger project of social transformation.

I had no grasp of what today I understand as the archeology of the mindful-body and the contradictions that lie on the threshold between resistance and self-determination. I therefore had no conscious awareness of how, in the struggle between my determined present and self-determined future, though I might 'need' to edit some of the facts of my history, their emotional and psychological force continued to structure my feelings, gestures and needs, and necessarily touched and influenced the lives and struggles of others. This is not a fault but a subjective and political fact of my personal humanity. As a community-based 'performing arts educator', I have a responsibility both to re-cognize the motivational power of my humanity and understand its 'performance effects'.

This intimate history is not the declared subject of this article. But it is clearly a part of its subjectivity and, more profoundly, by sharing this intimate story with you, I not only re-cognize and know myself as a writer, lover, son, friend, educator and elected President of IDEA on the various collective stages within my life; it is how I recognize myself as an inter-acting subjectivity on the collective stages of others and my only hope of learning the skills and praxis of a new community-based subjectivity.

At this time of writing, this is how I explain what *motivates* and *animates* my ideas and reflexive-empathetic solidarity with any person or people struggling to tell their story to create a new identity. But it also explains my commitment to illuminating the subjective effects of not knowing or denying this intimate history, and to understanding their significance in the quest for democracy and self-determination.

The emotional and psychological illnesses ‘caused’ by amnesia, cultural dislocation, lack of self-confidence, lack of self-esteem, lack of self-knowledge and lack of self-acceptance not only denies the possibility of interrupting the desire for affirmation that dialectically locks victim and violator into the abusive co-dependent cycle that characterizes all authoritarian relationships; it also explains the disability to say no, the justice-seeking desire for the center of the stage, the (consequent) tendency to assume excessive responsibility, the (consequent) disability to organize time, the relentless cry of (self)accusation and consequent inability to listen, and the chronic disability to perceive how the personal is present in their (and every) reading of the world which characterizes all victim cultures. Of course, inexperience in coordinating time and responsibility, and (impoverished) resources exacerbate these difficulties. But these factors tend to be turned into the key causes by victim cultures to rationalize and disown responsibility for their deaf and compulsive performance practice, an understandable but tell-tale reflex to blame rather than to re-cognize the intolerable possibility of complicity in any continuing suffering. This is the fundamental link between storytelling and self-determination. I often ask myself when I am most acutely uncertain how to read a culture that is not my own, or any individual I am working with *do I as an ‘outsider’ have any right to participate in other people’s struggles?* This uncertainty is no less present in my ‘own culture’ or ‘community’. We are all outsiders to others. But the question is fundamental. It is what inhibits any authoritarian desire to ‘conscientious-ize’ others and generates the necessary self-doubt and need to question that ensures permanent questioning and learning.

### **From Storytelling to Storymaking**

If our capacity to narrate and tell stories arises from our need to organize and make sense of our experience in the world, how we narrate and tell our story of course depends on who we are, where we belong and the stories that we hear or do not hear. It does not follow that we know how to tell our story, that we know when and where it begins, or that we tell it in a way which satisfies our need. Perhaps that explains the compulsive fascination in so many people to hear other stories. But however we tell our story – whether we have to borrow the nerve or techniques of other storytellers to tell it, whether we have to smuggle it into another time and place to tell it, whether we have to tell it in the margins or the silences of other people’s stories, whether we have to conceal it within other people’s narratives or even between the teeth in their smile, whether we have to lie and cheat to tell it or bend it almost beyond recognition to match it with the world – tell it we must, at least to ourselves. For storytelling is how we try to know and recognize ourselves.

We could say storytelling is the way the world’s history is revealed in our actions, or that our intimate stories enable us to clarify our part and responsibility in the shared histories we are making. We could say storytelling is the act of closing one story to enable another to begin, or the act of maintaining a story as open and incomplete to extend it into the future. However we choose to see and define it, storytelling is much more than the mere telling of stories. It is an intervention in

a shared living history that contributes to the definition of the present and the making of the future, and explains why storytelling and the control of its story making power – its means of affecting and defining – are so fiercely contested and controlled. If storytelling is this act of ‘making sense’ through the making of a story for the first time or making it differently from the last time, why is it not recognized as story making? Is this to persuade us that we are mere tellers or listeners and should subordinate ourselves to and invest ourselves in the recognized makers of stories?

For this reason, we need to ensure that the dialogic power of ‘storying’ and how it is performed become an essential part of our human sensitivity and understanding of democracy. We should judge ourselves – and our cultural and educational institutions – by the extent to which we shared and nurture the dialogic skills of performance, in practice.

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