

# Guest Author Performing Transformation in the Community University of the Rivers<sub>(Part 2)</sub>

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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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### Section V

*Grandpa, I adore immersing myself in your stories  
I'm able to imagine  
the childhood of Marabá.  
But grandpa  
I hear so often  
that everything will change and I ask myself  
when my river  
becomes a highway  
how will I play?*

Kaline sits drawing in concentrated silence, in a circle of a dozen tiny girls and boys, all drawing cross-legged or leaning in different positions, around a sea of books of songs, short-stories and photos. Adriana, a brutally honest 12-year old with the *astucia* of someone ten times her age, coordinates her workshop within the outdoor community library *Folhas da Vida* (Leaves of Life). She offers words of support and glances of interest, while transforming the letters 'Culture and Art' into a sign which she has decided to peg to the clothesline that already carries many of the drawings that are being produced around her in response to Rafael's story-telling.

Rafael reads a story from books abandoned by and rescued from the Ministry of Culture's chaotic regional office, quizzing his larger circle of older children and young teenagers about its characters, themes, legends, narrative, new words and extraordinary phrases. He is alarmingly wiry for 15, effeminate in a fiercely homo-phobic culture, but respected. He walks in a circle as he reads aloud, followed by his assistant, Viviane, just ten, her darkly ringed eyes betraying a story of unspeakable violence towards her mother that she witnesses every night and promises never to tell. The two circle the drawing children, each in her world and the watching young teenagers, testing questions between them in dramatic whispers and then suddenly pausing to lance one unexpectedly at their alert audience.

It is a rapt universe. Everyone knows that at the end of an hour, there will be a literary lucky-dip for the most active, the most supportive, the one who scored the most correct answers. They are all so quick and have such a keen sense of injustice that with so many answers in the air, little Viviane struggles to keep a tally. But Rafael mediates with humor and he is fair. No-one looks away. Apart from the desire to return home with a book to build up their growing library, everyone wants to feel lucky.

I admire these three young coordinators building their community of 380 family libraries. But where do their participatory and dialogic coordination strategies and courage to constantly innovate come from? Are they African, Indigenous,

Amazonian reflexes, an intuitive intervention which draws on centuries of processed but unspoken experience?

At a discreet distance, Manoela, sits reading with another small group of slightly older girls, prepared at any moment to intervene to offer pedagogical support to the coordinators or to protect the outdoor library. The week before, she had explained to an American journalist who had suddenly entered from the river, camera to his eye, that the workshop was not to be photographed or filmed without prior permission from the project's organizing nucleus, and from the young people and their families. When he asserted his right, she had raised her hand to cover his lens: child and youth prostitution here in the region, friend, is the highest in Brazil. Few here have the confidence to say 'no'. Why not sit and talk to the children? When he grabbed Manoela's arm and pushed her to one side, all the children had stood up. Some asked him to leave. The man had retreated and the story went viral in the streets.

Surveying the entire scene, ex-colonel Stanislau Cordeiro, President of the Francisco Coelho Residents' Association, had glowered down from one of his mansion's balconies, furious that his American guest had been so abused. But he did not react. He is confident that his National Firemen's Training Program for At-Risk Youth will discipline the illiterate truants, and his wife's street parties, baskets of free food and folk-dancing project will sweep this community university from the pathway of history, so that he can get on with the planned transformation of this small territory into a spotless heritage park, sustained by prestigious hotels. The mining giant Vale has already pledged the funds. He has the Senate in his sights.

A few months earlier, the ex-colonel's wife, Maria Celia, had thrown nineteen black plastic bin-liners from one of her balconies, in protest against our open-air community cinema that was blocking the street. Évany, Camila, Rafael and Manoela opened them and sifting through the expensive garbage, found Cordeiro's credit-card receipts, his mason's conference tags and Maria-Celia's card-game accounts. By coincidence, the most able and courageous journalist in Marabá had been present, visiting the project. *Don't denounce them*, I insisted. *Our project needs to persuade Cordeiro and his family on the strength of its proposal, not through fear.*

Manoela handed copies of the tell-tale documents to the police for the record, and the project held its breath. Young considered teenagers like Luciel, Pablo and Carlinhos had understood the invitation. Zequinha chewed his upper lip. The teenagers did not break into the project's brightly painted cultural centre to torch its open-air library and to steal its equipment, or assassinate Manoela or me for 20 or 30 Brazilian Reais. That Cordeiro and Maria-Celia's children now insist in participating in Rafael's reading circle and *Cine Coruja*, also gives us hope.

Between Manoela's reading group and Adriana's clothesline exhibition, Luciel talks to Popopo, a mute adult with special needs, on the periphery of the workshop, looking through his collection of CDs. In his unpatronising, genuine and

smiling manner, motivated by empathetic reflexes of community care, Luciel is improvising a communication strategy which includes Popopo into this circle of readers. No adult has ever managed this.

Rafael notes the initiative, and gestures to me to include it into my filming. In this past year, he has already distinguished himself as a remarkable linguist in our dialogic English project. Now I perceive his peripheral awareness, linked to a sensitivity often found in gay intelligences. By example, Rafael is inspiring an entire community which sits at the back of the class, condemned as illiterate, to love literature, and to see books as a place where the imagination can be fed, nurtured and reclaimed. *Dan. I've just had an idea. Why don't we bring our literary lucky-dip into the cultural raffle at the end of each film, and integrate our library circles into the community caravan?*

I'm stunned by the quality of the proposal. Rafael has transformed *Folhas de Vida* into our first transversal project. He has grasped it is not enough to want to lose books rather than stamp them with return dates, and there is not enough time to visit every home in Cabelo Seco. He has seen the potential of the street and the community's little square as intimate spaces of public transformation.

When I show a video clip of *Folhas de Vida* to the Director of the National System of Public Libraries, during a national seminar in Belem, Rafael's idea becomes policy. Two crates of forgotten, mint publications arrive in Cabelo Seco, addressed to Rafael Varão, Community Librarian, Community University of the Rivers. It makes his day. It may have saved his life.

## Section VI

*In the first bike-ride, for peace  
I carried my assassinated brother  
and flying on the edge of the Tocantins  
we met Amazonian beauty.  
On the second, for life  
I carried my cousin in my lap  
and whistling together without fear  
we discovered the path to freedom.  
On this third, for the waters  
I will carry you, mum, to Amapá  
and creating our university of the rivers  
let's revive our Itacaiúnas.*

Shall we hold the frontline, together? I look into the eyes of Luciel, Pablo, Carlinhos and three other youths whose names I cannot remember, all riding bikes which they've built from abandoned and, probably, some stolen parts. They use their flip-flops as brakes. Some wear painted crash helmets and dark glasses; others t-shirts, ripped and painted for the occasion. Many ride with cousins and siblings cross-bar, in baskets and back-saddle. All one hundred and fifty-odd cyclists peddle with our simple bright orange strip of linen wrapped around their wrists,

ankles, necks, foreheads, handlebars, antennas of imaginary radios, and the accompanying police and firemen do too, attached to their motorbike antennas and mirrors. Proud tags of belonging and quest. *Will you help me?* I repeat.

I keep asking every few minutes, to keep the vital threshold between life and death at the front of their minds. These six have proven themselves in the first two bike-rides. They all love the rush of adrenalin, riding out of Cabelo Seco, a river of children, youth, some mothers and fewer grandparents, watched by hundreds of relatives and friends from windows, doorways and street corners. But these moments of centre-stage affirmation and recognition are the hardest. *Hold the line. Show them our leadership. Show them the beauty of our cooperation.* They smile, aware and visibly growing in stature in the gaze of their community. They tease the jealous few who could not find a bike on time, and throw out one-liners to the police officers who today see their restraint and care.



Figure 4. Bike-ride for freedom (2013).

I can see they are saving themselves. They are already imagining the freedom of the motorway, yelling without inhibition beneath the overpass bridges, and the triumphant chorus of song as they enter another invisible community. *Listen to that river of freedom guys, and hold the line. We have the lives of them all in our hands.* A din of whistles, home-made horns, small drums, euphoric cries and chants, accompanied by the CD played on the bike-radio:

*Sou da raça negra  
da raça africana  
gosto do reggae  
do reggae jamaicano*

*e no balanço do reggae eu vou  
 todo mundo me segue eu vou  
 eu dancei ontem danço hoje  
 e amanhã, reggae.*

We pass through the old city, hundreds of shoppers clapping, acknowledging, smiling with approval and admiration, contaminated by the joy, community and dream. Throughout this river of life, born out of the assassination of our bassist at the end of last year, every cyclist is chatting in pairs, helping someone to recover their balance or inflate a flat-tire, exchanging stories, passing on news, comparing and analysing the bike rides and waving at astonished school friends. All are exhilarated by their own power to transform decades of cruel prejudice towards Cabelo Seco into recognition and respect.

The small group of coordinators beside me resists the temptation to burst the banks of this river of dialogue. They call out to those who spill over the frontline by name with a well-aimed affirmation or explanation, urging the angriest and most self-destructive, or most compulsive and least integrated to keep the collective rhythm and stay behind their moving community threshold. *Take a look at our wheels, guys. It's like we have an invisible chord. Who would've imagined this beauty last ride. Where will we ride to next month?*

*Beauty was the last word I expected to hear on the bicicletada*, Carlinhos smiles as we arrive in the Liberdade community centre. He had composed one of our CD's most popular songs four years ago, and suddenly traded the pleasure and affirmation of the experimental music workshop and community stage for the endless nights of crack-cocaine. I look at his self-consumed youth, not yet 18, and recall his easy self-confidence as a dancer and percussionist. Has the emerging eco-pedagogy of the bicicletada resonated within his needs? The unexpected visceral mix of personal autonomy and collective responsibility, well-being and sustainable transport, cultural production and community solidarity, has drawn him close again for the first time.

Though his body has been ravaged, Carlinhos' charismatic smile and generosity inspire by example all around him to lift instruments, speakers, oranges and bananas, vats of *cajá* juice and our mobile library into the school playground. He places the chairs in concentric circles, reflexes from two years of creating a stage of inclusive human rights and ethical principle with the *Latinhas de Quintal*, and young observers gravitate towards him to lend a hand. Four younger children step into this new space to repair a bike, and with the same easy-going leadership, Carlinhos sits with them and creates a seven-minute workshop, showing them how to transform a coin into a screw-driver to repair jammed brakes. The bike is leaned against the wall as two of *Afro Mundi* dancers and the young *Latinhas* musicians take their positions, and within seconds two hundred young people from Liberdade community have formed an active audience, singing and moving to Cabelo Seco's afro-amazonian culture. Our self-styled journalist, singer and dancer, Carolayne takes the mic. *Welcome Liberdade to the Community University*



*of the Rivers! Let's begin with one of our first songs about solidarity in the car- boot of everyday life, written by Carlinhos at 12 years of age!* The lyricist smiles and blushes. He did not expect the recognition. Maybe he will come home, and live.

## Section VII

Évany sets up the projector while Carol, Pablo and Adriana organize 50 chairs into the intimate half-moon auditorium of Cine Coruja (Owl Cinema). Last night, the cinema was in the street, open to all, to view *The Whale Rider*, and everyone brought chairs, sat in doorways, leaned out of windows, and even bundled children on their laps. Tonight is youth night, restricted to those over 12, and takes place inside the cultural centre. We expect the cinema to pack out after weeks of African films, chosen by the young coordinators in consultation with their community friends, their teachers and their families.

Araguaia: a Conspiracy of Silence is a risk. The film is overtly political and even shows a scene of execution by young people who have chosen to defend the Amazon with arms. It is a far cry from *Avatar* and even *Beloved*, epic films that our audience watched transfixed, shivering under blankets when the temperature suddenly dipped, or came back to see to the end after torrential rains interrupted the film and threatened to turn the makeshift screen into a kite.

*It's worth a try*, Évany affirms as she connects the speaker to the computer to welcome the audience. *Have you brought the goiaba and caju juice, apples and bananas?* she asks Carol. In its first year, Cine Coruja began with a string of lights hung on the walls around the open garden of the Cultural Centre, and suspended between banana trees, facing the River Tocantins. Camila and Carolayne had hired an old popcorn van and served litres of *Guaraná*, dressed as usherettes. They had even mounted a photographic exhibition. But when a considered teenager sought refuge inside the audience turning it into his terrified shield, and the growing numbers of diabetes cases claimed the life of Manoel Gato, the coordinators had to rethink all dimensions of security. Now in its second year, the audience expects Amazonian fruits and juices. *Ready to let everyone in?* Pablo nods. He rarely speaks.

The short begins, a brilliant Bolivian animation, with just three people in the audience. A growing despair seeps into the collective confidence of the young coordinators. They have facebooked their networks, posterized the bakery, fresh water well, local bars and schools, blogged and even sent a ludic jingle through the community's two roads, by bike-radio. Resistance to a program that dares to show films from outside Hollywood or London has long since melted, as children, youth and parents discovered Brazilian, Central and Latin American, African and Asian films. The indoor youth sessions are also now a place to be seen, to flirt by mobile in the dark, to steal furtive kisses, and to enjoy some relief from the tense, authoritarian and sometimes violent kitchens of so many fatherless homes. *Beloved* helped many to understand the accumulated, unvented violations in their lives. No, this absence is something else.

*Maybe it's a kind of self-censorship*, Évany speculates, messaging all the coordinators of the projects. *The word's out that it's about here. They don't want to face it.* The clarity

of her analysis, marginalized and hidden in her school classroom, convinces all of them. Perhaps this is new. They had faced the question of censorship with courage, mothers and teenagers alike, in their weekly planning circles, as they debated how and if they should close the door of a community cinema, to meet the specific needs of young people and of the adults' hunger for 'thinking films'. They had considered everything, from a kiss in the shadows to explicit sex in the car, anti-heroes in conflict at home, in school and in church, to the portrayal of gay love.

Their discussions were often inflamed by so many unresolved histories and threatened to erupt into open conflict. But they had learned to listen, to risk taking a stand, to question and to mediate their differences in struggle to reach a democratic decision. One debate was interrupted by the assassination of a son on a street-corner, another by the cries of hungry children in the street. The street always focused the debate, at once threatening to revoke any risky decision and to taunt any fearful step-back. Patience had been tested. *Cine Coruja* had not just faced the profound challenge of censorship inside a religious, terrified poor community. It had come to be defined by it. This evening it is something else.

*The film asks people to take a stand about the future of the Tocantins, explains Carol, and they know the Colonel's up there, watching all who enter and leave.* They sit scattered throughout the auditorium, children watching the cartoon like a council of elders debating the future of the Amazon, oblivious of their unusual maturity and analytical precision. The short ends and Évany proposes they postpone the snack and distribution of the cultural raffle tickets. They quickly agree. Two adults from outside Cabelo Seco, participating in the Community University and a young teenage couple expecting their first baby drift in. Évany starts the feature and all focus. Though they know they are in permanent formation and are offering films which respect the life-experience of their community, the young coordinators are still disappointed.

Fifteen minutes into the film and suddenly there is a rush of teenage guys. Then a few girls enter and Carol shows them to their regular seats. Everyone is wired. In seconds, the explanation has circulated. The Residents' Association has deliberately scheduled a party outside their headquarters to clash with the cinema program. Children and youth have been dancing brega above beer bottles, drinking beer and coke, devouring chocolate cake and crisps. But as soon as the free food has been consumed, all of the teenage cinephiles have raced over. A nervy energy of sugar-excess permeates the air, but the familiar streets and squares of Marabá on-screen have already excited interest and there's the hint of an emerging love-story which resonates with their needs. They are identifying. In the next 90 minutes, they watch the agony of a law student as he faces the slow death of a soldier he has executed to protect a local community, and the painful decision by people like them to implement a collective agreement, to send away a teenage guerrilla from the underground forest-camp, for becoming pregnant. All mobile phones are still. In a tiny riverside cinema, condemned youth are reflecting on their lives, history and choices. The ritual applause and Évany, Pablo and Carol walk to the front of the audience.



*Thanks for coming, Évany smiles. What did you think? An edgy silence, not of shyness, but of calculating risks: the risk of appearing too serious on a Saturday night, of appearing too forward in a culture that chides originality and the courage to question, of just appearing, above the long-grass. But no-one leaves. Many of us lived that story, says Zequinha from the back row. Akissiany, a large nineteen year old, balances in her chair. It's hard to believe that happened here in the Old City. Pablo looks at Zequinha. It's in your song, Alerta Amazônia. Simone speaks from the corner. This is the only community in Marabá that has the nerve to screen a film like that. We should make a film of what we're doing here tonight! Laughter of agreement. We need to install solar energy in Cabelo Seco, Pablo replies, to keep that dream alive.*

### Section VIII

A full year later, Camila hugs Marina da Silva, former Brazilian Minister of the Environment and candidate for vice-president of Brazil in this year's elections. Marina has opened an international conference of social movements, trade union leaders, policy advisers and NGO activists in Washington DC on the legacy of her close friend Chico Mendes, offering a reflexive celebratory portrait of the mythic assassinated rubber-tapper through a weave of stories, eco-social ideas and provocative new paradigm policy proposals. Camila will dance *Roots and Antennas* the following night, and has recognized her own experience and intelligence in Marina's voice. It is a remarkable hug, unimaginable seven years ago when Camila first danced beneath drying clothes in a Cabelo Seco backyard. *I am an afro-contemporary dancer and Amazonian arts educator, she tells Marina, in our community university of the rivers. I dance to research and transform memory of exclusion and hunger, to create imagined communities of choice.*

Marina's eyes well up with emotion. She recognizes herself in the dancer's struggle to arrange and articulate her thoughts, on her feet. Both value precision. They have suffered the power of words and silences. They know them as weapons, tools and bridges. Camila twice braved the prejudices of the American consulate in Brasilia to gain her visa, her tongue too swollen with the muscular reflexes of forbidden grammars and disappeared vocabularies to move elegantly inside a mouth crowded with teeth still being pushed forward by a lifetime of thumb-sucking. We have talked about how both dramatize a violated childhood she never had time to enjoy, and she knows braces will not conceal or heal the need. But right now, she is enjoying her momentum. In her interview for a travel visa, she convinced the consul, seated well below his gaze, that her life project would not allow her to become another young black prostitute on a Washington street-corner.

Marina reads Camila's moment with genuine admiration and equality, a new symbol of the long, epic struggle of the urban Amazon to know and voice itself, narrated in the calendar she is being offered. She asks Camila perceptive questions about two of the photo-portraits in this artistic-pedagogic publication, and the two women hug again, close their eyes and slowly ease apart in silent synchrony. Marina disappears into a crowd of impatient journalists and activists, and Camila checks the photo of her meeting with Marina that we will send to local newspapers in Washington and Marabá.

We return to our host's modest home, a gesture of solidarity from a complete stranger. The kitchen and living room are large enough to each contain Camila's grandmother's home. She notes the shower and toilet annexed to each bedroom. When we arrived a few hours earlier, Camila wandered from room to room, noting every detail. She did not need to explain that she washes in the river every day, and squats in an outdoor toilet with a makeshift door to protect her from lascivious drunken uncles and pubescent cousins. It is all said in the way she looks, pauses, moves. She had touched the walls painted in bold vibrant colours, catalogued the hanging fabrics and sculptures from every continent and everyday objects from different centuries, and laughed aloud at the eccentric-finds in a lifelong collection.

But now, after two days of traveling, Camila is too exhausted to notice anything. She climbs the stairs and falls into a coma, without removing her clothes. Tomorrow, we have two international roundtables on Chico's life and on human rights violations. I chat with our host to make sure we will have time to visit to the Potomac River before Camila's evening performance so that its roaring cascades and gushing whirling currents infuse her solo. I turn off her light. Camila is already asleep, thumb in mouth.

I go on the internet in my room and click on Mano's email. A gasp leaps from my throat too suddenly for me to conceal. I reread the detailed email as seven photos of Camila begin to scroll open. The first three to emerge show her honed dancer's body, naked from the waist up, a child smiling into a plush hotel mirror, presented by our embarrassed youth coordinators on their mobiles to Manoela, minutes after our send-off. I read on. They have already circulated the narrow streets of Cabelo Seco and its nearby schools and quadrilhas. Nausea and despair well up in me as two more selfies emerge. Camila is completely nude, the same smile, innocent, appealing for approval, her gaze angled down to the upturned mobile. I look away, trying to avoid complicity, recall Camila with Marina an hour earlier, and look back. In an instant, I can imagine the reactions of her grandmother Dona Tonica, her mother, her teachers, the parents of the children she is teaching. The photos are too naive to be seductive, but they will shock and provoke judgement. In one night, she has blurred her story.

I will tell her after her performance. No. After our workshop, the following morning. Three more photos unveil themselves. Camila in the mirror, looking up, breasts fuller, more womanly, photoshopped shadows insinuating availability. After the workshop, I will sit with her, alone. Ready to catch her when she falls.

I delete the photos and return to the email. Her elderly *cabocla* grandmother is passing from home to home in our street, insisting that each photo be deleted before her eyes. *It was an error of the heart*, she explains to the neighbours. *Don't we all have regrets?* A reflex of solidarity in a desert of despair. Our youth coordinators have met and reflected in their circle of decision-making. Numb with empathy, unable to meet each other's gaze, they will stand by her. They know they will not have the courage to ask friends to delete the photos.

Two years earlier, Manoela and I chatted easily with Camila about her coy self-portraits in bra and scant shorts she had posted on Facebook. *They'll cast shadows across your leadership and life-project, amiga.* We had felt a chasm of decades, centuries, but Camila replaced the portraits with powerful artistic narrative photos of her research into the memory of her skin. All her friends had continued posting selfies, but Camila had understood something. From within. *Our project has acquired a new frontier of knowledge and action,* we announced in our conference contributions and reports.



Figure 5. Camila transforms historical narratives (2014).

Following a brilliant solo performance and lucid workshop, we return to our host's home. I shut the lounge door and sit Camila down, and holding her hands, I tell her about the selfies. She falls. Hard. Her whole body cries. She lowers her eyes, for an entire night, ashamed, furious, vulnerable. The next morning, she cannot speak. We walk in silence in Washington's rain. Camila is desolate. She needs to be alone, but in open space. We find scant insight in the dark wooden carvings of indigenous leaders, imprisoned in the Museum of the American Peoples. The creative self-portraits of contemporary African artists fascinate and distract Camila, and in mute anger, she reads Lincoln's bold promise to all enslaved African-American peoples, written in stone in the vault of his tomb. *All my cousins,* Camila notes, beginning to glimpse the generations of dry tears in her swollen mouth. By good fortune, she is far from home. She retreats again into silence. On the plane, she chooses to watch *12 Years of Slavery*, her fork suspended between her plate and her open mouth until her food grows cold.

### Conclusion

Two months later, we sit reading these words together, in our studio in Cabelo Seco. *Are you happy for these stories to carry your real name?* I ask. *Mine can stay,* Camila states decisively. She has faced her vulnerability, in every gaze, on every stage that she enters and leaves in her life. She is stronger. I smile.

Camila stands. She gathers up her ample quadrilha costume into her arms. We have spent the week reinterpreting her solo performance of *Roots and Antennas*, working late into the night to transform her new harrowing insights into layers of performed memory and need, projecting film of riverside African life onto the surfaces of her body. But right now, this poetic experimentation has been left to dry in the sun, pegged onto the clothesline outside her home. The African textiles shimmer in the midday sun and explode with colour across the street. I show Camila but all she is thinking about is tonight's pre-performance in the main square of the old city. She has integrated afro-contemporary dance into the quadrilha's performance for this year's festa juninha. In the intensely competitive culture, only I have been allowed to know of this fiercely guarded secret. Camila reads my doubts and smiles. *I know it contradicts all we are doing, but it will enter the culture of the festa juninha. And it's my way of healing myself and regaining my community's trust. I want to take them with us.*

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