

Performing Impossibility

Lynn Fels, Warren Linds, and Kadi Purru
University of British Columbia

*Your dissertation speaks to performing the possible,
what about performing the impossible?*
—Ted Aoki, 1999

welcoming

As theatre/drama educators and emerging scholars we struggled to find ways to present our practices and lived experience of research. During the writing of our dissertations (Fels, 1999, Linds, 2001, Purru, 2003) we continuously confronted these questions:

- How do we identify, analyze, and document the complexities of theatre/drama education experiences performed in elusive spaces in-between presence and absence?
- What language might we use to perform our understanding on the page so that other researchers, educators and scholars might be informed?
- How might performance as methodology, inquiry and writing welcome new ways of knowing into the academy?

This exploration of rewriting the challenges of our dissertations struggles through a renewed journey. Our shared performative writing illuminates and frustrates as our emails flit between locations—Vancouver, Burnaby, Regina and Montreal. Three-way telephone conversations unravel stories, focus desires, expose raw nerves. We dare each other to a mentorship of working together that extends beyond our initial apprehensive steps as graduate students to this full textual embrace of remembering our dissertation texts in concert, in dis/harmony, with hope and per/mission.

prologue: Rhapsicle rebels

*Nor may they [rhapsodes] imitate the neighing of horses, the
bellowing of bulls, the murmur of rivers and roll of the ocean,
thunder, and all that sort of thing?*

—Plato, *Republic*, Book III

ACADEMIURGE (*Academic Demiurge*).

A Platonic character, the deity and public magistrate who fashions the academic world.

RHAPSCIPLE (*Rhapsodic Disciple*)

A rhapsodic character, a graduate student simultaneously passionate and in despair as she seeks recognition in the academic world.

RHAPSCIPLE: I am... alone on the stage. Under spotlights. I cannot see my audience, but I feel their expectations.

ACADEMIURGE: Begin! What are you waiting for?

RHAPSCIPLE: I can't...I don't know what to say.

ACADEMIURGE: Please, stop fooling around, how can you not know what to say? We have taught you the Script and you have rehearsed it conspicuously.

RHAPSCIPLE: I don't have the Script—I threw it away!

ACADEMIURGE: What??!!!

RHAPSCIPLE: (*mumbles*) I didn't like it, nothing worked, it sounded obsolete...I confess!
(*throws herself onto the knees*) I have lost faith in the Script!

ACADEMIURGE: (*in angry disbelief*) Are you crazy? You risk your work of so many years, you abandon all our accepted principles and canons? Are you aware of what you have done? Don't you want the applause of your honourable audience? Your actions will have consequences...

RHAPSCIPLE: I cannot continue reciting the lines of the Script anymore. Life has changed, I have changed...

ACADEMIURGE: Are you saying that you are abandoning the Script?!

RHAPSCIPLE: (*with uncertainty*) I...i...i...want to perform...to be true... to...my own performance...

ACADEMIURGE: (*skeptically*) Good luck! Ha-ha-ha-haaaaaaaaaaa!

Although performative writing is gradually becoming recognized in the academy (Pollock, 1998, Pelias, 2005), particularly in arts-based educational research and performance studies, it remains a contested area. There are pained expressions, and throats anxiously cleared, when new scholars write their dissertations against the grain of conventional academic writing. Resistance plays out between thesis supervisor, committee members, institution, and graduate student. Ultimately, with permission, the practitioner/researcher/graduate student decides how to perform his or her dissertation through a process of inquiry and writing. Through encountering resistance, release, doubt, anticipated failure, and recognition of the impossible, new possibilities of engagement and learning open.

LYNN

I wanted to write a dissertation that embodies integrity, presence, and resonance. I didn't want to explain what happened...I wanted to textually perform moments of learning that emerged from my performative work with my students.

WARREN

I wanted my written work to transform, reflect on, be consistent with, and deepen my understanding of, the dramatic process I engaged in with others.

KADI

I dwell at the border between nations, ‘races,’ cultures, languages, disciplines, epistemologies, discourses, and wor(l)ds. As an im/migrant inquirer, I searched for a language conveying the tensions between settling in and being on the move, between home and away, between belonging and not belonging. My dissertation engages ‘border writing,’ an attempt to decolonize dominant academic b/orders.

KADI WARREN LYNN

Our narrative is an invitation for scholars to shrug off the standard practice of the five chaptered thesis and to invite the reimagining of dissertations as narrative, autobiographical, performative texts of possibility and inquiry.

What learning emerges when form is challenged?

What happens to content?

Think of a caged bird suddenly released...

all that space, so many possibilities...

do we dare to take flight?

reading: a back straight against the wall

(One day Lynn gives Warren her dissertation proposal to read . . .)

I am used to skimming texts—sitting at the breakfast table, on the bus, at the beach, or wherever. But here is a text that asks me to pay attention to it. I am sitting on the carpet of my father’s townhouse, trying to read her proposal. Eventually, I realize that I need to have my back straight against a wall and engage my full body with this text. Here is another way of writing that requires another way of reading, a text that asks me to become part of a performance:

Let the moments speak their presence.

*And yet, they are elusive, like the wind that briefly sets clothes
on a line*

to dancing.

Butterflies pinned, they lose their potential for flight.

*Phelan’s suspension bridge momentarily
announces presence and then abandons us
with capricious indifference.*

We dance freeflight in remembered space, and

recognize absence.
illumination is desperate, slipping in and out of view.
And I am left with fragments of possibility.
I suspect I am writing yet another version of breath-becoming
knowing that is performative inquiry
pause
between this moment
of opening and closing
opening
butterfly in flight

What language performs our knowing, our learning on the page? Brings others into the performance? Languages the unlanguageable?

how does one write breath?
capture elusive moments of transformation?
what language performs the impossible?

listening: windworn messenger

Lynn is stopped; the writing of her dissertation eludes her. Six months pass. On the first day of the seventh month, she attends a presentation by Jacques Daignault, a scholar from Quebec.

In his hands, between his toes, under his armpits, he carries notes. Notes spilling a haphazard path to the podium, notes in his pockets, his trouser cuffs, his socks, behind his ears, under his collar. Like a feather-tattered seagull windworn from travelling across an expanse of sky, he leans windworn against the podium, as if surprised to find himself momentarily grounded in the windless room where we sit, notebooks in hand.

He gestures at his papered vestments.

welcome words welcome characters welcome body emotion feelings welcome intertextuality welcome grace welcome the unknown

try to say nothing
listen
our text speaks

our text sounds our presence

welcome

She sits in the front row, wiping tears from her cheeks. She recognizes the landscape. With relief, she gathers the notes that drift to the ground, lost feathers of an unknown angel who wrestles Knowledge. She is not alone. This too is possible. The challenge of writing a dissertation becomes one of writing a performative text that listens, interplays between absence and presence, and welcomes with grace the not yet known.

writing: bull in the pen

(Warren structures his dissertation in the form of a drama workshop)

I need to describe a warm-up exercise. I recall experiencing *Bull in the Pen* (Sistren Theatre, 1987) which calls on participants to identify key social issues or 'isms' that hem them in. As I write about this exercise, my fingers, shifting across time and space from present to past and back again, type

Bull in the Pen come out Bull in the Pen come out

A circle of people, hands linked, tightened, slowly circling. Surrounding one lonely person looking for a way out.

Bull in the Pen come out!

All of us **in** around the circle shout

Bull in the Pen come out!...

What kind of Pen is this?

This bull, this person, feelings welling up inside, what is imprisoning me?

Bull in the Pen Bull in the Pen

come out

come out

Bull in the Pen

come out come out

What kind of Pen is this?

racism,

pain,

fear

(whatever comes forth)

KADI

un/belonging in English language and in this text

Presenter, Planner, Coaching from the side...
Or just along for the Ride?

LYNN

How does the identity and presence of the researcher interrupt, influence, ignore, misconstrue, perform the text?

WARREN

That question took me into using masks to uncover more of my work.

KADI

Masks? To masquerade ... disguise. Why would you want to hide your researching 'self'?

WARREN

Masks didn't hide me. They became points of departure into expressing different views of my 'dynamic' self, distancing myself from my practice yet exploring its familiarity. Why do you masquerade as Rhapsicle in our text?

KADI

Well ...I want to be in touch with my 'true' feelings! Rhapsicle emerged out of a moment of crisis. I abandoned three years of work in comparative literature, transferred across disciplinary b/orders to education where 'alternative academic writing' was happening. My feelings are those of an 'outsider' in the culture of North American scholarship, feelings of discontent and unbelonging which I cannot suppress even in the conversation with my closest colleagues—friends like you. These feelings are not only rooted in my im/migrant condition, they are also embedded in my home culture. My Estonian cultural memory is deeply wounded from more than seven hundred years of subjugation by German, Russian, and other European colonizing powers.

LYNN

Masks speak to the researcher/writer/performer who is not masquerading as an objective observer, but engaging as a living breathing snarling impulsive desiring performing poetic scholar!

KADI

Plato treated poets badly and threw them out from his Republic because their creation "indulges the irrational nature" (Plato, p. 36) and "impairs the reason" (p. 36). He divorces 'poetry' from 'knowledge and truth' and submits non-rational impulses of life to the control of rational order. Isn't it time to bring rhapsodic poets-performers back to Academy? Rhapsicle, researcher-performer, subverts the logo-centric thinking dominating the Western scholarship!

WARREN

Each different perspective co-mingled, contrasted, and added to the other, yet all of the masks are 'me'! In writing *through* the masks, I was able to respond to my supervisor's question, and, simultaneously, extend and deepen the analysis of my text. Not only that, the masks created a performing text of multiple voices, multiple perspectives, interrupting the conventional dissertation form.

LYNN

Sometimes we can get so caught up in the form that we forget its ethical complications. Think about

performative writing in academia in terms of an etymological deciphering of per/form/ance: "through form and through the destruction of form" (Fels, 1998) we come to 'action.' It's the tension and interruption of form that matters as we seek new understanding. I think this interruption has startled the academy.

KADI

Writing as a form of representation is also a way of knowing. That's why form is an important issue ideologically and epistemologically. Writing performatively allows me to search for ways to disrupt and decolonize the Western way of knowing and representing 'other' wor(l)ds.

WARREN

Language, that is writing, is not representing a world 'out there,' but rather is "an ongoing bringing forth of a world" (Maturana and Varela, 1992, p. 11). This emergence involves a disruption, through the action of writing *and* through reimagining forms of our taken-for-granted textual worlds. Writing brings us into contact with those thoughts, feelings and intuitions we don't know we have. It is transformative because, as expression and exploration, writing brings us to an understanding that is beyond the writing (Merleau-Ponty, 1973).

KADI

Sounds perfect...but here we are still, in our Plato's cave, in a Western academic space of writing, attempting to deconstruct dominant academic forms through performance. How can we leave this cave? How can we undo the shadows of Platonic Forms that lurk even in the notion of *performance*? Do you think writing performative text is, in itself, a decolonizing action?

LYNN WARREN KADI

Striding confidently into unknown territory, our first response is a giddy feeling of release, quickly followed by doubt, fear, and a desire to return to what was once known. It would be so easy to turn back, to return to the cave, blind to the light of possibility outside. Impossibility lies just one step beyond...once taken, the desire to step outside the known form becomes irresistible.

epilogue: what are the possibilities of impossibility?

WHITENESS OF PAGE

EMPTYNESS OF COMPUTERSCREEN

flicker of movement

References

- Aoki, T. (1999). *Question asked during doctoral defense of Lynn Fels*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, March.
- Daignault, J. (1995). *Presentation to faculty and graduate students*. Vancouver: Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, January.
- Fels, L. (1998) In the wind, clothes dance on a line. *jct: Journal of Curriculum Theory*. 14. (1) 27-36.
- Maturana, H. R., and F. J. Varela. (1992). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*.

Boston: Shambhala.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *The prose of the world*. Claude Lefort (Ed.). Trans. John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Pelias, R. J. (2005). Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*. November, 5 (4): 415-424.

Plato. "Republic." In Adams, H. (Ed.). (1992). *Critical theory since Plato*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 18-38.

Pollock, D. (1998). "Performing writing." In P. Phelan and J. Lane (eds.), *The ends of performance*. New York: New York University Press, 73-103.

Sistren Theatre. (1987). *Bull in the pen*. Workshop activity, Regina, Saskatchewan, June 15, 1987.

Biographies and Thesis Abstracts

Lynn Fels is co-ordinating editor of *Educational Insights*, an online journal sponsored by the Centre of Cross-Faculty Inquiry at the University of British Columbia. Her academic interests include performative inquiry as a research methodology, performative writing, and teacher education. She is currently co-authoring a book on performative inquiry in the classroom.

Her thesis, *in the wind clothes dance on a line: performative inquiry as a research methodology* (1999) conceptualizes performance as an action/site of learning and research. Through her experiences as a drama educator and readings of complexity theory and performance studies, Lynn articulates a research methodology that recognizes the learning and research possible through dramatic explorations such as role drama, visualizations, and improvisation. Her dissertation engages performative writing to illustrate those elusive moments of learning that "dance on the edge of chaos."

Warren Linds is an educator and community activist trained in methods of Theatre of the Oppressed. He has been working in popular theatre and community education for the past twenty-five years. He is presently an assistant professor in the Department of Applied Human Science at Concordia University in Montreal. Warren also continues to work with the Saskatchewan Association for Multicultural Education in the use of theatre techniques in developing leaders in anti-racist education in secondary and elementary schools.

His dissertation, *A journey in metaxis, Been, being, becoming, imag(in)ing drama facilitation* (2001) explores the facilitation of drama workshops through an adaptation of Theatre of the Oppressed, as he worked with high school students, teachers and others in the community. As pedagogue Warren explored how knowing and meaning emerge through theatre, and in the interplay between his life and work.

Writing about this process of coming to know an identity-in-process as a drama facilitator enables the interpretation, interrogation and transformation of how one becomes facilitator, (re)writing/performing presence.

Kadi Purru was born in the university town of Tartu, Estonia; studied theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia and taught theatre at the University of Valle, Cali, Colombia. Since 1991 she has been living in Vancouver. For her an academic space is not only an intellectual, but also a creative space to explore contact-zones between cultures, languages, identities and disciplines. Her academic work co-emerges with her community theatre work. Recently she completed the project "Migrant Homes" based on the life-stories of the Estonian Canadians in Vancouver. Her current academic interests include supporting the articulation of new, emerging immigrant, border zone, languages – accented englishes – as an important aspect of cultural diversity and tutoring M.A. students in Post-Colonial Drama at Athabasca University.

Her dissertation, *Acknowledging Home(s) and Belonging(s): Border Writing (2003)*, is "homeward" journeying through the discursive landscapes of nation, ethnicity, diaspora, and "race." As ethnoautographic inquiry, her research includes conversations with: theorists, colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds, and members of the Colombian and Estonian communities to which she belongs. She constructs these conversations as borderzone art where a "third space" emerges. As an im/migrant inquiry, the dissertation intends to create a different, an-other culture of scholarship.