

Performance, Place, and Possibility: Curricular Landscapes, Curricular Songs

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# » Performance, Place, and Possibility: Curricular Landscapes, Curricular Songs

Lynn Fels

*Singing the space  
there are meetings  
and I am transformed...  
—Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe**

## Singing the Space

*On the edge of the sea, i wait, wind-caressed, standing against the horizon. Footsteps, traces of my presence, momentary signatures on sand. A turbulent sky is a scrim of cloud and sun playing light through light. In the distance, white winged boats map the ocean landscape; angel vessels in ponderous movement, seeking knowledge through wind-cries. What crew hauls on sheets in fevered response to an absent captain's command? Do i sail pregnant-bellied, white against blue? The cool touch of brass, the wheel turning beneath flesh—is it i that sets the compass reading? Whose voices sculpt sand responses in the failing tide? How does this moment perform?*

My work investigates curricular places of possibility, absence, and disruption realized through performance. *Performance not as process nor as product, but as breath, intermingling, unexpected journey landscapes reeling against the sky in a sudden moment of recognition.* I am curious about the spaces that we breathe into being through imaginative play and exploration, curricular spaces that open to us with invitation.

...the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected. (Greene, 1995, p. 28)

Performative inquiry is my vessel of investigation. Performative inquiry is a research methodology which explores possible journey-landscapes, charting space-moments of learning that are realized through performance (Fels, 1998). Performative inquiry draws, in part, from enactivism (e.g., Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993; Davis, Kieren & Sumara, 1996) through which learning is a “laying down in walking” of “new possible worlds.” An ecological reading of the interplay between voice, imagination, and body, performative inquiry embraces intercourse, fortuitous interminglings of embodied presence and as yet to be imagined absence that breathe new possible curricular worlds into being.

*within pools of echoes and silence  
a lover awakes  
madness touches her skin  
drenched in phosphorous kisses  
she arises translucent in moonlight*

Performance studies theorist Peggy Phelan (1993) states that:

Like a rickety bridge swaying under too much weight, performance keeps one anchor on the side of the corporal (the body Real) and one on the side of the psychic Real. Performance boldly and precariously declares that Being is performed (and made temporarily visible) in that suspended in-between. (p. 167)

It is Phelan’s rickety bridge that I want to suspend between the tensionality<sup>1</sup> of the known and the not-yet-known world(s) of being; I want to lean from precarious heights, to create the bridge’s presence in the very swinging of our embodied imaginations. And in the moment between the height and fall of our swing, what curricular opportunities await?

Performance plays on “the edge of chaos” where patterns of interrelations and interconnections are continually created and recreated through an “endless dance of co-emergence” (Waldrop, 1992, p. 12). It is not the dance but the interplay that is our research and space of curricular inquiry. To entertain performative inquiry as a research vehicle and curricular place of learning is to recognize risk, the unexpected embodied

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<sup>1</sup> See Aoki (1991, p. 8) for his reading of *tensionality*.

in performative action and interaction that opens us to possibility and impossibility.<sup>2</sup>

A playful etymological reading<sup>3</sup> of the word *performance* brings us to *form* as structure and *ance* as action, as in (d)ance. Performance, then, is both form and action. It is the duplicity and complicity of the prefix *per* in the word *performance* that gives us pause. A momentary stop. *Per* prescribes the adjacent *form* and brings with it the meaning of “utterly, throughout and through,” but also, “to do away, away entirely or to (the) destruction of.” So we may read performance as meaning that *simultaneously through form and through the destruction of form we come to action*. Understanding that action is “knowing, doing, being, creating” (Fels, 1995), we recognize the learning that happens through performance.

*performance is the heartbreath that dances  
possibility and interstanding into presence*<sup>4</sup>

Performance is realized on the fine edge of chaos, a space where possibilities seduce and life dances into being. Performative inquiry is an ecological interstanding that invites the coevolving world(s) of performance, interpretation, complexity, and cognition into a transformative dance of possibility.

### In the Wind Clothes Dance on a Line

*Hand over hand hauling in the netted light,  
the holes in the representational,  
the holes in the visible* (Phelan, 1993, p. 177).

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<sup>2</sup> In conversation with Dr. Ted Aoki, in which he inquires about the “impossible,” that which is not yet possible to imagine into being, that which remains beyond our grasp like the force that moves the tides, unseen yet present in all our innocence and ignorance of movement.

<sup>3</sup> See Barnhart (1988, pp. 398, 775).

<sup>4</sup> Taylor and Saarinen (1994, *Interstanding 2*). The authors propose that “understanding has become impossible because nothing stands under. Interstanding has become unavoidable because everything stands between.” I chose the word “interstanding” because it is through the interplay between the “known world(s)” and the “not-yet known world(s)” that performance breathes learning into presence.

Mario is hamming it up in the dory. I recruited him as my crew for early morning cod-jigging in the bay, a decision I am now regretting. Indifferent to my dramatic struggle to create a coastal outport in lecture room 210, he halfheartedly pulls at imaginary oars. Unknown to me, he sneaks copious gulps of screech from a flask and slyly winks at the audience—a circle of his peers who, like Mario, are reluctant to migrate from the solidity of the classroom to the elusive space of dramatic imagining. Outside, the January evening spills winter rain against the windows.

“Look, Mario.” I sweep a generous hand across the horizon of blackboards. “The village looks like the broken grin of an old man’s smile. Boarded up windows. Fallen fences. How many people live here now?”

Mario shrugs. Coughs. Tugs haphazardly at an oar.

“Remember that signpost outside of town, just where the road bends?” I am sweating under the layers of fisherman’s sweater, life jacket, and overalls, trying to kickstart our role drama on the fishing industry in Newfoundland. The outport refuses to take shape. *Why isn’t this working?*

“Never seen it,” says Mario with another swallow of screech.

*You’re wrecking the logic of the drama. Of course you’ve seen it! You’ve lived here all your life! Can’t you just pretend?*

“You know the sign.” I jab him in the ribs and point emphatically at a sign that I had taped before class on the blackboard: Come by Chance—Pop. 157.<sup>5</sup> I am silently cursing him under my breath, *Come on, Mario, work with me on this.* But he refuses to play along with my paper props. He refuses to follow the expected script.

“Nope. Never laid eyes on it. But,” he says suddenly rocking the boat with unexpected enthusiasm. “I know how we can figure out the population.”

“How?” I am suspicious. *Is he going to swamp the boat?* The class eagerly leans forward on their seats—sea vultures waiting for us to capsize.

“Count the clotheslines!” He stands triumphantly in the dory, pointing to the blackboard. “One, two, three...”

And to my amazement, clotheslines magically appear—diapers, workmen’s overalls, cotton dresses, woolen socks, sheets dancing in the wind. The entire population of the outport leaps into being.

Within that single moment, Mario captures the very heart soul body of the outport and gifts us life. Realized in the choreography geography of cloth limbs

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<sup>5</sup> I am aware that the real Come by Chance, in Newfoundland, has a significantly larger population, and is not the isolated outport we imagined in our role drama. I am, however, captivated by the town’s name, reflective of our attempts to create imaginary landscapes through performative exploration.

dancing on lines in the wind, the outport unknown becomes known. Within a moment, the not-yet-real<sup>6</sup> is realized and possibilities open to exploration.<sup>7</sup>

Here we are. In this moment. What if? What happens? What matters? Who cares? What is possible? How will we respond? Through performative explorations we realize a curriculum of possibility.

We engage in our momentary world of clotheslines and, in role, explore what happens when the local fish processing plant is closed. How are families affected by the closure? What action will the outport take in response? When we discover that the plant manager has absconded with all the plant's profits, will our anger be contained within the town hall meeting, or will it spill out into the imaginary streets? Will we, as a mob, advance with shouts and raised fists to the manager's home? What letters to the editor will be written in the local newspaper? How will the editorial read? What personal complicity may be read in the accountant's subdued announcement that the manager's body was found hanging from a basement beam in his home?

And what eloquence of silence/resistance/welcome will speak when the fisherman's sweater belonging to a grandfather drowned at sea—

*Sometimes I imagine that he will return, standing at the wheel of his fishing boat. And dancing in the waves, aft and at the bow of his boat, will be the cod, thousands and thousands of codfish. He'll be shouting, Give me back my sweater, boy! It's damn cold out here! And he'll be bringing the cod, and all our wealth, home to Newfoundland.<sup>8</sup>*

is handed to an entrepreneur from “away” who promises a resort and jobs for everyone, exchanged for a lost fisherman’s dreams?

Our role drama, embodied through clothes on a line dancing in the wind, plays curricular possibilities into presence, within which questions are asked, and possible answers set windchimes to singing. Through debriefing, we listen to the learning that happens through performance: within the role drama, in connection to life experiences, to seeing the world darkly through other lenses, other perspectives.

Unexpectedly clotheslines of our Newfoundland outport give birth to memories of clotheslines from our childhood

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<sup>6</sup> “Not-yet-known” describes the unknown that may become known through performance.

<sup>7</sup> A version of this dramatic incident is published in Fels (1998), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from monologue in Newfoundland role drama.

cotton limbs  
frozen on a february line

clotheslines strung between apartment buildings  
backdropped by jets in a Hong Kong sky

a birdcage swinging empty on a line.

Each clothesline is a story, a poem, a family album, a lost trace; within these stories are invitations to curricular exploration, remembrance, and shared recognition. Performative inquiry explores and maps unfolding journey-landscapes that twist in sudden gusts of recognition like clothes on a line. And through our bodymind mapping, curricular possibility enters our language of embodied action and interaction.

### **Dislocation**

*Close your eyes. Breathe deep. Listen to my voice. You are going on a journey.*

*Imagine this.* We live in a time of war, of terror, of mistrust. You are hiding in a dark room; you are waiting for someone to come. Your neighbors have already escaped this place of madness. You have been abandoned by all you know, by your colleagues, by your friends, your family. Before the war, what was your work? Were you a journalist? A banker? A politician? A shopkeeper? Before the war, did you live a life of wealth? Or one of poverty? The city has been under siege for several weeks. Look around your room. What room are you in? A bedroom? The kitchen? A one-room flat? What kind of furnishings are in your room? The windows are shattered from the force of the bombs that have fallen in the streets several blocks away. The noise of a gun battle interrupts your restless sleep. Your safety could be betrayed by candlelight, by the smell of soup simmering on the stove. There is no turning back. You are alone. Listen. Do you hear that noise? Don't move. Don't let them hear you. Your heart is pounding, your breath loud in the empty room. Shhhhhh. There? Again. Oh god! Footsteps. And voices. Outside. There

now. They're banging on doors. Shouting. Coming closer. How many? You must leave. You have time. You must leave the country. Cross the border tonight. But wait. There is something you must take with you. Something that you cannot leave behind. What is it? A letter? A picture? A diary? Incriminating evidence? A family heirloom? A child's forgotten toy? An address book? You can bring only one thing with you. What will you choose? Quickly now. Wrap it up safely. Do you have anything to put it in? To keep it safe? A box? A rag? An envelope? Careful. You must leave. Now. Quickly, they are close to you! How do you escape?

You are in the streets now, running. How do you find your way to the border crossing? Do you walk? Have you found passage in a truck? Now, you are at the border. You can hear the officers talking, checking visas, looking at passports. They are carrying flashlights. Can you see them? Will they see you? Are you hidden? Do they take your papers, and write down your name? Don't be afraid. They won't discover your secret. They won't arrest you. It is late. They are tired. There now, another moment. Be patient. Yes. You have crossed the border, into a new place, a place that welcomes you, that holds you safe. Soon you will have a job, you will build again your lost life. Wait a moment. Do you still have what you took from your room? Is it safe? You will keep this with you all your life. This is a remembrance of your journey, your border crossing. What is it? What have you brought with you into this new land of hope and exile?

*When you are ready, take a breath. One, two. You may open your eyes. Welcome.*

And in opening my eyes, I see reflected, in startling tears traced on cheeks, an awakening of other journeys, places, moments of songs yet to be heard within the curricular space of our being/becoming. In our sharing of multiple border crossings that we experienced during the visualization, we speak of past lives imagined, the dark rooms in which we hid, and the objects we chose to bring with us into the new land. A woman speaks of smuggling a baby across the border. Another brought a precious Ukrainian egg. Another brought a diary, and yet another describes a photograph. And, breathlessly, one tells of a stone that she had gathered from the beach, a remembered site of joy and pleasure, carried over the ocean to Canada, which now rests on her desk, a reminder of a lost landscape, a witness to her current life and success in her chosen land. Some participants wove their visualization experience

around their personal lives, integrating fragments of memory, family, experience. During debriefing, they share with us stories of emigration, loss, and new beginnings.

*The learning is one of surprise—freefalling through moments of crisis and recognition of possibility.*

We discover that many of the named objects are of cultural, linguistic and/or family memory or significance. As imagined exiles, participants imported foundation stones on which to build a new relationship of interaction with the landscape. And so we stumble upon the transplanting of cultural presence; an unplanned curriculum of multiculturalism. Our collection of objects and the stories that accompany our border crossings open a curriculum of intercultural conversations. How do we choose to map our presence in landscapes that are simultaneously places of home and exile?

What stories within stories are revealed within the embodied performance of our visualization? This is unexpected curriculum, curriculum that coevolves through performative inquiry; participants opening curricular landscapes in shared tellings and retellings.

### Honoring Landscapes

*we cannot know what country will  
emerge in the moment of our meeting  
as yet unmapped  
bearing witness to the interstices of our journey  
between dawn's early light and  
the beating of an eagle's wing against a darkening sky  
we shall find ourselves new explorers  
in the terrible first moments of our awakening*

Here then, on the edge of the sea, at the foot of the mountains, I dismantle cardboard boxes, and voices cry out, “Stop! Don’t destroy our forests! Who are you to reap profits from our mountains?” And I am stopped.

In curricular exploration, if we are truly listening, body aware, the learner so often is the teacher, arrested by a voice crying out, “Listen! Hear me!” *Voice of a child. Voice of a moment. Voice of a forgotten presence. Voice of absence.* To empower our children through embodied

imagining is to learn yet again the mystery and terrible wonder that is performance.

It is within the stop that the possibility of absence springs to presence. And so we come to a place of curricular recognition and possibility. What not-yet-known stories will we perform?

A role drama is presented.<sup>9</sup>  
There are modest ambitions.  
*How does community come into being?*  
Can we create a place of shared relationship  
within a space with our  
voices, bodies, imaginations, experiences,  
a jumble of cardboard boxes  
a white sheet  
a blue sheet for the sea?

In a circle we tell stories of emigration  
yet again dislocation  
each of us choosing a direction from which we travelled  
an imagined history of past experience and connection.  
We play our arrival to this space,  
tell tales of our voyage,  
some crossing the ocean,  
others fording the prairies,  
some have come willingly,  
others are in exile.  
Together we gather to create community.

Now, I tell them, imagine a space on the edge of the sea  
                                  in the shelter of the mountains—  
                                  it is here on this fine line between that our community  
                                  is to be located.

I assemble the boxes, and with the group,  
create mountains.  
A participant drapes the white sheet over  
snow peaks  
while another spells the ocean on a concrete floor  
through the laying down  
of a blue sheet.

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<sup>9</sup> *Finding Ourselves on the Map*. Role drama performed at “Imagining a Pacific Community: Representation and Education Conference,” Vancouver, BC, April 23–26, 1995. A longer version of this role drama is published in Fels (1998, pp. 31–33).

I bend and give the sheet a tug. *It's too close to the boxes*, I think.  
Hey, put that back! A woman shouts. The mountain comes down to the edge of  
the sea!  
Tectonic response. Quickly I replace the ocean.  
*How is it that she inhales the presence of the sea, and runs bare-footed along  
the waves*  
*while I see only sheets and boxes and  
hear the low hum of the  
air conditioner?*  
Already the land and sea are in relationship  
swelling one against the other  
in melodic response  
to our presence.

Let us build our houses, I command, seizing a box.  
Each box can be a house.  
Stop! Don't destroy our forests! Who are you to reap profits from our  
mountains?

*How is it I suddenly discover myself an unfriendly giant disrupting the contours  
of the land? My intentions are good.*

My hands burn with the broken piece of a mountain  
that I in my uncaring  
have ripped from the landscape  
to sculpt new ownership—

Clearcutting. Parking lots. Tracts of suburban housing.

Resonance of another time, another people, another community  
retold within a space-moment of recognition  
weave through the telling of this performance.  
ancient injuries  
swirl around my naked feet cold to the touch  
drawing me backwards with the tide  
relentless pull of the moon

In my haste to create community I betray community  
only now recognizing in the moment of the stop  
that community is  
relationship to the mountains  
the ocean  
the edge between.

Quickly I repair the territory

which does not heal but remembers  
mourned in the laments of seagulls sailing against  
an empty sky and in the silent scars  
that map our presence.

I am stopped.  
And within a space moment of learning,  
hope sings  
on the edge of the sea in the shelter of the mountains.

*re-imagining curriculum*

Curricular moments of possibility are realized within the elusive space of Phelan's "racketey bridge" of performance.

Through space moments of learning—  
counting clotheslines,  
dismantling mountains,  
carrying a treasured object across borders

—new landscapes are revealed, relationships illuminated, journeys anticipated. These are curricular opportunities embodied through performance which simultaneously become possible spaces of understanding and curricular exploration.

### **Not a Narrowing Down But an Opening Up**

Mario's counting of the clotheslines invites our outport into being, and we, in turn, breathe our presence through improvisation, tableau, writing-in-role. Our outport is fragmentary, elusive; closing the door at the end of class leaves behind an empty space that sings of traces. For a suspended moment, our outport demands our attention, our actions produce a particular anguish and joy of participation, and in our leaving, within our absence clothes dance on a line. The curricular song that becomes the telling of our experience is a celebration of our journey-landscape. Multiple lines, shadowed absences; linen echoes, dancing briefs resonate, enrich our telling, and bring forth new possible curricular worlds to explore.

*hope  
splash ascends*

*wavebillows of light  
whisperblue*

*At the edge of the sea, in the shelter of the mountains,* issues of environmentalism, native rights, ownership, birth, and community are spelled out in the embodied interactions that are our momentary presence. And when the cardboard boxes are dismantled and the sheets folded, the embodied memory of our shared landscape writes its presence in our conversations about clear-cutting, in our revisiting of treaty negotiations, in our attempts to build community within our own dwelling places. The tide spells our learning in the sand, retracing our curricular encounters. Within performance we are performed.

you lay down a path in walking.  
in walking you lay down a path...

and in turning around...  
wanderer, path there is none,  
only tracks on ocean foam.<sup>10</sup>

In the visualization that is an exploration of exile and homecoming, the border-crossing is a metaphor that we hang on a line. Opening our eyes, welcoming again the present space, we speak of border crossings: those of immigration, of changing careers, of abandoned marriages, stepping across a line that is at once a barrier and an opening.

*when flight is  
danced into presence  
on a line between*

Three landscapes—each welcomes an unexpected entry into curricular spaces of exploration. Curricular possibilities open and we are engaged.

Three landscapes unfold within the performance that is us. We can locate our explorations, identifying the props and supplies of our immediate presence: our experience, our identity, our cultural and intercultural locations and imaginative interplay. Our presence matters.

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<sup>10</sup> Poem by Antonio Machado, from *Proverbios y Cantares* (1930) as translated by F. Varela (1987, p. 63).

Our absence sounds loudly. We shape our worlds of exploration through the intertext of our embodied imagining, performing possibility. Curriculum as realized through performance is a tidal exploration, subject to the nuances of light, position of moon, and presence of a second pair of dry socks. Space-moments of learning are elusive in the hopeful intermingling<sup>11</sup> of place, inquiry, and participants, and yet, in that joyful cry of “Aha!”<sup>12</sup> we are recognized.

What learning is possible on the edge of the sea in the shelter of mountains? How is it that through the counting of clotheslines an outport leaps into presence? Mario’s clotheslines become the line dance of our own laundered childhood memories. And in the crossings that are the intermingling of exile and homecoming, objects carried across the line bring intercultural presence to our landscape.

Our performative intertext(s) invite a reimagining of curriculum. These new understandings lead to changes in our practices of teaching, research, curriculum development and learning as defined and sought. Our curricular dance on the “edge of chaos” through performative inquiry resonates. How can I now, having watched the clothes dance on a line, return to the structured texts that are the voice and expectations of my community? How can I write in the language of the oppressor when the song of my heart catches the flight of winged gulls? What happens when we trust the freefall that is performance, and, in reaching out, are arrested in mid-flight? How do we write our learning that is in the border crossings of our shared journey-landscapes? How is it that light spills between our fingers, and mountains are born?

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<sup>11</sup> The term “intermingling” is found in an unpublished essay, “Phosphorescent Creatures, Earthly Features, Luminous Things,” April 2000, by Susan Hass, a doctoral student writing in the field of planning.

<sup>12</sup> Aha! moments are moments of transcognition—space-moments of learning that come into being in the interstices between the real world(s) and the not-yet-real world(s) of performance. The aha! moment realizes unexpected connections for us, illuminating the not yet known in the brilliant light of the dance. An aha! moment is not an end point in learning (or research), but a landmark or signpost in a coevolving journey-landscape that welcomes further exploration and contemplation. Aha! moments come from a place of trust, where a momentary imbalance sends us scrambling to secure our footing on unfamiliar ground. An aha! moment happens when participants knowingly or innocently throw themselves into freefall, and are momentarily arrested in flight.

*On the edge of the sea, i wait, wind-caressed, standing against the horizon. I catch the jib sheet and pull, weight of the wind in my hands. A curricular space of possibility. Beneath my feet, the sea spells our story, intermingling flesh and wind, vessel and water. And a song is born on a breath of wind...*

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