

A Black Dog on a Green Meadow¹

Doing Expressive Arts Therapy in Peru: Some Headlines

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*Hasta que sentimos sobre nuestros ojos
Las primeras paladas de tierra
La última caricia inacabable
Y nos reconciliamos con nuestra procedencia.*

(César Calvo)²

Living in Peru is like stepping into the decentering phase of an expressive arts therapy session without warming up or being aware; it is like appearing suddenly in a reality often felt as alternative, yet not unreal. The informality, the rawness, the abruptness: all are part of its essence. It would seem there is no time to sensitize us sufficiently to face our daily experience as Peruvians. *More than 69,000 Peruvians missing and killed by subversive organizations and State agents during the internal war in Peru (1980–2000)*. Sooner or later we become involved in this overwhelming reality, where sometimes we are not fully sure whether what we are living is a nightmare, a parody, a play, or a drama.

This is the kind of violence that has settled into our daily lives. It appears in the form of racism, in arrogant driving in traffic, in the pollution caused by cars, in the feeling of helplessness caused by unfair law enforcement: culprits who skip trials, accused rapists and murderers turned into accusers.

All this surrounding us, enveloping us. *Seventy-five percent of the victims of political violence were Quechua-speaking peasants.* In a public bus, the loud music, the collector shouting out the route, the smoke, the horns, and more than one person wearing headphones, listening to what they choose to listen, trying to choose what they hear without really accomplishing it, as the shouting, the horns, the music that we do not choose is heard anyway. It would seem that we were training ourselves to try to avoid listening to what we don't want to hear, to see things selectively even if they are right before our eyes, or not to see things that leap into view. Is it that the shrillness of everyday life – the day-to-day violence, its harsh nudity – is covered over by our perception, by our senses? Is it perhaps that if it arrived naked it would affect us so deeply, to the point of leaving us painfully exposed?

**Regional government of Loreto cancels
project with TAE Perú**

The TAE Perú 5Team (Expressive Arts Therapy Team) spent a week in the City of Iquitos at the request of the Regional Government of Loreto, to evaluate the possibility of starting a community development project through the arts. Iquitos is the largest city in the Amazon forest region of Peru, full of color, diversity, exuberance, and mixed feelings due to its multiple development possibilities, but also due to its many deficiencies, its poverty, and permanent chaos. The regional president himself supported the initiative with great enthusiasm. TAE Perú were already engaged in the preparations to start this initiative, which aimed to strengthen different groups that work with the arts in the city of Iquitos through the principles of expressive arts therapy. However, after several months of paperwork the project was trapped in government bureaucracy.

"Estamos en la calle," one of the collective exhibitors with whom TAE made contact, offers urban concerts where it brings together "heavy metal" and the traditional rhythms, tales, and myths of the Amazon forest. The exhibition seeks to group different urban, traditional, and contemporary artists to offer them greater possibilities for exposure and venues through which their voice and art may really reach the largest number of Iquiteños.

Contact was also made with "La Restinga," which for the past several years has engaged in different artistic activities with children and adolescents in marginal situations. Just recently they organized a

procession through different places in the city, with the image of a shoeshine boy (representing little Jesus), which they created themselves. The idea stemmed from the children themselves, who participated in the creation of the entire event. With this they sought to raise awareness in the community with regard to the hardships that working children face in Iquitos.

With them and other groups TAE Perú was able to enthusiastically imagine different joint work possibilities, taking expressive arts gradually to an entire city where the arts have great presence. A first stage would involve the creation of art together with the different institutions, then building on this experience and determining what would be the best way to consolidate the work and strengthen different initiatives that could emerge. Then, little by little, the different activities undertaken by the different groups involved in the initiative would gradually integrate. Thus the arts with all their transforming potential would have greater presence in the city of Iquitos.

"Unfortunately, from imagination and illusion we were rapidly brought back to reality; or maybe it took us too long to accept this reality. Maybe we were never able to understand the qualities of the reality we were facing, so magical, seductive, and frustrating at the same time," the members of TAE Perú stated with disappointment.

*Why don't you answer
 Why don't you come save me
 Show me how to use
 All these things
 That you gave me
 Turn me inside out
 So my bones can save me
 Turn me inside out
 (Lhasa de Sela)*

The Expressive Arts Therapy – Peru team has always discussed the way in which we are immersed in our country, trying to read through it and to feel it, joining efforts to stand up to the challenges... And taking into account how we must attend to ourselves in order to do this. *More than 40 percent of the population in Peru lives in a situation of poverty and extreme poverty.* This time, encouraged by the presentation of this chapter, we

wanted to make art in order to try to clarify our ideas as to what doing expressive arts therapy in Peru implies. This could well extend to other Latin American countries.

The proposal involved facing the language of our reality as narrated in all the local newspapers and creating a collage with that material. The reality and its fragments appeared then through images, words, phrases, advertising, shapes, colors, different sized letters... *Madman stabs brother to death / Ransom: one million soles / Supreme scandal in Supreme Court / War in town / I was also scammed / Robbery at McDonalds close to the Palace of Government.* The faces of semi-nude cabaret dancers mixed with characters pursued by the law, the look of victory on the face of "our" world surfing champion, and the grief of the family of a murdered teenager.

We then collaged all these images on a large piece of cardboard without any particular order and not all at the same time. It began to take shape. We used tempera to fill in spaces after the first analysis. And so we had the impression we had accomplished unity. However, something was still missing. *Exports will show the best of Peruvian art / Terry's father was selling cocaine (who the hell is "Terry"? / Money for everyone, participate and win.*

We made time for ourselves so that each of us could include phrases, either our own or taken from newspapers. We shared. *Catastrophe. Faith. You decide. Lab representative in just three months. Peru, third-world tourist destination. Have a nice day.*

We placed white tissue paper over the entire collage, with good results. We felt pleased with the final product (even considering that it was not totally finalized). The fragments of news now appeared veiled, a veil that caused the harshness to fade and made the collage beautiful, a veil that did not conceal but made it possible for it to be seen differently.

From there on, we faced some questions that will try to guide our reflections in this article. Was the veil our aesthetic response to the misery displayed in the newspapers? The veil covers; does it also reveal? What role could the veil have in our work as expressive arts therapists in this country? How can this veil help us formulate principles that may guide the work in expressive arts therapy here?

Tissue paper covers and at the same time reveals. The harshness is there and yet the cry is mitigated. The veil, contradictorily, better reveals what is beneath.

Reality is painful in our country. We often find ourselves in the midst of a clash between our desire to deny reality and the weight of reality itself. *In Peru, the expenditure in the education sector amounts to 2.8 percent*

of the GDP, far below average levels in Latin America. It would seem that the attempt of many Peruvians to not "believe" what goes on here is more a reflection of a feeling of survival than a psychotic mechanism of dissociation.

Nevertheless, denial has also been conscious and institutionalized. During the dictatorial administration of former president Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) the State paid for mass media to sell us a "false truth" for years through written press, radio and television. *Vegetables are good for depression. Closing our eyes to reality became almost a necessity for the population. Crops for export grow 20 percent.* What then does it mean to look at reality for Peruvians? When is truth real, and when is it suspect? *The vice president of Regional Credit for Latin America of the rating company Moody's stated that the international financial crisis enabled Peru to show its capacity to absorb shocks, and raised Peru's rating to investment grade.*

Thinking of our work as expressive arts therapists, of our task to enable access to the imaginary space, to value imagination, to pursue beauty, we wonder: what should guide our actions if at times it is hard to distinguish between what is real and unreal? On what reality should we stand?

*Un perro. Un prado.
Un perro negro sobre un gran prado verde.
¿Es posible que en un país como éste aún exista un perro
negro sobre un gran prado verde?
Un perro negro ni grande ni pequeño ni peludo ni pelado
ni manso ni feroz.
Un perro negro común y corriente sobre un prado ordinario.
Un perro. Un prado.
En este país un perro negro sobre un gran prado verde
Es cosa de maravilla y de rencor.*

(Antonio Cisneros)³

Our reality starts to define itself based on our purpose to work with the truth. This means accepting what exists, what we have in front of us, what comes up, beautiful or painful. *During the past 33 years, expenditure in education in Peru has not risen above 3.7 percent of the GDP, and instead has been gradually dropping.* It means accepting our contradictions as a country. This also implies accepting our contradictions as members of a community, as a professional team and as individuals. It means accepting a contradictory reality within ourselves. It means accepting the contradictions of the other.

Tae Perú project evidences lack of commitment of the district authorities in Ica

On August 15, 2007, Peru was shaken by an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter Scale that hit mostly the cities of Pisco and Ica, 400 km from Lima.

In October of that same year, collaborating with Save the Children and Codehica, TAE Perú started to work on the emotional recovery of the population. The project lasted nine months and involved two different stages. During the first stage TAE Perú trained and accompanied three local groups and one group from Lima so that they, in turn, could work directly with the people. The second stage involved the implementation of safe playgrounds as part of the reconstruction of the city. To this effect the entire community participated in the implementation of the parks, from the design, the delimitation of the space, installation, painting, etc. Training of the local groups continued throughout this stage.

TAE Perú arrived in Ica during the first stage of the project. They had to train a drama group made up by adolescent workers, called *Eclipse Total* (Total Eclipse). The group would present a play in the most severely hit areas of the town. The purpose of the play was to help the population deal with the emotional impact of the earthquake.

TAE Perú faced a group made up of teenagers 9 to 17 years old, and commented: "It was amazing to be facing a group of such young people, who had the responsibility to provide support to the population and who were confident they would be able to do so. These kids not only have to face this task, but also their house chores, their school work and their daily work in the street."

TAE Perú members observed the commitment and responsibility of the group towards their work throughout the entire process. During the training sessions, the members of *Eclipse Total* had, among other things, a space to share their feelings and internal conflicts about their work responsibilities and their deep desire to play and create.

In contrast to this, TAE Perú had to face a series of setbacks and contradictions arising from the poor management abilities, responsibility, and commitment of adults in regard to the project: authorities who were mostly absent and only made an appearance to receive the applause for the results, namely the play presented in their district; teachers who disappeared mysteriously during the training session and suddenly returned to enjoy the complimentary lunch;

local partners with little capacity to guarantee the good quality of the products acquired for the children's playgrounds, materials that were even billed for as if they were first-class; time-frames and deliveries that were not honored; people who due to previous conflicts shut down the electricity and ruined the park inauguration.

The creation and expression processes were violated and attacked by the unstable conditions under which we worked. We wonder how things would have turned out if the authorities had responded with the same commitment and responsibility as the children and adolescents of Eclipse Total.

We long to enter the imaginary space, accepting its own truth and the reality it may bring, without adorning it in order to make it more palatable, without anesthesia. *Peruvians, men and women... killed and missing... subversive organizations... State agents... internal war...*

The transparency of our role is in making it clear that we will not deny the rawness of reality; this also means that we will not pretend to see it free from distortions, including our own. However, this implies not denying reality, nor converting it immediately into an artistic creation. *Currently, four out of every ten women are victims of domestic violence.* It implies being present in the pain, in the uncertainty, the chaos and the violence, respecting the pace, making sure that it does not dissipate "too fast," so that we may realize that it exists as an indisputable truth.

Being there will allow the real thing to stem from within us, so that beauty may come to face us and bring us closer to the possibility of change.

*Si la mitad de mi cuerpo sonr e
La otra mitad se llena de tristeza
Y misteriosas escamas de pescado
Suceden a mis cabellos. Sonr o y lloro
Sin saber si son mis brazos
O mis piernas las que lloran o sonr en
Sin saber si es mi cabeza
Mi coraz n o mi glande
El que decide mi sonrisa
O mi tristeza. Azul como los peces
Me muevo en aguas turbias o brillantes*

*Sin preguntarme por qué
Simplemente sollozo
Mientras sonrío y sonrío
Mientras sollozo*
(Jorge Eduardo Eielson)⁴

As expressive arts therapists we seek out the veil not in order to be suffocated, but rather to help us find ourselves in a space with sufficient "air" to create and access the imaginary, to do *poiesis*, to transform the forcefulness of literal reality without rejecting it.

Thus, while the transparency of bonding is something common to all therapeutic spaces, guaranteeing that transparency is especially important in this country... *Madman kills / Currently, four out of every ten women / Money for everyone, participate and win...* that transparency becomes the safe place from which to access imaginary reality.

TAE Perú participated with the Dutch Cooperation Agency in conducting a workshop based on expressive arts

The workshop aimed at strengthening employability skills for students from two Technological Agricultural Institutes. TAE Perú prepared the work proposal, and the Cooperation Agency together with the authorities of the education sector was in charge of organizing and publicizing the event.

A few surprises came up with regard to the coordination of the organization by the Cooperation Agency and the local education authorities. One hour before the scheduled time of the workshop, we were informed that it was the anniversary of one of the institutes. That same morning we received the invitation to attend the event. Given this fact, the teachers who should have been present at the workshop remained at the celebrations until the next day. Meanwhile, the students were under the impression that the training would be on agricultural and livestock issues; the organizers had omitted to inform them about "the subject" of the workshop.

At the beginning of the workshop we had to admit the occasional fragility of established agreements, as well as the surprise and annoyance that this can generate. Making this explicit, putting it into words and not denying the reality and the feelings it generated, gave rise to the possibility of an open and honest exploration with the arts.

An opening ritual, in which each participant was able to bring something to place in the center of the working space, enabled us

to take a close look at beauty: green leaves, dry leaves, moist earth, twigs, colorful fabrics, a cricket, a caterpillar, and a book, among other things. Each one was present in the creation of this center; each could be recognized.

Towards the end of the workshop we visited a lagoon, where we baked potatoes in a mud oven prepared on the spot by the students themselves using the earth in the field. The final artistic presentations, prepared during the days of the workshop, took place next to the food. The working place of these agriculture and livestock students is the field, so that is what we chose as the setting for the last meeting.

The closing of the event was attended by the representative from the education sector. Whether due to the impact that the workshop had on them or for other reasons, the students presented to him their criticism about the teaching work in their institutes. Forced by the insistence of the students, the representative had to affirm several times that he would review their requests through the directors of the study centers. The claims were perhaps a means to return to literal reality, a way of effectively modifying it.

During the time we have been doing our work, we have found ourselves recognizing that what is literal may be present in the entire process of doing art. *More than 40 percent of the population in Peru lives in poverty / why don't you answer / turn me inside out.* We want to do everything possible so that this literality does not become an obstacle, but rather draw on its rawness in an authentic manner in order to let beauty emerge. *Twenty-one percent of the population is undernourished.* We must recognize the qualities of our literal reality so that we may begin its transformation. What should our proposal be as expressive arts therapists, in order to achieve this? Should we propose anything? *Is it possible that in a country like this there still may be a black dog on a green meadow?* What conditions do we consider essential to enter the imaginary space? Are there essential conditions? *For the past 33 years expenditure on the education sector in Peru has not risen above 3.7 percent of the GDP.* What does it mean to prepare the ground to do this? To prepare the ground or to be prepared for the ground: this is to be alert, to watch what goes on, to accept what is in front of us, not to deny but to admit it, *because the shouting, the horns, the music we do not choose, is there anyway* and there is the risk of suffering its attack and/or our defense, the risk that we may wish to fight it from literality, from reality itself. *Madman stabs brother to death.* The harshness of reality is present in

the space of creation, in the center and everywhere in the air. *More than 69,000 Peruvian men and women killed and missing.* We must not only call out its presence, but also look at it from another shore, with different eyes, in order to be able to start doing something with it. *A black dog, neither big nor small, neither furry nor short-haired, neither tame nor fierce.* Being on a different shore does not necessarily mean moving to a new stage, but rather staying there, next to the literal, with our senses open, with the risk of being invaded once again. *A black common and ordinary dog on an ordinary meadow. A dog. A meadow.* Using the veil allows us to see without intoxicating ourselves, without defending ourselves beforehand. It allows us to wait, wait for the unexpected, to await the unexpected, to be... *until we feel over our eyes / the first shovelfuls of earth / the last endless caress / and we make peace with our source.* Then we might begin to see something new in the horror, something beautiful, something that was always there, faded in its literality, then we might be able *to move in cloudy or clear waters / without wondering why / just sobbing / as we smile and smiling / as we sob.* Perhaps the veil could let us recognize reality, even if half my body smiles and the other half sobs. Perhaps the transparency will help us arrive at a surprise, arrive at the unexpected, find some faith in this catastrophe and see that our catastrophe is present again.

This means paying attention to the way we feel, letting our senses recover their vitality and their original role, to start creating from there. It is about listening to this internal dialogue and doing something with it – without forcing anything, not even expecting anything. Having faith in dialogue as in the rhythm of our breathing. Trusting that every movement brings another one. *It is possible that there still may be a black dog on a green meadow in a country like this.*

In our country this may be a necessary first step, and at the same time the starting point for genuine creation on the way towards change and transformation. The starting point that can help us become aware and have the necessary sensitivity to step into our comedy, and see the drama it actually is without turning it into a banality.

So that we may live our drama with sensitivity, let art and humor and truth not be deprived of value. In our country this may be a first step necessary for the probable appearance of the third one, a step prior to a green dog on a black meadow

*a blue green dog like the fish
transparent like the black meadow.
Participate and win.*

Notes

1. This phrase has been taken from a poem by Antonio Cisneros.
2. Until we feel over our eyes / The first shovelfuls of earth / The last endless caress / And we reconcile with our source (César Calvo).
3. A dog. A meadow. / A black dog on a green meadow. / Is it possible that in a country like this there may still be a black dog on a green meadow? / A black dog, neither big nor small, neither furry nor short-haired, neither tame nor fierce. / A black, common dog on an ordinary meadow. / A dog. A meadow. / In this country a black dog on a green meadow / It is a matter of wonder and bitterness (Antonio Cisneros).
4. If half my body smiles / the other half fills with sadness / and mysterious fish scales stem from my hair. I smile and I cry / unaware if it's my arms / or my legs that cry or smile / unaware if it's my head / my heart or my glans / that decides my smile / or my sadness. Blue like the fish / I move in custody or clear waters / without wondering why / I just sob / as I smile and smile / as I sob (Jorge Eduardo Eielson 2002, p.191).

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