12 Woman Overboard

Pedagogical Moments of Performative Inquiry

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"How many people live in Come-by-Chance?" I ask, as Mario rows our dory into the middle of the bay. I sweep my arm across the classroom, to encompass us all.

"I don't know," he replies.

"Of course, you do!" I try to conceal my annoyance. "You bicycle past the population sign each morning. Remember?" My finger points directly at the blackboard where I have taped the sign. But Mario ignores me and sneaks a copious swallow of Screech, an infamous Newfoundland brew. His antics set the others giggling. I am furiously sweating, overheated in a fisherman's sweater, yellow rain overalls and lifejacket. *Why won't he work with me?*[1]

I dwell in performative moments, realized through performance. Performance embodies our lived experience[2] and the imaginative evocative worlds we create through our engagement in the arts—theatre, dance, creative writing, visual arts, multimedia, and other forms of creative endeavor. Performance may startle, astonish, or puzzle us. Performance calls us to wide-awakeness. Emergent moments of recognition reveal, or conceal, our fears, joys, misconceptions, preconceptions, vulnerabilities, ambitions, despairs, yearnings, desires. Fragments of silenced stories may be given voice. The unsayable, the unspeakable, the unsaid dwell within moments of performative action, *presence performed through absence*.[3]

Central to my work in performative inquiry (Fels, 1998, 1999, 2010, 2012; Fels & Belliveau, 2008) is philosopher David Appelbaum's concept of the stop, *a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity.* A stop is simultaneously, a moment of interruption, a pause, a listening to the as-yet unnamed. A stop is not a moment in which one literally stops, but rather is an embodied realization within which dwells possible recognition of as-yet unknown choices of action. We cannot grasp tightly to a stop moment; a stop, like the breath, is a moment within action. A stop, writes Appelbaum (1995), is "both a resistance to and an agent of [the] movement" (p. 125). A stop, ephemeral, temporal, elusive, calls out to us, *listen, this moment matters.* A stop may, like performance, surprise, astonish, puzzle, or startle us. A stop

Image 12.1 Sivertsen, C. (2000). *airing it* installation [Close-up photograph]. South West England.

is an unexpected stranger[4] that calls our attention to what is hidden—a vulnerability, an intimacy, a curiosity.

Performative inquiry recognizes performance—creative engagement and emergent creation—as an action site of inquiry and learning. Researchers, through the strategies and medium of arts practices investigate creative, critical—and in collaborative engagements—communal, embodied action and reflection. Performative inquiry introduces to educational research what artists know and practice, that the arts embody research in order to create, engage, express, and query. We are called to engage in a living inquiry (Meyer, 2008, 2010) as we perform and are performed in the presence and absence of others.

In the conceptualization and articulation of performative inquiry (Fels, 1998), I introduced the concept of a "moment of realization," created within an experience, event, or encounter. A moment of realization may be understood as a tug on the sleeve or a stop moment that calls us to attention. Upon further inquiry and reflection, a "moment of recognition" or what we might understand as a moment of learning or interstanding[5] may come into being.

As Appelbaum (1995) writes:

> No theoretical construct, the stop is an actual moment, the moment of poise. . . . The stop lives in the interstices of action. . . . it gives us a key to a deeper engagement in a meaning that unfolds our lives. For it

> offers a choice. Either to remain habit-bound or to regain freedom in one's approach to an endeavor. The stop is the advent of an intelligence of choice. (p. xi)

In a moment of recognition, we may perceive or come to imagine possible choices of action upon which we may or may not choose to engage, or, in hindsight, recognize we may have chosen. Possible actions, repercussions, or consequences that may await us cannot all be anticipated nor named: thus Appelbaum's allowance that a stop is simultaneously a moment of opportunity and risk.

To undertake meaningful, reflective, and compassionate action in response to a stop moment and subsequent moment of recognition is to be wide-awake to and responsible for our actions, relationships, and ways of engaging in the world. Philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1963) writes, "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep."[6] Educator Maxine Greene (1978) cautions educators that we must not sleepwalk through our lives but rather attend with wide-awakeness to our relationships, encounters, and actions with others if we are to educate students (and ourselves) to embody critical awareness, sensitivity, and potency of action. We are called to engage in a living inquiry (Meyer, 2008, 2010) as we perform and are performed in the presence/absence of others.

As I have written elsewhere, Hannah Arendt "asks of us critical and insightful acts of imagination that attend to the consequences of our actions in relationship with and in the presence of others. To take action is to be responsible to that which we may have not yet imagined" (Fels, 2010, n.p.). Philosopher Mordechai Gordon (2001) further calls us to understand that "action, the ability to interrupt and begin again, bestows meaning on human existence" (p. 43).

Thoughtful engagement requires that we look again at that which preoccupies us, considering the possible consequences of our choices of action, while understanding that we cannot anticipate nor suspend all consequences of our actions. Thus it is that a performance, event, encounter, or experience may startle, astonish, or surprise what we thought we had already understood, interrupting our habits of engagement, if only for a brief moment, requiring us, if we are willing, to come into presence.

Performative inquiry invites us to attend to the emergent, contextual, and relational in order to come to new interstandings of how we perform and are performed within the contexts of our environment, our relationships, our communities, and our choices of action.

What matters is whether we choose to stop and reflect on those moments that call us to attention, and if, when so doing, whether or not we choose to take meaningful responsible action. Reflection on the stop moments and subsequent moments of recognition that interrupt our lives may lead to new interstanding and new possible action.[7] The word action is used here deliberately, with an Arendtian understanding that action is undertaken with critical and thoughtful intention to invite the world's renewal (Arendt, 1958).

GESTURE AS A STOP

> *. . . where an outstretched hand is no longer a gesture but a moment of love, lasting until sleep, until waking, until everyday life.*
> (Thùy, 2012, p. 141)

Action as meaningful engagement and encounter requires mindful and embodied attention to our words and gestures. A word spoken, or left unsaid, calls a possible world into being. A gesture is a moment of performance that speaks what we leave unsaid, that reveals what is hidden. "What we do," Varela (1987) says, "is what we know, and ours is but one of many possible worlds. It is not a mirroring of the world, but the laying down of a world" (p. 62).

In this writing, I explore two stop moments. First, I attend to a stop moment I experienced in a role drama, in which a student spells into presence a clothesline, on which hangs evidence of a village's lived experience. The second stop I explore was the time that I fell gracelessly out of my lover's sailboat. In both instances, I ask, as a researcher, an educator, a lover, *what is lost, if I do not pause to listen? What calls me to attention in this moment of encounter?* In the inquiry that is the writing of these two moments, I speak to my learning, learning that arises, when we attend to the moments that arrest us.

Mario's Clothesline: Gesture as Gift

This first stop is the catalyst within which performative inquiry is born,[8] a moment when I am trapped within my own expectations, and annoyed by the play of a student, who mischievously thwarts my concerted efforts to create a Newfoundland outport where I have set our role drama. Witness to Mario's resistance and my increasing frustration are his fellow students who in role as fishermen, factory workers, and family members will learn during our role drama that their community's fish factory is to be closed.

I am attempting to build belief, a standard drama education strategy that Mario is gleefully (although not deliberately) sabotaging. We are sitting back to back on chairs in the middle of the room, wearing life jackets. Mario pretends to row as I attempt to bring our outport to life through our shared dialogue. How many people live here, I repeat, gesturing again at the blackboard, where my paper population sign states the obvious—a moment of silence and then:

> "I've got it!" Mario exclaims, leaping to his feet, forgetting he is supposed to be rowing a dory. "I know how we can figure out how many folks live in this town!" The boat rocks violently. *I suffer a moment's panic. I have no idea what he will say—*
>
> "How?" I mutter, teeth clenched. *He is going to tip this dory, we'll end up in the ocean. I'll look like a fool. How can I control him?* The rest of the class leans forward in anticipation.

> "Count the clotheslines!" Mario gestures grandly towards shore, and to my amazement, clotheslines materialize, clothes on a line dancing in the wind. I see a row of white diapers neatly pinned on a clothesline of a home where a newborn has arrived safe and sound. On another, the cloth sleeves and legs of men's workpants and flannel shirts flap madly in the wind, as if dancing a jig. And, oh! Over there on another clothesline, the absence of these, only women's garments, tells the tale of a fisherman drowned, a widow weeping. Each clothesline reveals the stories, secrets, joys, and sorrows hidden within each household. Mario shouts, "Count the clotheslines," and with a single gesture, he magically brings clothes on a line dancing in the wind into our presence, gifting us with our outport.[9]

This stop illustrates how the unexpected may arise within a perceived moment of resistance. Mario, unwilling to parrot my script or enact my expectations, ignores the population sign that I had taped on the blackboard. Instead, he chooses to skipper his own navigation across the bay, imagining beyond my imagination, creating beyond my script. Mario offers us, in face of the errant wind of my impatience and fear of failure, an opening into our role drama. This moment becomes a stop moment, one that reveals my fear, my struggle to control, my mistrust turning into interstanding.

Mario's offering is a curricular and pedagogical meeting between student and teacher. Our encounter calls me to attention, and, through reflection, reveals the danger of my own resistance when creating spaces of play for students to engage. Do I, in fear of losing control, my unwillingness to go off script, fail my students? What spaces and opportunities do I create for my students in which meaning making and learning is truly embodied, collaborative and co-creative? What barriers of resistance do I present with my signposts and scripted lines?

And, in this moment of writing now, I wonder, what invisible clotheslines are lost to our classrooms, when we as educators fail to welcome our students, our children, our youth, to perform their presence within our shared curricular journeys? We might imagine these moments, *in the wind clothes on a line dance*, not as moments pinned in linear regulation, but as offerings, gestures of presence and wide-awakeness—embodied narratives of socks, shirts, trousers, sheets—recognitions of grief, joy, longing, learning, forgiveness, love, as a playful breeze dances breath into emergent moments of light and sound and action.

WOMAN OVERBOARD: REVISITING A STOP

With respect to my second stop, there is a factual error that I must confess to immediately. In the interests of full disclosure and academic integrity, I make the correction. The boat belongs not to a lover, but rather my husband to

Image 12.2 Elliott, M.F. (undated). *before the fall: woman on trapeze* [Video still]. Lac Montauban, Quebec, Canada.

whom I have been married 30 years. I first crewed my husband's International 14—a 14-foot sailboat designed by Ian Bruce—when he and I began dating in the mid-seventies. (He sometimes complains that I married him for his sailboat, and he is not mistaken.) Our boat, $E = mc^2$, is the equivalent of a Corvette or Jaguar in the nautical world (although being older than our marriage, our sailboat lacks the design innovations of a younger boat).

Swinging out on the trapeze (which involves wearing a harness hooked onto a 15-foot wire attached to the mast, feet on the gunnels, arms outspread, body horizontal to the waves) is the closest I have ever come to flying. Intoxicated with wind and sea and sail, I am perennially reluctant when he announces it is time to return to shore. "Just one more tack!" I plead, and he obligingly replies, "Ready about?" "Ready about!" I shout with glee, as the boat's bow swings into the wind on a new tack away from shore.

The stop that I want to explore is not my falling gracelessly out of the boat, but rather the moment of rescue, a moment that haunts me still. Picture our situation:

> We are sailing on the lake where my parents have a cottage. The winds are fickle here, channeled between hills, but we navigate the contrary wind confidently. And then, unexpectedly, an absence of wind collapses the sails while I am out on the trapeze. I lose my footing, topple off-balance, and, with an undignified yelp, I tumble into the water—an unforgivable *faux pas* for a crew. The boat rocks violently (for every action there is a reaction) as 125 pounds (poetic license) falls overboard. Still tethered to the trapeze wire, I am dragged gracelessly through the water, my body in full resistance, as my husband struggles to prevent $E = mc^2$ from capsizing.

"Get in! Get in!" he yells. But I can't, my butt plows spectacularly through the water (so embarrassing, on shore my son is happily video recording my predicament—evidence that both son and husband refuse to destroy). And then, my husband reaches out, I clasp my hand in his, and I rise out of the water, stepping with grace into the boat. *Impossible! We should have tipped!*

"Ready about?" he yells. I scramble into position.

"Ready about!" Our sails billow with wind, and I swing out over the water, feet steady on the gunnel—arms outspread like a resurrected angel—to embrace the wind.

This moment truly is a child of duration.[10] *Why does this moment matter? It should be forgotten!* But here I am, years later, still attached by a wire line that I can't detach, unable in the dynamics and physics of the moment to rescue myself; this moment is suspended in time, *there is no resolution.*

This moment begs reflection.

Reflection is a critical element of performative inquiry, a spiraling again and again to moments of performance that give us pause. Or moments that initially slip by, but upon reflection now call us to attend to the possible lessons that they embody. Reflection of stop moments permits us to investigate our actions and ways of being in the world. Reflection encourages us to still the momentum that carries us relentlessly from one moment to the next. Reflection invites us to dwell in thoughtful contemplation of moments that arrest us. Much may be learned from a moment: our choices of action, how we choose to encounter each other, how we attend to the daily unfolding of our lives, matter.

Jana Milloy (2007) introduces the concept, "each moment a child of duration" in her beautiful thesis, *persuasions of the wild: writing the moment, a phenomenology*, and gently reminds us that each moment unfolds into the next, a fluidity of movement, time, and space. I have come to understand her phrase, *each moment a child of duration*, as a concept particularly critical and poignant for educators to attend to; we engage with our students through moments, one moment unfolding into the next, in our presence and in our absence. Each moment marks us, marks the students we encounter. Hence a single moment of encounter is embodied within us for a lifetime, with all its consequences, known, as-yet-unknown, anticipated, intended, unexpected, unforeseen. To attend in the present to each moment is to engage in the unfolding of each child's future, and our own.

In reflection, writing this chapter now, I see immediately the metaphor of my inquiry of this second stop—a marriage in trouble, someone falls overboard, in the chaos of the moment, the skipper is present, wide-awake, he offers his hand, the sailboat stabilizes, husband and wife enact the rebalancing of their relationship—

But no, this reading is too simple. I pause in the act of writing. I am simultaneously poised and unpoised in this moment of reflection . . .

> *Ah, now I understand!* I am called to attend to the moment of the gesture itself—an outstretched hand—a moment that arrests, startles, astonishes.
>
> *The moment of gesture is the stop . . .*

I wonder, in this moment now, how often does my husband reach out his hand in gesture, an unspoken offering of welcome, invitation, renewal, forgiveness that I fail to see? Floundering out of depth, dragged by my expectations, my yearning, my desires for what I do not yet recognize, weighted by my failure to be present, how often have I gracelessly fallen overboard? I think of this simple gesture repeated—his hand reaching out to me—in all those times when I am unable to rescue myself—to rescue us—from the turbulence of everyday living, its challenges, my resistance to us—

> *Oh! And here I pause.* How many times have I failed to recognize an outstretched hand offered to me by others—those I love, friends, colleagues, students, strangers? What offerings, I wonder, have been ignored, unseen, unrecognized as acts of love?

Yet this is not a hero's narrative, a maiden rescued. In reflection now, writing in the spaces of the unsaid, the unspeakable, the unsayable, as I step into the boat, I recognize love, acceptance, forgiveness offered in this moment, that is obvious, but, within this moment, too, the grace of reciprocal action that comes as I, who have fallen overboard, say *yes, yes, I will*,[11] as I clasp my husband's hand. The lesson embodied within this moment lies in the act of saying yes, of recognizing love, forgiveness, acceptance, and renewal within the gesture, and the responsibility, *a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity* that arrives through reciprocity. A moment of recognition—

NATALITY—COMING INTO PRESENCE

> *. . . where an outstretched hand is no longer a gesture but a moment of love, lasting until sleep, until waking, until everyday life.*
>
> (Thùy, 2012, p. 141)

For the wide awake, within each moment dwell curricular and pedagogical possibilities of renewal, resistance, recognition, compassion, invitation, and welcome. Within each stop moment resides the possibility of natality, a reciprocal encounter that invites new ways of engaging in the world and with each other *as if for the first time.* Such moments require of us willingness of integrity, honesty, vulnerability, thought. Patience, reflection, wisdom, and openness must be our guide. The concept of natality may be understood as the receptivity and ability of an individual to be open to engaging anew with each new encounter experienced, be it human or nonhuman. As Gordon (2001) reminds us:

> Natality stands for those moments in our lives when we take responsibility for ourselves in relation to others. In this way, natality initiates an

> active relation to the world. It signifies those moments in our lives (and there are many) in which we attempt to answer the question that Arendt argues is at the basis of all action and that is posed to every newcomer to the world: "Who are you?" (p. 21)

Natasha Levison (2001) writes that we arrive in the presence of others already marked by who we are within the context of the world within which we are born, by the burden of our stories, by the unfolding paths of our journey. Levison warns that natality is threatened by the fact that "our capacity to act emerges always in relation to the ways in which we are positioned by others" (p. 21). Those who arrive amongst us are already marked by the context and environment of their arrival, by the assumptions, prejudices, expectations, prior lived experiences that influence how we see and are seen.

Our arrival and possible renewal requires that natality be an embodied practice of reciprocal responsibility and mindful awareness and attention to who we choose to become in the presence of each other. Thus to encounter ourselves and others wide awake, we must attend to that which shapes how we see and hear and respond, the language through which we communicate, our habits of engagement. The utterance of a word or embodiment of a gesture immediately situates us, possibly betrays us. To arrive at a crossroads of a stop, suggests Appelbaum (1995), is an invitation to revisit what we have imagined as our destiny. He writes:

> There is a moment in which personal or cultural history stands before two diverging pathways. One leads to a repetition of the known, the tried and true, the old, the established. It is safe, secure and stable. The other finds a renewed importance in the unknown, the uncharted, the new, the dark and dangerous. Unfettered by accepted categories of thought, it might be immediately hidden away from view, out of fear or repugnance. The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice stands on.[12] (p. 16)

Our choice of words, our gestures, are not innocent, nor naïve; they are enacted within a time and place and in the presence of others, within backstories rich with lived experience, within specific cultural, social, economic, communal contexts. Our choice of action—enacted in everyday living and/or enacted within creative impulse, exploration, and expression of performance—reveal who we are, who we are yet to become. Our choice of action gives birth to emergent worlds within which we choose or are not chosen, with or without our knowing, to engage or to be excluded.

Levinson (2001) advises that educators' greatest responsibility is to attend to the gap between past and future, a gap, which is simultaneously a generative action site of possibility and renewal or of thoughtless and/or deliberate reproduction. She writes, "Here we come to the central role of the teacher

whose task it is to preserve natality, therefore insuring that the gap between past and future remains a space of freedom and possibility" (p. 20).[13]

A stop moment then, like a child's tug at our sleeve, calls us again and again to its location of encounter—*who am I? Who are you? How might we be in the presence of each other?*—action in the gap between past and future that exposes who we are, and anticipates our future (Meyer & Fels, 2014). Natality is a reciprocal act of receiving, welcoming not only the other but oneself, as if meeting oneself for the first time, within which we are offered an opportunity to engage in meaningful action, not through habit or expectation, but with a willingness to imagine ourselves anew, and in so doing rebirth new possible worlds.

While performative inquiry informs and guides my research and my journey through life, I am learning that performative inquiry is simultaneously a contemplative practice that invites me to welcome and reflect upon moments that call me to attention. My work calls me to a contemplative engagement with others, in care and compassion, and in recognition of *who* we choose to become in our relationships and in action with each other. In my practice, I am learning to be wide-awake to every moment and gesture in its moment of coming into presence. Reciprocity requires that I be present to receive what is already awaiting my arrival, and that which has yet to be imagined. I am called to a compassionate stance within which I must meet myself anew.

Upon reflection, these two moments are pivotal moments; they speak to me of vulnerability, resistance, my fear to love, to trust, to invite others into play, into love. Writing through each moment has revealed recognition of gifts offered within a *gesture of reciprocity.* Each stop moment speaks to the difficult learning that is to receive an outstretched hand with welcome, with openness. Each moment touches my heart, as I come to understand the invitation and love that is ours to offer, ours to receive, if we are willing to be present to the moment that startles us, that astonishes, that calls us to attention, and simply reach out our hand—a simple gesture that embodies possible new worlds, within the gap between past and future, present within a breath of recognition.

NOTES

1. The story of my role drama with Mario and the clotheslines was first explored in an article titled, "in the wind clothes dance on a line," in *JCT: Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* (see Fels, 1998).
2. This term, now commonly used in educational research, is in reference to experiences lived by individuals. See Max van Manen's (1990) writing, *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*, in which he introduces researching lived experience as a meaningful way for educators to come to understand learning and teaching.
3. Julie Salverson's work on testimony and witnessing, in reference to Butler's work, speaks about the possibility of "moving outside the sayable" (Salverson, 2008, pp. 251–252). Butler informs us that the unspeakable may remain unspeakable because of the context within which we are engaged where we do not even comprehend what is left unsaid or unsayable. As Butler explains, "The question is not what it is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the

domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all" (Butler, as quoted in Salverson, 2008, p. 252).

4. Here I draw on Derrida's concept of hospitality and the unexpected stranger who appears at our door. Derrida says, "Pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality itself, opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign visitor, as a new arrival, nonindentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly, other" (Derrida, as quoted in Borradori, 2003, pp. 128–129). What fascinates is when the unexpected stranger who arrives dwells unsuspected within us, a "child-within-our-midst" (Munir Vellani, in conversation) and we are called to reconsider our acts of hospitality in the presence of this child who suddenly appears before us—a stop embodied within a performative moment of realization and recognition.
5. Interstanding is a term coined by Taylor and Saarinen (1994) who explain:

   Understanding has become impossible
   because nothing stands under.
   Interstanding has become
   unavoidable because
   everything stands
   between
   (Interstanding 2)

6. Thoreau (1963), p. 66, as cited in Greene (1978), p. 42.
7. Action embraces knowing, doing, being, creating (Fels, 1995), not-knowing, and undoing (Frantzich, 2013). In her research on embodied creation of emergent theatre in relationship to deep psychology, Frantzich writes, "I have added undoing and not-knowing to Fels (1999) line up: 'Knowing doing being creating' (1999, p. 30). By undoing I mean listening that allows for an unfolding in which one is moved, opened, receptive, follows. In the same way one moves in and out of balance and imbalance, one moves through doing and undoing" (2013, p. 188). Frantzich's notion of not-knowing and undoing, inclusive within knowing, doing, being, creating, reflects the fluidity, uncertainty, reimagining, revisioning that is our lives, within the arts, as artists, and in our everyday living.
8. I have explored this stop moment in an earlier work, and within my thesis as a critical awakening to the theoretical underpinning of performative inquiry. See Fels (1998, 1999).
9. A version of this story appears in Fels (1998).
10. Milloy (2007), p. 157.
11. Molly Bloom's response in *Ulysses*. See Joyce (1960, p. 938.)
12. I first read Appelbaum's *The stop* for my doctoral work, and was called back to this particular quote when reading Kathryn Rickett's doctoral thesis (see Ricketts, 2011, p. 141).
13. See also Arendt (1961), who introduces the concept of the gap between the past and present, and our opportunity, our responsibility, to engage in meaningful action and relationship, with our students, in our lives. See also Meyer and Fels (2014). I am grateful for the insights that Dr. Karen Meyer brings to Arendt's concept of the gap between past and future, which has informed this writing.

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