

Performative Inquiry: Releasing Regret

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*wanderer, the road is your
footsteps, nothing else;...
in walking you lay down a path...ⁱ*

I arrive at the hotel in downtown Vancouver, breathless for my interview. I am 22 years old, the ink on my teaching certificate is barely dry. Ushered into a bedroom filled with strangers, I stop at the threshold...Oh oh! is my first thought. The interviewers are in an adjoining room, five of them lined up in a row like judges at an ice skating competition. Two are in national dress. We have all come to be interviewed for a teaching position in Nigeria. Two by two we enter the room, and sitting side by side, we answer questions. The man beside me escaped from Uganda, he is twenty years older than me; he has been teaching all his adult life. His face is worn, his voice weary. I feel impossibly naïve. “Who is your favorite English writer?” an interviewer asks. I have no idea about British authors. I studied theatre at Queen’s University in Canada. I take a wild guess. “T.S. Eliot?” (How odd, I’ve just noticed my husband’s last name bears that of the famous poet). “And your favorite poem?” “Ummmmmm.” My voice betrays my lack of knowledge. “The Wasteland?” The interviewer on my far right mutters repeatedly, “She’s so young.” I am impossibly inadequate. My interview ends *not with a bang but*—ⁱⁱ

Here now in this moment
writing an entry on performative inquiry....
why do I struggle to share
what is the heart of my research?
What lingers to be forgiven?

*wait, the moment whispers,
you know me.
this space moment resonates.
go to your being, becoming.ⁱⁱⁱ*

We are at the first rehearsal of a play written as part of a doctoral thesis.^{iv} The playwright, Graham Lea, revisits his mother’s letters and audiotapes, sent home after she left her parents’ farm in Prince Edward Island to teach in Kenya. Graham, who also travelled to Kenya, created a script drawn from his experiences, journal writing, and his mother’s artifacts. I read the lines aloud from Graham’s script, in role as a young woman who had been teaching for two years in Kenya. She is now wrestling with the thought of whether or not to extend her contract. “Should I go? Or should I stay?” I hear myself say as I read her lines. I picture his mother as Graham has located her, bare-foot, looking out over the Kenyan landscape, unspoken tension

between daughter and her mother, worlds away in Canada, hangs in the air. A kitten plays at my feet.

Performative inquiry^v is an invitation to attend to what calls us to attention, like the child's tug on the sleeve. *What if? What matters, So what? Who cares?* The catalyst for inquiry may be "a question, an event, a theme, an issue, a feeling, a line of poetry, a fragment of lived experience, a narrative quest, a human condition: any phenomenon which we wish to explore through performance." (Fels, 1998) Performative inquiry invites us to attend to the senses, presences, absences, lack, desire, embodied within us, within and through performative actions of encounter, awakening new interstanding and recognition that may be realized through performance and upon reflection.

George, who is directing, interrupts us. "Let's imagine a trunk," he says. "There, in the middle of the room on that chair. Now, one by one, place something in the trunk, as if you are packing to leave." Individually, each woman approaches the trunk, hands held out as if holding a sweater, a blouse, a skirt, something to be worn in a foreign land. We enact a ritual of departure. I lay down my imaginary item of clothing into the trunk, and, in that moment, I fall out of role, come into my own presence as I envision hundreds of women, young, full of imagination, anticipation, enthusiasm, similarly packing their suitcases, in that time when CUSO called young men and women to teach overseas. *I am packing my trunk to leave—*

The heart and pulse of performative inquiry are stop moments that interrupt, disrupt, trouble, astonish, tug at our sleeve. A stop moment is a potential call to action, an in-between space of engagement like the pause between exhalation and inhalation. "Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesure, a discontinuity...It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways..."^{vi} A stop moment invites us to interrupt our habits of engagement, to recognize absence within presence, to renew an opportunity of choice. As Appelbaum explains,

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...The other finds a renewed importance in the unknown, the uncharted, the new, the dark and dangerous....The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice stands on. (p.16)

A stop moment is a moment of listening, calling to us to attend to what is hidden—intimacy, vulnerability, fear, regret. A stop moment is a stumble in what may be recognized as performance of our lives unfolding in our presence, and in that moment of noticing, we are called to wide-awakeness (Greene, 1978). Noticing and attending to stop moments, through reflection, dialogue, writing, creating anew, invites new possible actions of choice. A stop moment offers awareness of possibility; through reflection, we come to consider new possible choices of action

in interaction with our environment, context, relationships, ourselves, recreating the worlds we create.

She is so young she is so young, echoes in my head as I wait for their decision following the interview in Vancouver. I make plans to marry. Two months before the wedding day, a letter arrives, offering me a teaching position in Nigeria, outside the city of Lagos. *What should I do? Go or stay?* Holding affirmation in my hands, I no longer trust the girl who stepped across the threshold of that hotel bedroom so many months ago. She is now someone waiting for a train that will carry her across the country to Quebec to be married. She is afraid to accept—

Engaging in performative inquiry through the arts—whether drama, theatre, dance, music, visual or media arts, or simply, the performance of living— may bring us into new learning not through method or methodology, but through mindful presence to what matters—singular moments that call us to attention. Performative inquiry invites us into performative action spaces to explore what is known, not known, not yet known. If we understand action as knowing doing being creating (Fels, 1995), then performance offers us an action site through which we may learn who we are, what matters to us, how we might choose to live.

Notably, scholar and performance artist, Kirsten Frantzich (2013) proposes that action embraces, not only knowing doing being creating, but also not-knowing undoing. Performative inquiry thus offers us the opportunity to dwell in the not-known, calling for a willingness to accept ambiguity, uncertainty, the possibility of never knowing what we yearn to know, and likewise, the opportunity and possibility to undo what is done in order to reimagine new possibilities and understanding. Performative inquiry thus creates an action space within which we may encounter ourselves as if for the first time. How we receive ourselves anew in our presence is a matter of natality (Arendt, 1958). How willing am I to receive into my presence who I may yet become?

“I should have gone to Nigeria!”

“I wish you had!”

Our first marital argument rings with these words, regret, anger, fear embodied in a simple phrase. I am furious. How to forgive myself for chickening out, for turning my back on an opportunity to step beyond the perceived known into an unknown world an ocean away? *What would have happened? Who might I have become? What stranger would have come home?* I listen to the stories of those who have worked overseas, and envy their adventures. In time, regret slips into forgetting, lingering somewhere in the recesses of a full life, marriage, children, friends, work.

Should I go or should I stay? In the act of packing an imaginary trunk in rehearsal, I experience, within that singular action, the actions of thousands of young women have gone before me, and thousands who will follow me, en route to new beginnings, and in that moment, I too am packing my trunk. Reading the lines of

Graham's script, I look out a plane window to see the land I never travelled to revealed in a break in the clouds, I stand at the threshold of my door, watching a Kenyan sunset, waiting for a visitor's footsteps on my path. Welcome. *Should I go or should I stay?* I listen as my words, my actions replay time, resonating with those of a young woman who chose to remain in Canada. Graham's mother, who had chosen to go to Kenya, chooses to extend her journey. Standing with script in hand, I realize that here, now, I am standing where I had feared to go. *Yes, I will. Yes.*

Days after the performance, when all the rehearsals are completed, and the script is tucked away into my memory box, I encounter Graham the playwright. My step is light, I call out, "I can't explain what happened, but I no longer feel regret about not going to Nigeria." How is this possible, relinquishment of a regret, a not-known lack that has haunted me through the years? Did embodying the role of a young woman who chose to do what she wanted, allow me to replay my own decision, so that I too could journey across the ocean, embodied in the performance of our play? Or simply that in embodied action I came to recognize the choices possible, and in choosing anew, my body released what had burdened me through time? Did I pack regret into the trunk? Or was acceptance embodied within the gesture? Was the simple act of undoing what I had done, and packing my trunk, getting on a plane, flying to a land across the ocean, allow me to accept the not-known that is our action, a performative action space of recognition and reconciliation?

*and when turning around...
wanderer, path there is none,
only tracks on ocean foam.^{vii}*

This moment calls us to attention. Might performative inquiry, through playing a role in someone else's script, and upon reflection, untrouble what lingers unresolved in one's own life, inviting us through exploratory creative play, to reimagine new possibilities, come to new places of interstanding^{viii}, forgiveness, acceptance? This stop moment, that called me to attention, I stumbled upon while playing the role of a young woman who went to teach in Kenya, mirroring an opportunity that I had turned away from when I was 22 years-old.

Would I have come to such recognition if the play had been deliberately designed to enact my own life? Or was the unexpected gift of seeing myself anew, in role of a young teacher who had reached beyond the expected, an opening for new recognitions created through imagined embodied opportunity? In rehearsal, I was given the opportunity to replay my choice of action through the character I was playing.^{ix} And in doing so, release the burden of regret, the not-known, undoing my former decision, packing new possibilities into an imaginary trunk.

How we engage in our research is an invitation to reimagine ourselves anew, to meet ourselves again, as we once were, in memory, in action, in yearning and desire, and, in doing so with love, to welcome who we have become, who we are in this

moment now....to forgive that young woman who was afraid....and welcome her home.

RESOURCES

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Selection of lines from poem by Antonio Machado, from *Proverbios y Cantqres* (1930) as translated by F. Varela, 1987: 63.
- ⁱⁱ Eliot. T. S. (1922). *The Hollow Men*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Fels 1999.
- ^{iv} See Lea, 2013
- ^v Performative Inquiry dwells in the interstices of performance studies, complexity theory and enactivism, recognizing that performance as creative and reflective exploration within lived experience is an action site of learning and research. See Fels 1998, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012.
- ^{vi} Appelbaum, 1995; 15-16.
- ^{vii} Sections of lines from poem by Antonio Machado, from *Proverbios y Cantqres* (1930) as translated by F. Varela, 1987: 63.
- ^{viii} Interstanding was coined by Taylor and Saarinen (1994) who propose that interstanding is the meaning making that arises in the shared encountering of ideas, concepts, experiences, that inform us, from which we learn.
- ^{ix} Counsellor and researcher Marvin Westwood ((2005) who introduced Therapeutic Enactment as a therapeutic practice is currently conducting research to ascertain such a possibility, along with Drs. George Belliveau and Graham Lea, both authors in this book. See also Balfour, Westwood and Buchanan, 2014. Drama therapy likewise seeks to help others to wellbeing, through performative activities. See Emunah, 2015.