Brazilian children's theories of empathy

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Abstract

Though academic research and public policy have directed much attention to how education can promote empathy in children, fewer studies have examined exactly how children define empathy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian NGO Usina da Imaginação engaged in a long series of arts and storytelling workshops with children across the socioeconomic spectrum and then used research methods from ethnography, literary studies, and documentary film to hear children's ideas and theories about alterity, solidarity, and empathy. These interviews showed that for this group of children, art is a transpersonal feeling: one girl described music as a synapse capable not only of connecting neurons within a brain, but of connecting one brain with another. A close genealogy of these children's theories shows how they emerge from both indigenous and afro-Brazilian practices of esthetic sociality, valuing being-together as a principal element of human flourishing and valuing collective art as a privileged part of that process.

Author Biographies

Kurt Shaw studied philosophy at Williams and classics at Harvard, but his real education came from two years in Central American refugee camps and Colombian slums, where he found poor and marginalized people more compelling thinkers than many academic philosophers. He developed the world's largest network of grass-roots organizations serving street kids, directed the first feature film made entirely by ex-child soldiers, produced an indigenous telenovela in Bolivia, and directed the first fictional film in the Amazonian Tukano language. His feature film The Princess in the Alleyway, won world's best film of 2017 by the Subversive Cinema Society..

Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva, PhD and post doctorate in anthropology (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina and UCLA), is a a filmmaker and researcher in children narratives and performances. Rita was born to a large farming family in southern Brazil, where she learned to appreciate the mysteries of nature, something that continues to animate her work and research with children. After years teaching in the university, she later moved into non-profits, founding and co-directing Usina da Imaginação. She has directed many films, including The Princess in the Alleyway (fiction, 2017), The Other Side of theOother (doc, 2019), Wuitina Numiá (fiction, 2021), and the upcoming Aiurê (Fiction, 2024).

Introduction

Educators often conceive of empathy and solidarity as central goals of moral and character education. It is less often that we ask children about empathy: what it is, how it grows, or what role it plays in children's interactions with their world. Over the long years of the pandemic, a group of educators and artists affiliated with the Brazilian NGO Usina da Imaginação ran a project where children and teenagers from many walks of life used the arts as a way to connect with and understand children from the other side of the wall of Brazil's social and economic apartheid.

In the process of making hundreds of visual artworks, eight songs, three music videos, and twenty films with more than a hundred children from a variety of social classes and regions of Brazil, we have found that these children reveal and construct coherent theories of empathy. We hope to show in this article that the children's ideas of moral growth, responsibility, and solidarity reflect an ethical framework that ethno-philosophers have identified in indigenous and afro-Brazilian worldviews.

We begin this article with a brief review of the extensive literature around the pedagogy of empathy and put it into dialogue with the growing field of the neurology of empathy and alterity in literature and film. Our own methodology is different from both of these disciplines, but the literature provides an important foundation from which to listen carefully to the children themselves. We continue with an ethnography emerging from long conversations, interviews, and analysis of children's artworks during the pandemic. The ideas of a diverse group of children from many walks of life and regions of Brazil form the basis of nascent theories of empathy developed by and with — and not simply about — children.

In the second part of the article, we examine the cultural, artistic, and intellectual context in which these children are immersed: the multicultural world of indigenous, African, and European influences that form the Brazilian world view and influence its arts. This section also delves into the anthropology of art, ritual, and empathy, putting local ideas and practices into dialogue with international ethnography.

Spurred by this theory, we return to the children's artwork and interviews, showing how imagination serves as a quilting point for developing empathy through doing art together. We conclude with how the lessons from this experience can inform moral and character education in contexts far from Brazil.

Arts, empathy, pedagogy

The last decade and a half have seen the development of a growing literature on the development of empathy in a diverse range of contexts, from formal educational institutions and hospitals to the arts and entertainment industry, as well as excellent criticisms of the unreflective valorization of empathy as a universally positive moral value. A comprehensive review of this research goes far beyond the scope of this article, but we want to draw attention to several theories and ideas that will help to elucidate the participant ethnography of children we develop below.

Within educational institutions, teachers and policy makers generally encourage the development of empathy along two tracks — emotional-affective or cognitive-perspectival (Demitriou, 2018) — with different kinds of empathy emerging at different points in the emotional and intellectual

development of a child. Though any number of factors, especially toxic stress, can complicate the development of small children's empathic development (Center, 2016; Moya, 2023), scholars have confirmed what early childhood educators have long known: that even small children can "feel" what other children are feeling, putting themselves in the shoes of classmates who are sad and suffering, but also happy and excited (see also Svetlova et al, 2010; Demitriou, 2004). As children grow, the forms of pedagogy that can inspire empathy can also grow, including many more techniques that draw on Demitriou's cognitive-perspectival axis as well as techniques from Aristotelian virtue development (Kristjánsson, 2015; Jubilee, 2017; POSTNote, 2018).

Though most of the scientific literature on character and empathic education emerges from a broadly European — and often specifically Aristotelian — milieu, we want to stress a new current in lowland South American anthropology and ethno-philosophy. Many anthropologists — and now a new generation of indigenous intellectuals writing for academic and popular audiences — stress that the ethical and epistemological focus of Amazonian thought is assuming the perspective of the other (Viveiros de Castro, 2002; Fausto, 2007; Baniwa, 2019, Krenak, 2023). Just as Kantian epistemology insists that we learn about both object and observer as the perspective of the observer changes (Karatani, 2003), perspectivism — the name now given to indigenous theories of knowledge in lowland South America — values a similar imperative of these culture: to see the world through the eyes of the other, be it other human beings, animals, or even plants or geographical features. Though we have attempted to put this concept into dialogue with European concepts of epistemology, social change, and project scaling (Shaw and da Silva, 2021, Shaw and da Silva 2023), there has been little literature written on Amazonian perspectivism and character education. Over the course of this paper, we will delve much deeper into this concept of changing perspectives and how it – and the children's ideas of empathy – challenge the emotional-affective or cognitive-perspectival dichotomy common to many European studies of empathy in education.

Though art and literature have long been valued as a powerful route to develop empathy with people from different places, times, and experiences (Hakemulder, 2000; Koopman 2015), recent years have seen an explosion of studies on how cinema inspires (and often problematizes) empathy. Vittorio Gallese's groundbreaking and painstaking research on the neuroscience of film perception (see esp Gallese, 2019) has shown the way that the dialectic between point of view shots and the close-up develops a powerful form of empathy. Though Gallese and many in his circle (Chora, 2006) see this process as a kind of identification with the characters on screen, others have suggested that it is, in fact, the de-familiarizing effect of cinema which makes it so powerful as an empathic tool:

> *The nature of the camera is different from that of the human eye. Different, mainly, because instead of a space filled consciously by man, the unconscious appears… In general, the act of picking up a lighter or a spoon is familiar to us, but we hardly know what passes between the hand and the metal when making these gestures, not to mention how our mood fluctuations affect them. The camera comes with its dips and rises, its interruptions and isolations, its stretching and accelerations, its enlargements and reduction, takes us to the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis takes us to the unconscious of drives. (Benjamin, 1992)*

Whether dealing with literature, art, or cinema, the majority of these studies focus on the relationship between the work of art and its audience (see Brunn, 2018 as an excellent counter-example). In the pages that follow, we plan to expand this focus to look at the relationship between empathy, art, and the children who produce art. The question is not so much whether (or how) the *art-work* produces empathy, but how the process of *art-making* can produce both empathy and a children's theory of it.

Methodology of action, methodology of research

The arts project analyzed here, called *Inspiração* in Portuguese (a pun on inspiration, breathing, and action) was designed to inspire both action and reflection during the pandemic. Adapting the popular education of Paulo Freire (1996) to a socially distanced world, the educators included theater games (Augusto Boal, Viola Spolin, Constantin Stanislavski), and lessons from Brazilian artists like Lygia Clark, Bispo do Rosário, and Lydia Hortélio. The result, as children said many times, was that though they could not *be* together, at least children could *do art* together. The workshops strove to stimulate connection and affection between the children, while at the same time opening a space for reflection and shared emotional analysis.

The artists and educators arranged for art materials to arrive at the participants' homes, making it possible to engage in the following workshops:

1. Plastic Arts: 16 workshops with two different groups of a dozen children
2. Musical composition: 10 workshops with eleven older children and adolescents to compose music about the experience of the pandemic, resulting in an album of eight songs.
3. Soundtrack: Four workshops where the composition group composed and performed the soundtrack to films produced about the Plastic Arts group
4. Music Videos: Interactive workshops to script, act, and film three music videos
5. Urban Planning: 12 workshops with two different groups of children (10-16 participants per group), using diorama and models to imagine a city for children
6. Films: More than 20 short films and 5 medium length films where the children reflect on the experience, relating it to art, empathy, and solidarity.
7. Fictional Films: Two medium-length fictional films, where two different groups of children created the story and characters online, and then filmed themselves with their families at home; the result was edited into films that make it seem the children were physically together.
8. Exhibitions in more than 20 schools, five film festivals, and to close to a million people in quick clips on TV.
9. Two online film festivals where the children presented their own work.

Each phase has its own structure, but in each case, adult artists created their own art together with the children.

Over several years, 109 children participated in the workshops analyzed here. Of these, 32% were Afro-Brazilian and 10% indigenous; the researchers also worked hard to include children from all socio-economic groups in the country, with a class distribution closely mirroring Brazil's class demographics.[3] The online nature of pandemic-era workshops allowed a wide geographic range of participants, with children from ten different Brazilian states.

Methodologies of intervention and research were integrally related: the artists formed part of the research team, the researchers themselves taught many of the workshops, and the children understood themselves as researchers of their own experiences. Many of these techniques are encapsulated in Action Research (Tripp, 2005) – though adopted for the Brazilian context with reference to popular education and popular political movements (Araújo, 2021) – which insists that the best space to reflect on a social process is when one is immersed in it. By "doing and being together" (an idea that will also emerge in the children's theories, below), the researcher and researched, working together, develop both product and knowledge.

The researchers also used ethnographic techniques, where the researcher, while living together with the group she studies, describes, observes, and reflects on that group in dialogue with the anthropological literature. Much of this methodology – sometimes called an affective ethnography – has become central to contemporary Brazilian anthropology. (See da Silva, 2008) The present ethnography itself has emerged from a long term dialogue with Brazilian indigenous anthropologists and philosophers (Waikon 2013, Sodré 2017, Baniwa 2019, Barreto 2019, Krenak 2022, 2023). The authors of this paper have long been a part of this movement to stimulate methodological dialogue between indigenous people, afro-Brazilians, and the academy. (See Shaw and da Silva 2011, 2016, 2018, 2021, 2023)

Finally, documentary film techniques play an important role in the research: by placing a child in front of the camera in order to make a movie, the researcher signals that this *moment* is important and that the *ideas* of the child matter. When used with care and caring, the presence of the camera can evoke and inspire reflections that might not appear in any other way. Showing the films to the children and their families could then inspire yet another layer of reflection on the experience of doing art in the pandemic.

The researchers collected children's responses in several ways. All workshops were recorded, some with a camera or voice recorder as a part of the cinematic process or by an online recording of the Zoom workshops. In this case, children's comments were spontaneous, came in reaction to other children or to the general tone established by educators. Researchers then selected thirty-seven of the participants (34%) for one-on-one filmed conversations framed as "an opportunity for you to teach other children about your experience and your insights." These conversations, followed the affective ethnology mentioned above, with questions emerging from the workshops and from previous answers.

Events of "listening to children" (*escuta das crianças*) have become an important part of the democratic consultative process around public policy in Brazil: the research team used several techniques developed to this end but also showed that the arts – when combined with ethnography and a careful hermeneutic – are a useful tool to listening to new ideas from children. *Inspiração* included a sensitive listening to children, hearing not only their philosophy, but also their sentiments and intuitions. This process of listening demanded a space where everyone trusted each other, leaving space for emotions and intimacy, not only ideas. Doing art together helped to create this space.

Children's ideas on empathy and how to build it

The Inspiração project began with two groups of children: the first — generally with fewer economic resources, from public schools — undertook a series of visual art workshops online with local artists, using materials the project team distributed each week to their homes. After eight weeks, they had developed more than a hundred artworks. A second group of older and upper-middle class[4] children and adolescents had a similar series of workshops about music composition, resulting in an album each recorded at home, and which the project team then had professionally mixed, and three music videos. The two groups also encountered online, shared their art, and worked together to find ways to inspire social solidarity with children during the pandemic. In a time of fear and loneliness among children, this final topic was crucial to all of the participating children.

Finally, when pandemic restrictions allowed, we interviewed many of the participants, developing a series of movies that mix art with the children's and teenagers' reflections on the pandemic and how

they saw their place in the world. Between presentations at schools, visualizations on social media, Youtube, and Spotify, and attention in the local media, more than a million people have seen the children' art.[5]

Inspiração took as its goal to create empathy and solidarity during the pandemic: both between children from different social worlds and a broader social solidarity for the challenges that all children faced during the pandemic. We discovered, however, that the collective experience served as a powerfully democratic form of research and practical moral philosophy. When we took seriously the art the children produced and then listened carefully to what they had to say, we found perspectives on care, on otherness, and on public and educational policy that merit integration into the academic discourse on moral and character education.

In the first months of the pandemic, Isa – who was nine years old at the time – had participated in several months of art workshops; she worked hard to find the words to express what she had learned about life and love from her time doing art during the quarantine.

> *"I had never put myself in my Mom's place or really thought about everything she does for us. When I was little, I thought it had to be easy to be a Mom. I wanted to be a Mom so I could wear a pretty dress and all that… But now I see how hard she works for us, both in the pandemic and everywhere else. She does everything for us and she doesn't even have time for herself. There's no way we could compensate her for that. She's a super mother. My Dad, too. They're the most heroic people I've ever known."[6]*

Children also had very clear ideas about how art could help put them in the place of the other. When the quarantine started, Letícia was 11, the oldest of six children of a single mother. Her mother had lost her job, they had to care for sick grandparents and great-grandparents, and Letícia had lost her connection to school, the place where — as a very smart kid — she knew she could shine. Letícia explained how she started to feel connected in the midst of this tragedy.

> *"I always liked to draw, but when I look at other people's art, I say, 'Man, that's so pretty, so perfect.' I can't do anything that would make others say 'how pretty.' So one of the most important things I learned in the workshops is that art doesn't need to be pretty. Everyone woke up early, their faces still wrinkled from sleep… What was most important was being with people, with all of you. That's how I feel good. That's what gave me the feeling of 'Wow!'" [7]*

Letícia wasn't interested in the romantic idea of a lone painter or sculptor in his studio; she didn't even consider herself a good artist. What mattered to her was "wow" that comes from "being together:" art creates a space for encounter, for friendship, for sharing. By doing art together in spite of differences in class, race, and gender, the children found space for these encounters. We heard this time and time again: for Brazilian children, art is first and foremost a way of being together.

Though Aloís took pride in his artworks in a way that Letícia did not, like her he valued the way that art inspired "being together." "It's important to express what you feel without being judged," he said. "It's a relief. You can hear that someone else is passing through the same experience you are at that moment."[8] The song he composed expresses the challenge well, both in its poetry and its melody.

> *"I wake, I startle, I look in the mirror*
> *As if the whole world were judging me.*
> *They say this is just a phase*

that will pass
But I don't know if I'll hold out."⁹

Eliz, a teenager who participated in the music group, elaborated this idea of art as being together.¹⁰ Everyone, she explained, has "knots" in their lives: points of confusion and conflict, dead end streets where your thoughts or emotions get stuck. The pandemic forced everyone into isolation, she said, but it also created a world where almost everyone is tied with the *same* knots of solitude, fear, mourning, and confusion.

People try to untie knots with many tools, Eliz continued, and some of these work and others don't. But when someone finds a solution to these common knots through art — and when that art can reach the world — something magical happens: the solutions become public, common, *shared*. Anyone can access them. Eliz composes and listens to lots of music, so she used the metaphor of a song. When she hears the voice of someone who is struggling through the same knots she is, that work of art serves as a shortcut for her. She's able to use the insights of the artist to make her own way out of the maze of confusing emotions. And, she added, other people can make the same use of her art. In the pandemic, where so many of our confusions and dilemmas were common, these shared artistic solutions could be, too.

For Eliz, then, *music is transpersonal feeling*, not simply the expression of an idea that someone else may or may not understand, but a concrete link, almost as if the electricity that passes between our neurons had found a new synapse that linked it to another person or to the public. Eliz seems to suggest that teenagers both think and feel through the music they share, a kind of transcendental synapse that makes a group into a collective thinker.

Many of the children in the project mentioned "Novo Futuro" — a song composed by fourteen year old Liam as a part of the project — as a kind of anthem for teens in the pandemic. After a melancholy piano opening, he sings

> *"I think of all of the things I have lost…*
> *it is time to recognize that anything could disappear."*

The minor key in the accompaniment continues, but the lyrics change:

> *"When the sun sets, the moon rises.*
> *Night is safe for other creatures.*
> *And the times that are dying,*
> *are the bridge to a new future."¹¹*

The transpersonal emotion wrought by the music functioned through the words of the lyrics, but even more in the mixed tone of melancholy and hope in Liam's recorded voice, the emotion of his chord progression, or the repetition of a melody in another key for the second verse.

The song becomes public emotion, a shared experience of untying emotional knots. "Public emotion"or "transpersonal feeling" sound very strange in our Cartesian world of a "thinking thing" walled off from all other thinking things. But as Wittgenstein challenges us to "[j]ust try -- in a real case -- to doubt someone else's fear or pain."¹² Eliz might say "Just listen. Don't you feel the knots in your own psyche loosen as you hear those chords?"

When the diverse group of children and adolescents who participated in the Inspiração project were challenged to develop a theory of empathy and a proposal of how to construct it, they had very clear ideas that were consistent across race, gender, and social class.

1. Putting oneself in the place of the other is one of the most important ethical goals that one can have.
2. Art is a powerful tool to inspire children to put themselves in the place of the other
3. Art is even more effective when it is done together — transformative art is collective, and not the act of a solitary genius.
4. For this collective art to work, it must happen in a non-judgmental space, where children and adolescents can be themselves while being together
5. Art can work in this way because it is a kind of transpersonal emotion, a way that feeling — and even solutions to troubling feelings — can cross between one body and another the way that electricity allows transmission from one synapse to another.

The next step in the argument is to step back to examine the cultural and intellectual milieu where these ideas have grown, so that we can better understand how they work.

Art as being-together: Cultural and philosophical context

The theory of empathy that this group of Brazilian children helped us to develop depends upon doing art and being together as routes to putting oneself in the place of the other. Though the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition values "walking a mile in someone else's shoes," we would like to suggest that the ideas the children and teenagers express and elaborate actually come from a more diverse and artistic milieu.

Perhaps the most important element of Brazilian cultural identity is our esthetic sociality (Silva, 2008). From samba schools to country dances to *chorinho* circles, *candomblé* rites to *capoeira* to Amazonian festivals, Brazilians come together to make collective art. An outsider might categorize these phenomena as art or culture, but they also embody and express a profound philosophy of life, something that sees *bem viver* ("a life well-lived") in collective acts of creativity and ritual. The afro-Brazilian philosopher Muniz Sodré calls these practices "somatic philosophy," (Sodré, 2019, 129) a collective way of thinking epistemology, ethics, and ontology through the collective movement of bodies in art. These artistic and philosophical traditions influence Brazilian children in various ways: some participate directly in afro-Brazilian or indigenous cultures, but most become a part of this world of thought and rhythm through songs, drum groups playing on the street, capoeira, Brazilian movies and artists… the wealth of Brazilian popular and shared culture that emerged from the encounter between African and indigenous people.

In the European tradition, art is generally viewed through the lens of aesthetics, but in the Amazon, *art is sociality*. It is the space in which people can "be together." The indigenous peoples of the Rio Negro region of the Amazon use the *dabucuri* to bring together different and often rival communities to exchange arts and crafts, to share food, and to trade dances, songs, and ideas.[13] The immense collective dances in Xingu or the masked rituals of the Javari serve similar social functions.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro summarizes this philosophy best when he says that

> "In the West, both subjects and objects are the result of a process of objectification: the subject is constructed or recognized through the objects that they produce, and they know

themselves objectively when they are able to see themselves 'from outside' as a 'that'. Amerindian shamanism seems to be guided by the inverse ideal. To know is to personify, to take the point of view of that which one wants to understand… One sees in the 'other thing' another person, another subject or agent." (258)

Europeans might imagine shamanism as an ayahuasca-induced trance, but the anthropological literature on the Amazon shows it to be multiplicity of techniques to see through the eyes of the other. Viveiros de Castro showed that Amazonian warfare is basically an attempt to capture the perspective of the enemy by winning his songs as a trophy. Among the Arawetê people that he studied, he often heard the phrase "the enemy is a singing teacher," (274) while the nickname they gave to their enemies was "*marakã nin*" or "future song". "The principal function of enemies," he concludes, "is to bring new songs." (275)

Our own research among the Baniwas and Tukanos, two indigenous groups of the Upper Rio Negro on the Brazil/Colombia border, shows that the *dabucuri* replaces war as a way to bring new songs. Villages in the upper Rio Negro are quite isolated, often a day or more from each other by canoe. Casimiro, a 110 year old Yepá-Masã shaman, told us that when the Cobra-Canoa or Snake-Boat brought people to the Amazon, it separated them in distant villages and gave them different dances and songs. Each group then developed its own arts and crafts, stories and myths, and often different strains of manioc. When one village invites another for a *dabucuri*, they will exchange all of these things. Most importantly, however, in an exchange of songs and stories, they will trade *perspectives:* points of view.

Art as being together also centers the philosophy developed by Africans forced across the Atlantic as slaves. Muniz Sodré points out that English, German, and most romance languages have relatively clear subjects, objects, and verbs. The subject acts, the object is acted upon. The Nagôs — Yorubas enslaved in Brazil — embrace a different kind of grammar where subject and object, I and Thou, get confused (Sodré, 2017). Sodré uses the Greek middle voice to illustrate his idea, but a classic samba makes the same point:

> *"Morena de Angola que leva o chocalho amarrado na canela*
> *Será que ela mexe o chocalho ou o chocalho é que mexe com ela." (Buarque, 1980)*

> *"The black woman from Angola has a rattle tied around her ankle,*
> *Do you think she is shaking it or it is shaking her?"*

Anyone who loves to dance, sing, or play a musical instrument probably knows the feeling of ecstasy or abandon that happens when everything goes right. I am dancing the dance, or does the dance dance me? Does the dancer shake her rattle or does the rattle shake her?

The Greek tradition of esthetic analysis imagines a "muse" which incarnates in the artist to inspire creation. The Nagôs of Brasil also understand art through incarnation and incorporation, but an *orixá* will only *baixar* — "come down", incarnate — into a body during a moment of collective ritual, where a whole community dances and drums *together*.

Sodré insists that Afro-Brazilian religious rituals happen in the middle voice, because when everyone is dancing and drumming and singing together, the bodily experience is shared. There is no subject or object of the collective dance, especially when an *orixá* "comes down" and incarnates in a person, who begins to dance with steps she has never known before or to speak in a voice not his own. Some *candomblé* priests say that the drum or the *orixá* is the subject of the ritual, but

Sodré challenges us to find a new grammar of being-together. "There cannot exist a subject of joy," (Sodré, 2019, 151).

The anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) gives additional tools for understanding why Brazilian children might define making art together as a kind of royal road to empathy. For Turner, the ritual of performance or doing art begins with a separation from quotidian life. For Letícia, coming together in an arts workshop was a ritual that "gave me the feeling of 'wow.'" German romantics might have called it *Erlebnis* and a TED talk might call it the "ah-hah moment", but all these ideas are basically trying to describe something transcendent. Turner insists that the subject – the participant – must be disposed to live something outside of his or her own day-to-day existence, to take on a new identity or at least suspend the logic of their traditional personal narrative.

The arts and music workshops were a time out of time, a ritual of artistic performance among friends and allies where judgment could be temporarily suspended. During the first months in the pandemic, the world had already entered a moment of crisis where everything was different. The ritual of waking early to do art created even more of a parenthesis in life, a space safe from judgment where one could be oneself and be with others. In those extraordinary times, the children knew that they had to live that moment and celebrate the process of art, not judge the artwork that anyone produced. "If we didn't do something, we would have gone mad," 9 year old Lorena told us.[14]

"What we did," Leticia told us later, "was to get together and turn that awful moment into something good, if just for an hour." We — and we say "we" self-consciously, because it was also true for the authors of this paper and for the arts teachers — were hungry for connection, to find meaning in the extraordinary times we were living.

Within the logic of afro-Brazilian religious rites, this drive toward the other, this shared experience, is called transcendence. (Sodré, 96). Transcendence is not necessarily about gods or religion or the spiritual realm, but simply this shared experience with the other, these moments where people seem feel or think in connection, generally through shared corporeal experience.

Delving into the cultural context lived by these children helps us to understand their sophisticated theory of empathy and how to develop it, but it also provides a new concept. Though none of the children used exactly that word, they were all talking, in one way or another, about transcendence.

Empathy, Transcendence, Imagination

Though almost all of the children who participated in the Inspiração workshops talked about putting themselves in the place of the other as an ethical goal, some used other arts beyond the painting, sculpture, and music that formed the palette of the first fase of *Inspiração*. For many of them, forms of fiction were the key to transforming perspective. Among the participants we interviewed, more than half spontaneously talked about how much they were writing after the workshops – fiction, poetry, songs – very often using narration to understand people very different than they.

At 7 years old, Oberá was one of the youngest children in the group, and he suffered quite a lot from the solitude of the quarantine. In the first months of the pandemic, when he hadn't left his house in months and the arts classes were one of his few contacts with other children, he told us

> *"Imagination is important because it allows you to let go of yourself. It isn't rigid. I can transform that grass in my yard into a forest and the hail that fell last night into diamonds. It*

just requires imagination and will-power. That's what art allows me to do. Sometimes it doesn't come out as I want it to, but that's OK." [15]

He then went on to relate a story he had imagined where each of the characters seemed to be a possible identity with which he was experimenting or empathizing.

In the 1940s and 50s, Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg developed what is now called "The Method", transforming Constantine Stanislavsky's ideas about how to create characters for theater into a technique that would work with film and modern subjectivity. The basic premise is that if the actor feels the right emotions, she will express them profoundly on screen. Eventually, the two broke apart over how to investigate emotions outside of an actor's current experience: Strasberg wanted actors to mine their own experiences to find the emotions. Adler – a Jewish woman who had lost many family members in the Holocaust – condemned that method as unethical, abusing an actor by forcing her to re-live trauma. She insisted that the best acting — and the best ethics — came from *imagining* the experience and emotions of the character.

Rosa, who worked with a dozen other children and teenagers to invent an interpret an online movie, in which each kid filmed him or herself before we edited the clips together into a coherent film, examined how the process worked in herself.

> *"Envious people have always annoyed me. They get on my nerves. But in the play, that's the role I had to play: someone who is jealous and mean. Creating the character helped me understand why people can be that way — their past, their motivation. I think I can be kinder to them now; I think it made me a better person."*

Literature on the sociology of fiction reading and movie watching has shown clearly that novels and film can inspire empathy in their audience, but something even more powerful happens when a child playing or imagining the role of someone else evokes the feeling of the skin of the other. Anyone who has seen children play with toys — where they do the voices and play the roles of all of the stuffed animals as they interact — shouldn't be surprised that a children's way of knowing the other is closer to the indigenous epistemology we saw in the Amazon than it is to objectivization. In fact, children learn the world through trying on the clothes of the other, testing the voice of the other. *They learn by imagination and empathy.*

After the music group saw a first cut of the movie where Isa explained how she had learned to put herself in her mother's place, they took up the challenge of composing and recording a soundtrack for it. They spent weeks watching and re-watching the short documentary, thinking through each emotion that Isa expressed or felt during the interview. Next, they composed and debated melodies, harmonies, and key changes. "We had to feel what she felt," Liam explained. "She's just nine years old, but she's so smart and so insightful and we had to make a soundtrack that conveyed all of that." "Composing for that soundtrack was much harder than writing music for myself," João added. "Because I had to put *her* emotions in the music, not mine."

The song that 10-year old Helena composed in the workshop adds several important elements to a child's theory of empathy. Like many of the other participants, Helena pointed to the contradictions of the pandemic – where children were prisoners at home, but also free of the constraints of school – as a time-out-of-time that encouraged and allowed her to dream and imagine.

> *"Freedom makes me dream,*
> *especially close to the sea.*
> *I feel that infinity before me,*

feel the wind in my hair."[16]

The rhythm of the song says something even more interesting: Helena is blond and middle class, but her song is an *ijexá*, the beat of Oxum in afro-Brazilian religion – each *orixá* has a different rhythm, making the liturgical community feel and think together in a certain philosophical/ emotional framework, and Oxum is the orixá of waterfalls and drinking water. The chorus of the song doubles down on the same transformation of perspective:

> *"We see stars (starfish or reflected stars) in the sea,*
> *and also in the sky.*
> *They color Iemanjá and her veil."*

Iemanjá is the *orixá* of the sea, protector of women and children, and when Helena scripted the music video for the song, she chose to wear the colors and clothes of Iemanjá. She also protects and embraces her toddler cousin, as Iemanjá does to children in *camdomblé* rites. While Isa found art as a way to put herself in her mother's place, Helena used rhythm and costume as a way to put herself in the rites of afro-Brazilian religion.

In all of these cases, we see how children's imagination of the other can be an essential step in the process of empathy and connection with that other. However, if this project worked in *Inspiração*, it was because imagination was linked to dialogue and human contact. Raffaella, who worked with Rosa on the fictional film project, interpreted a mother in the movie and had to imagine what it would be like to parent a teenager; later she told us that when she showed the result to her own mother, the experience brought a sense of connection that she felt she had lost during her adolescent rebellion. Similarly, After the music group composed the soundtrack to the film where Isa narrated her experience during the pandemic, they shared the soundtrack with her, asked her response, and made changes so that the emotions of the music would reflect her responses. The dialogue served to make the film and its soundtrack a better and more honest work of art, but even more importantly, it created a connection between Isa and the musicians, a friendship where each could learn from and teach the other. Empathy happened in the art, and the art opened the possibility for a relationship. Similarly, Helena developed her *ijexá* with musicians who learned in afro-Brazilian traditions and then showed the music video to the black children who had participated in the project.

In all of these cases, we see that the children learned techniques of empathy with people who were both radically other or frighteningly intimate. This process of imagination, sharing, and dialogue comes very close to what both anthropologists of performance and participants in afro-Brazilian religion and music call transcendent.

<u>Conclusions</u>

Educational disciplines often segregate character and moral education from the arts, literature, or other parts of the humanities. Both the children whose ideas we translate through this ethnography and the ideas that emerge from indigenous and afro-Brazilian philosophy and educational practice suggest that educators would be well served to challenge these divisions. Art — and particularly the creative arts that demand imagination — can be one of the most powerful tools for moral reflection and education.

Several years ago, we did a similar experiment to the one we describe here. First, we taught filmmaking to two groups of children: one from the slums and one from middle class apartments. After each group learned script, camera, sound, and acting, we helped them make a movie about

what they imagined life to be like for children on the other side of the cultural divide. We then showed each film to the other group and challenged them to compare it to their own life. Finally, we brought the children together in the favela and in the apartment complex, so that they could play and get to know each other as equals.

The experiment was the basis for a documentary on Brazilian public TV, where one of the girls explained the experience like this.

> *We created an axis of friendship. We made relationships, saw what we had in common. It was so beautiful, because the film crew got emotional, too. We built links, and I hope that continues. That they come to our houses, that we go and play in the favela. And that it continues until we are all adults, still being friends. Because… The differences between us won't matter — it doesn't matter now. We created a strong friendship and I want that to continue.*

Art creates a space for encounter, for friendship, for being together. The children on both sides of the class- and race-based wall that separates Brazil were enthusiastic about their art because it opened space for these encounters, a challenge to their curiosity and their desire to connect. We heard this time and time again: for Brazilian children art is first and foremost a way of being together. And through that being together and imagining together, they could come to — as Isa said in the first quote of this essay — put themselves in the place of the other.

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[3] The 2022 Brazilian census divides the country in six classes, where the richest category (A) earns about 23 times more than the poorest (class DE) (US$4000/month vs US$ 175/month). About 3% of Brazilians fall into the A class, and close to 30% in the DE class, with the middle classes at about 22% and the lower middle classes at 47%. The sample of this study had a slight over-representation of class DE and class A. See https://gente.globo.com/infografico-pesquisa-panorama-das-classes-abcde/

[4] Though its GINI coefficient (measure of inequality) has dropped from .63 at the end of the military dictatorship to .49 today, Brazil continues to be one of the most unequal countries in the world. (Our World in Data) Upper middle class (classe B) formally refers to families with a monthly income of US$1750-2300. More concretely, it generally means a comfortable home in a closed condominium or large apartment, private school for children, two cars in the family, and steady, often managerial employment. The children in the other group of phase 1 were largely working class, with family incomes of US$250-400 a month; better off than children in the famous Brazilian favelas, but from families that often struggle to put food on the table and whose housing is far from secure.

[5] To see, hear, and watch the works of art, you can visit https://inspira.usinadaimaginacao.org/galeria/

[6] Isa: Arte em Tempos de Pandemia: https://vimeo.com/468655444 , minutes *2:11-3:06*

[7] Inspiração: Arte em Tempos de Pandemica. A Youtube Live presentation at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z96IAVPuiIs&t=6852s

[8] Aloís: Arte em Tempos de Pandemia. https://vimeo.com/607358532?share=copy

[9] Aloís Vicentini Bogo, "Abro os Olhos". https://spotify.link/g47CJyKR3Cb

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[11] Liam Ramsey, Music video for Novo Futuro": https://vimeo.com/521869663?share=copy . Or https://spotify.link/dRENnLtS3Cb

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[16] Helena. Mar de Liberdade. https://vimeo.com/533990619?share=copy and https://spotify.link/cdU3X2fT3Cb