

# Reclaiming the community of Cabelo Seco through dance

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## Abstract

Paulo Freire and John Dewey are helping the youth of Cabelo Seco in the southern reaches of the Amazon to reclaim their violated community. Freire (1921–1997) and Dewey (1859–1952) remain alive in Cabelo Seco, identified as one of Brazil's most dangerous communities. After describing the context of Cabelo Seco, the local community arts projects and the philosophies driving this work, I examine meanings of community dance in Cabelo Seco. Utilising a constructivist methodology that values dialogic interaction to build shared understandings, interviews and observations provide insights into diverse ways that people experience, value and make meaning from dance in community contexts. Dewey, Freire, Eisner, Boal, Zequinha and other arts educators are ever present in Cabelo Seco; understanding a lineage of influence helps to examine current practices and envision future projects. This paper explores the shifting and emerging role of dance in this community, focusing on how dance is helping to reclaim it.

Keywords: community, pedagogy, transformation, values, advocacy

## Introduction

Building a community begins with having and sharing ideals: artistic and cultural practices are an inherent part of forming, challenging and expressing a community's ideals. As a dance educator with a strong interest in the socio-cultural transformative power of dance within educational and community contexts, I share the philosophical and epistemological views of John Dewey (1934), Paolo Freire (1972), Elliot Eisner (2002) and Maxine Greene (1995) who advocate for the social, political and educative power of the arts. As Jorgensen (1995, p.79) stated:

Dewey, Freire and Greene are united in their passion for the values of justice, freedom, caring and carefulness and dialogue in education. The community cannot exist without ideals. They are embodied in the values the community embraces. They are the stuff of its stories, its rituals, its songs, paintings and other artistic creations, interwoven with its precepts and prohibitions and touching every aspect of the daily life of its members.

This paper presents a case study on how the arts, and in particular dance, play a role in rebuilding the community of Cabelo Seco through the *Rivers of Meeting Project*. In November 2013 I travelled to Cabelo Seco, situated on the edge of the city of Marabá in Brazil at the confluence of two rivers, the Tocantins and Itacaiúnas that feed into the southern tributaries of the Amazon. After 10 days of living in and working with this community I was struck by the currency of the writings and thoughts of my educational mentors Dewey, Eisner, Freire and Greene.

Dewey, Eisner, Freire and Greene remain alive in the streets of Cabelo Seco through the teaching and action of community arts educators and the pedagogical and

philosophical lineage that is clearly influencing current and envisioned community dance action. Through describing the context of Cabelo Seco, the *Rivers of Meeting Project*, and my experience of teaching and learning in Cabelo Seco, this paper explores understandings of community dance, the impact of past education leaders, and stresses the importance of community ideals in building communities.

## What is community dance?

Community dance is an attitude; it is learning how to re-examine and value both the intrinsic and instrumental roles of dance. Community dance places emphasis upon participation, process and product, diversity, dialogue, social engagement, pleasure and fun. Ken Bartlett (2009, p.32) former Creative Director of the Foundation for Community Dance (now known as People Dancing), documented the evolution of community dance over 30 years, noting that the overriding aims of community dance have remained constant:

To increase access to and widen participation in dance ... based on a fairly consistent set of values about the practice:

- placing the participant at the centre of the activity;
- respect for difference;
- dance as an empowering tool for participants in the dance and the rest of their lives;
- being inclusive rather than exclusive.

Engaging participants in action requires that people feel they have agency. Sociologist D.B. Clarke (1973) argues that humans seek community and community happens best when we have a sense of solidarity and significance. Solidarity acknowledges the sense of belonging, of unity within a larger entity; significance recognises the individual, that everyone brings something unique and that each person feels that they are relevant. I add another dimension—security—a feeling of safety to speak and contribute, to be different and critical.

Community dance is about activating people through dance, and focuses on how we may use or apply dance for multiple purposes. My educational focus and practice is centred upon valuing dance in a way that enables the making of community: making communities in a classroom, in a street, in a park, in a hospital, in a retirement village, in a refugee camp, in a university and so on.

Dewey, Eisner, Freire and Greene argued that community cannot exist without ideals. They also argued that our arts—dance, music, poetry, painting—are at the heart of understanding community, providing some of the greatest means of building and reclaiming community. A community's ideas, stories, ambitions may be enlivened by the artistic practices of that community. I argue, however, that you cannot wave some magical wand and have meaningful artistic expression or similarly have community, but that arts education holds the potential to help people create community. In 1902 Dewey stated:

No educational system can be regarded as complete until it adopts into itself the various ways by which social and intellectual intercourse may

be promoted, and employs them systematically, not only to counteract dangers which these same agencies are bringing with them, but so as to make them positive causes in raising the whole level of life. (p.78)

Not only does Dewey note the necessity and value of the arts in education, he also alerts us to how the arts may disturb the norms of society. The arts may be likened to a double-edged sword, one of arts education that wields an implicit risk or frisson that ideally informs arts pedagogy. Dewey goes on to highlight how schools in 1902 were letting down society by not adequately addressing the arts. More recently, Sir Ken Robinson (2006) in his TED talk *How schools kill creativity*, reiterated Dewey's comments regarding the inadequacy of the school system in providing for young people's future and bemoaning the rise of schooling factories.

In Cabelo Seco the notion of 'school' and 'education' is shifting. The relevance of the school is being questioned by young people and also their parents. Against this context, the *Rivers of Meeting Project* is providing other arts-led options that, during my visit, were gaining traction with young people and their parents.

## Methodology

My research interest revolved around two questions: What makes community? What role/s can the arts (dance) play in making community? An ethics proposal was granted through the University of Auckland, and community members in Cabelo Seco were advised of my visit and of my proposed involvement as an English speaking outsider. Utilising a constructivist methodology (Eisner, 1998) that values lived reality and dialogic interaction as a means of building shared understandings, semi-structured interviews and observations provided insights into diverse ways that people experienced, valued and made meaning from dance in community contexts.

I interviewed two youth leaders (Camila and Carolayne), one community elder (Zequinha), one community liaison worker (José) and two project leaders (Dan and Mano). With their approval I recorded our conversations and took notes; photographs and video footage were not permitted. We talked about Cabelo Seco, its understanding of community, the challenges of the *Rivers of Meeting Project* and their sense of the next stage in the project.

## A bigger picture

My 10-day research residency in November 2013 began in Taipei in 2008, where I first met Dan Baron Cohen (Dan) and Manoela Souza (Mano). It was here that I, on behalf of the World Dance Alliance, committed us to joining the World Alliance for Arts Education (WAAE). Since 2008 I have worked with Dan and other arts educators across the arts forms, and with various partners and multiple universities advocating for arts education and social transformation. Through these networks I have been working specifically for a pedagogical ideology based upon access, diversity, quality, socio-economic change, inclusion and dialogue, and creating a pedagogy echoing the stated educational theorists mentioned above.

In 2013 Dan invited me to Cabelo Seco to work with the young dance group AfroMundi, and to help youth leaders to develop their teaching strategies and enhance their community development.

I was greeted by a group of dancers doing a flash mob dance in the welcome hall of the airport. Over the next 10 days I taught dance to children, youth leaders, the staff of the local primary school and leading dance studio teachers. I spoke at the Municipal Government of Marabá, met with the Municipal Secretary of Education and members of the Secretariat of Culture, the Dean of Arts: Federal University and, most importantly, talked, played and ate with children, parents and elders within the community.

## **Cabelo Seco**

Cabelo Seco means 'dry hair' and references the tightly coiled hair (impermeable to water) of the African slaves who were transported here in the 19th century. Cabelo Seco is a small though intense community centred around a public square and two streets, nestled at the confluence of two rivers on the edge of the city of Marabá in the state of Pará, south of Amazonia, in the north central area of Brazil. It is dominated by gold and iron ore mines that have an ongoing impact on the local environment. The mining 'boom' is touted as being a key economic driver for the region, yet, as is evident when walking in Cabelo Seco, the locals are not experiencing any such 'boom'.

While Dan had enthusiastically described the work he did with the youth, he also noted the troubled political and violent history of the community. As one local community member stated, 'the community is judgemental and violent'. Cabelo Seco was described by a local workshop participant as 'a place of terrible self-destruction, of addiction, where people didn't sit together, where taxi drivers didn't have the courage to enter, and was and still is, to a certain extent, a place where you couldn't say you were from Cabelo Seco and expect to get work'. As Dan introduced me to locals on the streets he noted that there were times when people were afraid to come out of their houses. Child prostitution and domestic violence is huge in Cabelo Seco.

The community of Cabelo Seco has an African heritage, yet the current community arts program is one of the few that celebrates those cultural roots. Dan stated, 'They went to great lengths to conceal their African-ness. These people had no pride in their own identity, these people were slaves, then they were humiliated and then they were violated in public squares, in Brazil and across the world'.

## ***The Rivers of Meeting Project***

As Dan said, 'The *Rivers of Meeting Project* aims to re-awaken local sleeping cultural wealth through artistic and community-based activity'. Given the deep and long history of violence in the community (Brazil's third most violent city), the project leaders are involving all generations in partnerships with government managers and professionals within education, health, culture and security sectors. Dan Baron Cohen and Mano Souza provide the managerial direction.

The *Rivers of Meeting Project* evolved from a range of smaller independent arts activities from 2008 that culminated in the 2012 Amazon Beauty Festival, described by Mano on the *Rivers of Meeting Project* website:

How will they value and defend the Amazon, asks art educator Manoela Souza, when they do not see themselves as part of its beauty and wealth? Our artistic pedagogies are able to communicate with all age groups, awakening the care of the environment and of each person as a part of it, and cultivating collective participation. (<http://riosdeencontro.wordpress.com/> accessed 16 January 2015)

Dan and Mano were motivated to come to Cabelo Seco by their concern for the human and physical environment. They saw the ongoing devastation of the Amazon rivers and its forests, cultures and communities. Living and working in Cabelo Seco provided an opportunity to develop a local project that not only addressed these concerns but which also presented an opportunity to research and implement community-based pedagogies that might resonate locally, nationally and internationally. Dan identified with Paulo Freire (1972) and Augusto Boal (1979), both Brazilian educators concerned with social justice and reform.

Without a predetermined program of what to do, Dan and Mano talked with and listened to the 'streets' of Cabelo Seco. As Dan explained:

I've lived in communities where they are very conservative, very judgemental. This is a very judgemental community. We had to do a lot of work in the windows and doorways. We used to think of places of performance as a main square or a cultural centre, but then we saw young girls being judged and condemned after the carnival, after having been beaten by their boyfriends and women in the street. Older women were looking at the young women who performed, whispering behind their barred windows, 'Oh she deserved that, she brought that on herself'; we realised that we had to include the street. The street had to be transformed so that people could be accepted, could experiment with different identities, different values. It was then we realised the street was defined by the windows and the doorways. So every single month, and particularly on Fathers', Mothers' or Children's Day, we would take presents, medicinal plants and small performances to the windows and the doorways of every single home. In that way we were trying to transform a community defined by survival to a community that valued family, a community with choices, with options.

It was tough work, especially as families were being forced or 'enticed' to move out of Cabelo Seco so that the community could be 'redeveloped' in line with mining companies' aspirations. Involving children, youths, adults and elders was vital in establishing relevance and ownership of activities and agency in directing activities.

Dan and Mano formed a 'núcleo gestor jovem' (youth group) who initiated ideas and decisions and they had guidance from the 'núcleo gestor' (nucleus of Mothers) (now called Culture Cottage) and built trusting relationships with key figurehead elders such as Zaquinha Sousa. Identifying youth as the focus, Dan and Mano invited



young people to musicianship, dance, drama and English language classes by asking locals and invited guests to teach reassured the children and parents. Quickly a group of youths and children became active and Dan and Mano formed a core youth group who then began to become more involved in speaking, organising and participating.

With Dan and Mano's guidance and Culture Cottage oversight, the young people have established the following activity projects: the dance group AfroMundi – feet on the ground; the musical group–Backyard Drums; the social journalism project–Not a Jot; the audio-visual collective–Outboard Videos and Cine Owl; bike riding for social awareness; and, the community library project—Leaves of Life. (<https://riosdeencontro.wordpress.com/>, accessed 19 January 2015)

Through these activity projects, mostly run by local young people, Dan and Mano hope:

To strengthen the community's Afro-indigenous identity and culture through the creation of a new generation of young artists with community-building, organizational and production skills, capable of sharing responsibility to transform their families, streets and schools through the empathetic languages of music and dance, independent cooperative projects and everyday performance of empathetic solidarity. To ensure new young artists/cultural actors can train pupils in the schools that border Cabelo Seco; study other youth-driven cultural projects across Brazil and Latin America; and host national and international cultural leaders in their own homes. (<http://www.changemakers.com/project/rivers-meeting-amazon>, accessed 19 January 2015)

My focus was working with the AfroMundi dance group. This small group choreographed and performed their own work, taught dance classes to children and adults, liaised with local schools and dance studios, offering workshops and performances. The young women Camila and Carolayne, who led AfroMundi, were motivated and busy, with respectful mentoring from Dan and Mano who ensured that they made the decisions and accepted the consequences. These young women were capable in the diverse aspects of creating, performing, administering and teaching dance, and were respected by the parents and their peers.

The important issue of quality was dealt with sensitively by Dan and Mano who were not only mentors, but critics who ensured that the work presented by the groups was of relevant quality. The young women were mostly the harshest critics of their own and each other's work; Dan and Mano just prompted the debate.

Most of the activity was undertaken in and around the streets of Cabelo Seco, although in 2013 the music and dance groups also performed at various Marabá locations including Federal University, Pará State Parliament and the airport. At the time of my visit the community had just finished building Culture Shed, a one-room building for films, dance, drama, meetings and performances. Radiating from the shed, the energy and activity included the windows and doorways of the streets, embracing and remaking the community one day, one poem, one song and one dance at a time.

## Observations

After ten days of conversations, interviews and observations I began to identify the key challenges of remaking community through dance. Perhaps, with only ten days in Cabelo Seco, my thoughts are naïve and limited, but with a degree of experience I offer the following key challenges:

**Violence and corruption:** There are ongoing tensions in the street, especially between those keen to see ethical transformation and those happy to receive money for silence about violence and corruption. There is an undercurrent of threat and judgement, especially towards women. I noted parents' hopes for their children and the project, but also their concerns for safety when advocating for transformation. Assault and death are real and are fuelled by corruption, drugs, misogyny and poverty.

**History:** The weight of a history of oppression from slavery and poverty remains. Zequinha, who had lived in Cabelo Seco all his life, had longed for community transformation and believed it was possible. He already understood what the project could do for his community, but had felt powerless to make change. His personal struggles against corrupt local politicians required that he 'keep his head down'. Through this project he was able to lead workshops and tell community stories through dance; it was the practical 'doing' that allowed Zequinha and other project participants to learn, ask questions, to transform symbolism in the imagination, to immerse themselves in their art. They were aware that they were learning important techniques and skills, and slowly rebuilding their community.

**Economy/mining:** Cabelo Seco is money poor and culture rich. The mining companies want change and are willing to buy what they want, which I believe is a submissive community that will not interfere with the building of a huge dam, but opposition to the dam requires care. It will involve the rivers and will cause further pollution, and as I watched children swimming, mothers washing clothes and men fishing in the river, I wondered how clean the river is now. Zequinha said, 'It is nearly dead. It is polluted and we should not swim in it at this location'. Mining offers work and money and opportunity, yet corruption is rife and the work and money seem to be eluding the locals.

**Education:** My interviews with Camila and Carolayne revealed their overall dissatisfaction with formal schooling—ineffective and boring. Both had clear views about what made a good teacher and both wanted a good education in order to realise their vision. I spoke with some teachers about life as a teacher in Marabá, and clearly it was not a great profession to be in. They did not get paid regularly, lacked ministerial and community support; felt very alone and under resourced. From their perspective it was apparent that public school education is not a priority in Marabá nor in the state of Pará. When walking in the streets it was also apparent that many children and parents do not take school seriously.

**Teaching and learning:** In discussion with Carolayne and Camila their understanding of what it meant to teach and learn was quite clear. Both agreed that a teacher was a person who knew information but did not impose it on learners. The teachers and parents I spoke with were, however, more concerned with

authority: parents expected teachers to teach good behaviour but largely took no responsibility for it themselves. Camila and Carolayne emphasised the importance of teacher qualifications: expertise, experience and a degree. They wanted consistency, reliability and clear expression through language and movement, and they were adamant that good teachers expressed themselves well. As young teachers themselves they were aware of these qualities and worked to achieve them. It appeared that the younger generation and the grandparent generation were interested and engaged in teaching and learning, while the adult, middle aged 'parent' generation appeared to be disengaged. However, it was heartening to see that the project valued dance as an agent for social change and that the quality of teaching and learning was taken seriously. My residency and a residency by an African choreographer before me were examples of the investment being made.

**Meaning of dance:** The meaning of dance presented many good and bad challenges for the *Rivers of Meeting Project*. To my surprise, ballet was what dance meant. Camila and Carolayne did ballet lessons and taught ballet; to them ballet informs what and how you learn dance, but when pressed they agreed that they wanted to do more contemporary dance and use it to express ideas. They had very little access to contemporary dance, although what they saw they soaked up. Outside of any systemised instruction the girls learnt Carimbó, the local folk social dance, and being competitively good at this dance was important if you wanted respect as a dancer. Another issue was the sexualisation of young women dancers, with the media presenting dance as a sexually provocative activity for the male gaze. Very young girls were learning dance moves overlaid with sexual moves, presenting huge issues for the *Rivers of Meeting Project* and the AfroMundi dance group. However, the young dancers were dealing with this well by choreographing and performing dance that focused on issues without sexualising the dance for the sake of pleasing an audience. I was surprised by the absence of hip hop, though I knew that some of the youth were interested in this form of dance.

**Individualism:** Again and again I was struck by the individualism of the young people and parents. It was common for people to speak over each other and it appeared to me that no one listened. Working as a team required considerable effort and instruction from Dan and Mano, and I could see the young people's impatience as they waited for others to gain consensus. However, the energy and dynamism created by many individuals speaking their minds created a vibe that was exquisite when it found coordination within a song or dance or bike ride.

These are my main observations of the challenges found in Cabelo Seco, but as already noted, I was only there for 10 days and my observations are limited. However, with my dance education expertise I also saw how the *Rivers of Meeting Project* was attending to some of these issues. Here are how some of the challenges are being addressed:

## Ownership and engagement

Establishing the núcleo gestor: Respecting the mothers as quiet but dominant agents of change in the homes and streets. The mothers played a huge role in providing community security, long-term contextual insights, identifying and communicating unforeseen social 'grapevine' issues and trends, providing meta not micro advice on



all programs and activities; supporting the young women and children to speak and be present, and importantly, providing food, emotional and audience support.

Involving elders as teachers and learners: Acknowledging that there was existing knowledge in the community was a critically important beginning assumption. Valuing Zequinha's experience and knowledge was one example, but involving the elders required considerable effort, and asking them to share their stories and practices was key to engaging them. Once they saw how interested the youth and children were they saw the relevance of their knowledge and history. Zequinha became a beacon of knowledge and a very supportive teacher and mentor for several programs, and he had the community's respect; when he advocated for the project many people listened.

Youth owning the programs: The young people were asked to take leadership roles in the diverse activity programs. Camila (17) and Carolayne (16) were the leaders of the AfroMundi dance group; Rafael (12) led the community library project; Éveny (14) the community cinema club and so on. They took great pride in organising activities and classes and getting parents and other children involved. Dan and Mano were always present to help and advise, but the decisions were nearly always made by the young people.

### **Creating a safe space**

Dan and Mano opened their home as the gathering place for all meetings, many classes and meals. Their front room was a cross between a library, classroom, store room, gallery, park, meeting room and drop-in centre. This space was a place to meet, talk and just be, in safety. Profoundly important in this community, security and safety in this space enabled ideas and energy to be valued. From this epicentre other spaces were created, such as the Culture Shed. I was fascinated by the constant flow of people from the street to the house and how Dan and Mano welcomed and managed this flow. Providing the safe space was underpinned by the philosophical desire to have opportunities for debate, expression, diverse opinions, laughter, inclusion and opportunity, all ideals expressed by Dewey et al. In Clarke's (1973) terms, the security provided the scope for solidarity and significance.

### **Pedagogy**

Dan had a strong vision of a pedagogy that drove many of the projects and he consistently and gently mentored the elders and young teachers. He valued people's stories and the power of arts to communicate and translate those stories into learning platforms. Valuing arts shifted the emphasis of teaching and learning to creating, sharing and appreciating in respectful and aesthetic forms. Small but powerful strategies such as sitting in a circle and taking turns to speak or show made a big impact. Making eye contact as you listened; touching each other during drama sessions; giving and taking weight in dance activities were all new ways of encouraging people to engage in dialogue and accept diverse views and perspectives. The curriculum or activity programs were created with advice from the participants. They were relevant to them and informed by their aspirations and goals, and were protected and respected by them. The arts-based curriculum emphasised existing cultural knowledge and the public expression of culture.

## Internationalisation

Dan and Mano brought with them their international experience and networks. They proactively and strategically included the young people and elders in international events such as conferences and workshops, and invited international guest teachers such as myself. They used websites and YouTube as educational devices, ensuring that young people knew that there were opportunities beyond their communities. Expanding everyone's understanding of what dance means and who is a dancer was invaluable in affirming artistic and community decisions, but internationalisation also presented issues as much as opportunity. The 'grass is not always greener on the other side' for all people, and knowing what you cannot access can also cause bitterness. The mentoring role played by Dan and Mano was invaluable in guiding the community.

## Summary

Dan and I shared our respective insights into the outcomes being achieved in Cabelo Seco through the *Rivers of Meeting Project*. Those I observed and those Dan highlighted included:

- **Laughter:** Hearing children and grandparents laugh was an affirmation that good was being done.
- **Open doors and windows:** Seeing the street open with people talking to neighbours was a breakthrough that Dan noted was a slow development. He observed trust developing and behaviours changing.
- **Eye contact:** As Dan said, 'when people started to say good morning and looking you in the eye we knew we were making a transformation'. Again self-esteem and pride were being developed in all generations of the community.
- **Hope:** Parents were beginning to have hopes for their children and in small ways investing in their well-being. This was most obvious in preparing and bringing food to events and proudly staying to watch their children perform.
- **Cohesion:** A community of practice was emerging. It was increasingly accepted that group bike rides would raise consciousness of social issues; that being committed to projects was the norm; that celebrating achievements openly with others was done without fear.

The community was being remade and transformation was happening every day in small but determined ways. The visions of Dewey, Eisner, Freire and Greene for education were being achieved, though ironically not through a school but through a community-based project. This case study has focused on describing the experience and providing a tangible feel for Cabelo Seco and the *Rivers of Meeting Project*.

Further research and analysis will examine the pedagogical ideas shaping the success of the project and ways in which these may be replicated. I also hope to examine the lessons learnt from the *Rivers of Meeting Project* and how these may be transferred into a school context. More detailed and deeper data are required, necessitating more than 10 days of observations and interviews.

I am confident that Dewey, Eisner, Freire and Greene are helping the youth of Cabelo Seco. Their ideas are providing the guidance that enables young people to experience an increased sense of community, an awareness of the possibilities of education and a sense of responsibility to the process.

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## Biography

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