

Chapter 13

Step Slowly... Creating a Community Performance on the Threshold of Climate Collapse

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Thresholds

I have chosen to integrate three unexpected dialogues into a “performance narrative” that occurred in the months before and during the cruel pandemic pedagogy that we all have lived this year, to share key insights that emerged during the community-based “transformance” (transformation through performance) collaboration with the Pataxó people in 2001, while building the indigenous monument *500 Years of Resistance by the Indigenous People of Brazil*.

My choice to use performance narrative reflects three inter-linked intuitions that over nearly 40 years have enabled the knowledge-producing and transformative potentials of performance to be recognized and shared. Performance narrative avoids using objectifying, academic analytical strategies that tend to see and marginalize performance as interpretation, the effects of a cluster of audience-impacts, or the presence of exceptional, expressive genius; it contributes to the search for an aesthetics which evokes and reveals the triologic¹ complexity of performance (be it organized, spontaneous or everyday), and offers the reader an active dialogic role in its theorization; and it seeks to engage the power of storytelling itself – principled strategies to stimulate readers’ curiosity, identification, empathetic reflection and embodied “experiential” insight – to demonstrate and advocate sustained community performance as the dialogic enactment of knowledge, values and social

¹ The interaction between two simultaneous processes: the dynamic public onstage dialogue that emerges through the presence of two intimate dialogues that are set in motion when two people meet in a historical and actual place of possible narratives; and the interaction between a narrator/author, a questioner and a focalizing listener (audience), who together enable a circle of story-telling to take place, through agreed principles, as the conditions for the performance of making a new collective story. (Baron, Dan, p85, 2011)

transformation, a key resource for learning “democracy between equals”.

I use this performance narrative to bring to life the emergence of these key pedagogic and aesthetic insights, to enable you to experience “*transformance*” in action, and to be able to *sense*, like the indigenous people in this narrative, how to focus each step that we all now need tread, with great care, to see, to interpret, to imagine, to rehearse and to “enact your personal choice” (alone and with others around you), “as a species choice”, on today’s intimately-social, diverse, shared (even across locked-down, networked) stages - visceral, virtual or hybrid - on today’s stark, existential threshold: “ecocide or good living”.²

Dialogue Between Cultures, Generations and Rhythms

Let me introduce you to the participants of this dialogue.

On April 4th, 2020, Ikhã, a young Pataxó mother, student and cultural activist messaged me almost³ twenty years to the night when 200 armed military police interrupted and erased the collective construction by Pataxó mothers and children of the foundations of a stage in the form of a blood-red map of Latin America, with no national borders, a *horizontal monument*⁴ to the “*Other 500 Years*”⁵ of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil.

Located on the Atlantic *Coroa Vermelha* (Red Crown) beach, Bahia, north-east Brazil, where Pedro Cabral landed his Portuguese fleet of caravels on April 22, 1500, the monument’s surface of embedded *maracá* shakers and *cabeça* gourds, decorated with traditional markings painted from ground red *urucum* seeds and black *jenipapo* dried fruit was positioned as if spilling from the base of a 60 foot monolithic stainless aluminium cross, the Bahia State commissioned “vertical” monument created by national sculptor Mario Cravo, to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Cabral’s “discovery of Brazil”. This dialogic *performance*, conceived to touch and resonate throughout the cultural nervous system of Brazil’s imaginary, dramatized more than a question. It symbolized a proposal to create a healing, dialogic pedagogy of liberation to inspire the peaceful, decolonized co-existence of two conflicting narratives at the heart of Brazil’s layered national identity.

² Acosta, A (Ecuador, 2011): *buen vivir*, in Spanish, *sumak kawsay*, in Kichwa, the Equatorian traditional origin of the concept of to live well or in English, *good living*. Understood as valuing and caring for the harmonious, reciprocal relation between all species and Mother Earth, a biocentric ethics of extracting and replacing what is needed to preserve all life. The subtitle of Acosta’s book is revealing: an opportunity to imagine other worlds.

³ Ikhã and I do not recall the exact date of our first evening dialogue when she wrote to request an interview, as we had to replace our mobile phones a little afterwards. But we have agreed this date to highlight the deeper motive of the call.

⁴ This second invasion of indigenous land cannot be separated from the memory of the first invasion (April 22, 1500). But the brief furor that this State performance unleashed was notably followed by a silence that also explains why it occurred. How are the Euro-Indigenous children and grandchildren of the raped and the rapist to define themselves? What are the subjective effects of this unspeakable, confused and idealized “multicultural” identity, born out of violence?

⁵ The name given in opposition to the official “Discovery” narrative celebration of 500 Years of history, which represses the genocidal exploitative project of European colonization and previous millennial existence of originary, traditional and indigenous civilizations.

The unexpected virtual dialogue focuses on the “second” indigenous process of creating and building the national community “monument-as-theatre”. It begun on 22 April 2001, again as a collective community performance, but this time of invitation, in a natural forest clearing in the heart of *Monte Pascoal* (Easter Mountain)⁶, the first landmark sighted by Pedro Cabral who believed he had discovered India.

Ikhā clearly knew who we were, I, a performance educator born in London of Welsh-Canadian origin, and Manoela Souza, a theatre educator, born in Imbituba (southern Brazil) of Euro-African-Indigenous origin, invited to live in *Cacique* (chief) Joel’s home, to coordinate and, this time, to complete⁷, the artistic process. Her very first question unexpectedly revealed the transformative effects of the collectively *performed* creation, even on children like her who had only heard stories of the process.

But her focus on the contemporary performance potential of her Pataxó people and all indigenous peoples in Brazil, today, fractured and conflicted by the toxic, compulsive, authoritarian “performance” of President Jair Bolsonaro and his militarized government, explains some of the urgent aims of this chapter. In the course of the dialogues, as memory met imagination, the stage of the original monument “threshold between resistance and liberation” cross-faded into the stage of today’s global “threshold between Ecocide and Bem Viver”, the pandemic cry by *Tupã*, Mother Earth, to “choose”, between an anthropocentric colonial “performance” of predatory industrial “development”, and an alternative, biocentric, post-capitalist indigenous performance of caring, inter-dependent cooperation with Mother Earth.

At this time of writing, following two years of institutional and industrial violations authored by the Bolsonaro government, the indigenous peoples of Brazil are suffering territorial invasions by illegal miners and armed police repression, particularly in the Amazon. On June 23, the Constitution and Justice Commission in the Brazilian parliament voted on *Bill 490* which pledges to annul all indigenous

⁶ Invasion is clearly preceded by the act of looking, of selecting. But beyond its symbolic significance, there was another profound motive for the Pataxó choice of Easter Mountain as the site of the new monument: the need to reclaim the land, to survive. It would be a weapon of resistance and liberation. Once more, this time more slowly, living among the families for days at a time, we braided the eleven villages that live around the foot of the mountain through storytelling and collective imagining, using a slideshow of the construction and destruction of the indigenous monument of Coroa Vermelha to define the idea of a collective monument. To some, the word sounded like a food, and we laughed as we played with the new idea, redefining it as a way of nourishing the self-esteem of a massacred people and replenishing its confidence that unity and collective action are possible.

⁷ We tried to avoid hurrying collective decision-making time, to guarantee strengthening community motivation and the aesthetic excellence which we believe creates new, enduring symbols to shape the imaginary soil of our imagination. But we lived in diverse times. As autonomous artists, we had chosen to be free from institutional time-frames and the deadlines which come with grants, to live the rhythms of indigenous life and the spiral time of indigenous decision-making, where everyone present, in order of seniority, reiterates all that has been said before them, before adding their own contribution.

The Pataxó leaders too had to learn to live a “double-time” culture. When unexpected rain disrupted our agreed plans, they urged us to respect “forest time”, even when it disrupted the challenging improvised organization to transport, integrate and feed some 2000 participants from 11 dispersed villages. But they admired how Manoela reorganized the same task, or coordinated the specially-convened, first all-women’s circle of overlapping interactive stories about medicinal, aphrodisiacal, spiritual and edible plants. And word circulated how this “dialogic time” had suddenly been silenced by the arrival of the Cacique.

territories recognized after the ratification of the post-dictatorship 1988 *Constitution*, and open them to legal intensive mining. Ikhã and other indigenous community leaders throughout Brazil danced on the motorway nearest to their ancestral land. Indigenous leaders from the Amazon and other key ecosystems at risk, performed traditional *torês*⁸ of reciprocity and a call to be heard, outside the Houses of Parliament. They were met by spectacular brutal military repression. *Bill 490* was passed by a two thirds majority. Their dance became an alert. *Bill 490* will now proceed to the Bolsonaro-controlled House of Representatives and Senate where its almost certain ratification would seal the “legal” extinction of the Amazon. Forests that have absorbed and stored millions of years of carbon dioxide, transforming and exhaling it into flying rivers of rain to the world, once felled, not only distribute their own ash, but become emitters of vast quantities of carbon dioxide.

The “performance narrative” which follows carries, therefore, great relevance as an example of inter-cultural, transcultural and multicultural collaborative performance. We invite every reader to step slowly, with care, onto today’s existential threshold, in solidarity with all indigenous guardians of the world, in particular the guardians of the Amazonian ecosystems and their knowledges of “good living”, and in solidarity with the future, so that an alternative world performance can still be chosen, on time.

Step Slowly....

I click to accept the unknown caller.

Ikhã: Sir, I am Ikhã Pataxó, from Easter Mountain. I’m married to the son of *Cacique Braga*, from Foot of the Mountain village, Bahia.

I glance at Manoela, and up at the carved ornamental spear hanging on our wall that Braga carved from Ipê wood nearly 20 years ago to create his gift to celebrate our friendship and the launch of the monument. The unexpected mention of Braga’s name makes us smile. I hear his easy laughter as he improvises his narrative song of our emerging process, echoing through the forest.

Ikhã: I’m concluding my undergraduate thesis, analyzing the sociocultural impacts of the collective process of the construction of the monument, *500 Years of Resistance by the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil*. Would Sir answer some written questions about the key moments, how you worked, the meaning of the symbol?

⁸The traditional ritual dance of the originary “indigenous” peoples, led by the maracá, which integrates, concentrates, strengthens, levels difference, releases imprisoned and violent energies of trauma, calms and preserves and passes on traditional knowledges and relations in the rhythmic pulsing contact with Mother Earth.

Dan: Please call me Dan, Ikhã. I don't know this 'sir'.

Ikhã: Dan. Sorry, I'm not used to calling my seniors by their first name.

Dan: Let me present Manoela. She mediated our collaboration.

The two women greet each other with smiles.

Ikhã: Dan, would you grant me an interview?

The request from a Pataxó student reassures us. President Bolsonaro has promised to liberate all indigenous territories for commercial mining, so his "Indians" can fulfill their democratic right to become human in the cities of Brazil.

Dan: How is the monument, Ikhã?

As I wait for her answer to appear, news of the murder of another young indigenous leader flashes and disappears on the screen in the palm of my hand. I look across the Tocantins River at the shimmering blur of red that is spreading along the horizon. No-one here in this Afro-Indigenous fishing village can even name their tradition, let alone perceive the burning forest as their ancestral home on fire.

Ikhã: One of the five bows that protect the medicinal garden has been broken.

Manoela's and my eyes meet.

Dan: Political vandalism?

Ikhã: No. A tall Ipê tree fell across the monument.

Dan: Can you send us a photo of the damage, Ikhã?

Images from 20 years ago flash across my mind. The *torê* danced throughout the night to the beat of the *maracá*, to summon the storm which filled four huge containers with enough water to make the cement bows. Precious stones, placed one by one in molten cement as it was poured into the curved metal structures, transformed the bows into sacred guardians of 500 years of memory. And Marlene, pregnant with her seventeenth child, wielding a huge hammer to break stones for the monument's base, defying the custom that prohibited women from "being" in public⁹.

⁹ Manoela and I had noted with concern how every girl of ten or eleven years of age, seemed to be pregnant, and how only Marlene, Joel's wife and our host, had defied custom to join the construction of the monument, and broken stones with greater continuity and precision, than all the men. But we knew and respected that we had not been invited into the ancient Pataxó culture to question its gender relations and ensure the silence could be heard and shape the project's narrative. The active presence of Mano and Marlene, however, inspired an environment of deep questioning

The first photo begins to arrive. It comes into focus. The fallen bow, a broken arm of a warrior.



Figure 1. The torè dance to the rhythm of the maracá, which brings the rain



Figure 2. The damaged monument "500 years of Resistance by the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil" (Monte Pascoal, Bahia, 2020)

Dan: Remember how we stepped back, to admire our three months of work?

Manoela: (smiles). You joked we should leave all that home-made wooden scaffolding that held the bows in place so anyone could participate, to reveal our process.



Figure 3.

Dan: Well. It was beautiful! All that cement in the heart of a forest -

Manoela: Cement is just sand and stone, Braga said -

Dan: At least the map and names gave it history -

Manoela: But I suggested the garden...

Dan: Yes. Plants passing from grandmother to granddaughter. And when you proposed the garden, inside the map, it was agreed. Immediately!¹⁰

Another photo arrives. Another angle. I show Manoela. The metal structure is exposed, but does not appear damaged. And the names of the 245 indigenous peoples, written in marble. The bow has missed them.

¹⁰ From that moment, the sculpture was imbued with the feminine knowledges and rhythms of the forest, and we were talking about time and aesthetics as "gendered". Marlene's silent courage inside that process had nurtured an aesthetic boldness and cultural transformation.

Ikhā is writing. Fragments.

Ikhā: You don't know me, Dan, Manoela. I was just a three year old, one of hundreds of children, teenagers and adults that you visited to consult in our village to imagine the monument. Some carried stones to the clearing in the forest, to build its circular base. They returned with so many stories that now appear in our own children's games. Just a few days ago, *Cacique* Braga showed me a photo of my cousins in your book, painting each other on the *Day of the Indian*.



Figure 4. The Children prepare for Day of the Indian

I smile at Manoela. We instantly recall the photo, a girl painting her younger sister's face, then both running to enter the torê, a human river of Pataxó culture, weaving its way through the moon-lit forest, scores of left feet synchronized in song: "*Step, step, step, step slowly, I will step slowly on the leaf of Jurema.*"

Ikhā: We need to restore that bow, Dan. We need that monument to inspire our people to stand firm. We're being seduced again by the white man to leave our ancestral lands to become citizens in Porto Seguro.

Dan: Do you know the story of those bows, Ikhā?

Ikhā: I know you all stopped wearing flip-flops when you entered the space they protect, to respect our seven million murdered parents, present beneath it.

Dan: But did anyone tell you, Ikhā, how we turned 40 million murdered indigenous people of Latin America into a transformative presence?

Ikhā is replying. We wait.

Ikhā: I only know that those bows protect a circle of healing. That whoever enters it is cured. Becomes brave. A leader. And that in the years that followed, we recovered our Pataxó language, built Pataxó schools, chose women to become our chiefs.

I look at Ikhā's status photo, creating her self-portrait on her cell-phone, in front of a mirror. Cabral's ships brought bibles and mirrors. Always, that mirror of seduction.

Dan: We all had to be brave, Ikhā, to open the path as we created our method, with no map, compass or river to guide us. When the five bows were erected, we all looked at the completed monument, to rest and admire the living sculpture we had created. Suddenly one of the elders spoke out: *"Dan, you are leading this movement. Why do the bows have no strings? When people visit tomorrow and in the future, they will say, this is a monument of defeat. Of despair. The bows have no strings because the resistance has been defeated."*

I glance at Manoela. She too is back in the forest. I pause to give Ikhā time to digest the narrative, to ask any question. I sense her in her village, listening, waiting.

Dan: I looked at all the people who were working there in that clearing that day. Manoela and I could feel the elder was speaking for them all. We knew our place and our roles. To listen. To support. But I felt their expectation. That I would be truthful and speak from within my own ancestral heart. I asked Joel, our host, a wise *Cacique*, to mediate my words.

"We have created this symbol together, from your stories and dreams. There is no leader."

I paused. Cacique Joel translated. I continued.

"But I have a question. Should we place rope in each bow, each symbolizing a century of resistance, so that everyone reads a bow? Or is it better to leave the bows as they are, so

that when visitors look, they whisper to each other and to themselves. Are these bows? Then why are there no strings? They could be a red crown, the crown of Portugal, now protecting an indigenous garden. Or a flower, celebrating the beauty and resilience of the forest. Should each person have the freedom to see and choose?”

No-one seemed convinced, Ikhã. Did they even understand? So *Cacique Joel* said: “*Consult your families, listen to each person, and let’s take our time to decide.*” Everyone left in thought and I wondered if I’d made a good proposal. Days passed slowly, the forest echoing with whispered debate, generations of Pataxó sitting on their haunches, pointing at the bows, nodding, smoking, exchanging a few words. Joel listened without a murmur. Braga sang all he heard, faithfully, and the forest echoed.



Figure 5. The completed monument-as-theatre, the medicinal garden at its centre, bordered by the names of 245 living indigenous peoples.

We returned a week later, Braga (walking with my video camera in affectionate parody of the international director at his side), *Cacique Joel*, Manoela and I. We studied the silent, expectant forest of eyes. *Cacique Joel* finally stood and took one light step forward. “*Look at our arched bows.*” We all turned to look. “*Do you see their strings?*” The bows were clearly bent in tension. “*The strings are there, and they are not there.*” He paused. “*Do we not have a Pataxó proverb? We warriors never reveal the secrets of our resistance. Our bows are strung. Ready. But we do not need to reveal*

that. Let people interpret as they wish. If they feel secure, inside a crown or inspired by a flower, they will join us. We know our bows are always prepared. Our bows are brave. They are strung. That's enough⁹. We all smiled.

I pause. Ikhā is there. Invisible but present.

Dan: With that poetic insight, Ikhā, Cacique Joel united his people. And he'd revealed the relation between the fist of resistance and the open palm of liberation.

Ikhā does not respond.

Dan: Mano, have we lost our connection? Did I tire her?

Manoela points at the second tick to show Ikhā has received my words. It turns blue. I turn on the audio-recorder.

Dan: Was I clear?

An audio immediately returns.

Ikhā: Now I understand the pedagogy of bravery. Why that monument transformed us all, even the maimed, the lame and the weak, into giants. Thank you.

I smile at Manoela. Who could have imagined that a three year old girl who entered the *torê* that encircled eleven Pataxó villages, preserving and reinventing an epic narrative, was being formed, becoming the pulse of a new generation?

Dan: We will return to help repair that bow, Ikhā, so the monument protects other new seeds in the garden.

Ikhā: I'll speak to the Pataxó youth, Dan, Manoela. Now I must return to my children. Good night.

Dan: Good night, Ikhā. Thanks for calling.

I smile at Manoela. We look at the last photo. The medicinal garden is diverse. Dense. Humid!

Dan: That garden. It came to symbolize everything. The creative process and performance of the entire monument. Healing wounds, curing trauma, decolonizing imagined futures.

Mano: But no non-indigenous activist or elected politician chose to participate in the *torê* we danced to inaugurate the monument.

Dan: But we've created a place where people can *become indigenous*. To nurture a *good living* future for all.

Another audio from Ikhã arrives with an arpeggio. She's singing. In Pataxó. Her voice is calm and confident.

Ikhã: *Ahnã petoi akuã, anhã petoi sarã dxahã txobiharê*

Another arpeggio. I touch her portrait. Its the translation. I pass Mano my phone:

*I have my bow, I have my arrow, I have my root to cure*¹¹



Figure 6. Mico, one of many dedicated teenage Pataxó activists who were formed by the collective process, carves the name of the monument in arble.

¹¹ I recall in 2000, the aesthetic of Pataxó song in Portuguese was of lament, imploring, self-pity. 20 years later, songs danced in Pataxó are infused by an aesthetic of defiance, indignation and self-determination.

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