Mind the Gap: Outrageous Acts of Political Solidarity

An address to a gathering of poet/scholars

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The imagination must be undisciplined.
That is why the university cannot bear it.

This weekend we have sought to poetically/performatively engage, inquire, and represent our work—our desire, our yearning, our wounding, our joy—within the fragmentation and fragmenting of a post-modern landscape. This seeking to name ourselves as legitimate other within the academy—this too is possible—is an act of political resistance. Our gathering together here, at the world’s first international symposium, announces and reaffirms poetic inquiry as scholarly endeavor. This event is what Hannah Arendt might...
call a moment of natality[^4]: a labouring that bleeds across disciplines, a poetic joust at academic convention that leaves us all with blood on our hands, and the welcoming cry of a newborn child in our ears.

How shall we be received?

I have been writing this paper in my head these past months, its lines inspired by my public transit travels, measured by the beating of my heart, my quickened step, as I walk each day through my neighbourhood in the early autumn morning. My ambition is to purchase that first invigorating cup of coffee at Bean Around the World, a local coffee shop on West 10th near Sasamat Street. Caffeinated, with a second cup in hand, I jump on the 99 Bus direct to the Skytrain that then rockets me above the traffic below. As drivers jostle for position on the overcrowded freeway, I skim the headlines of The Globe & Mail, eavesdrop on cell phone conversations, write poetry on windows condensed by autumn rains.

And finally, the train stops at the Production Way–University station and, stepping onto the platform, I discover that there are no audio or textual warnings admonishing me to ‘mind the gap’ as we might receive when travelling on the tube in London. Here in Vancouver, we travel at our own risk. I descend the escalator, and greet the woman who daily hands out free copies of Metro. She smiles, acknowledging my presence.

After a brief flirtation with the bus attendant—he and I come from a certain era—I elbow my way onto the 145 Bus, jam-packed with students and the odd colleague or two. University professors, I have learned, generally travel by car, with a sporadic few who cycle furiously up the forty-degree slope, heads bent over handlebars, bodies tented in rain ponchos. I cling precariously to the overhead handrail as the bus swings up the mountain to Simon Fraser University where an unfamiliar landscape, as yet unmarked by my presence, awaits me.

Walking through the concrete architecture, I feel as though I am striding through an enlarged version of one of the Lego buildings my brother used to build on the living room floor, in the days when we all thought he would grow up to become an architect. Seven weeks into my new position, and only last week did I find myself glad to be striding through the campus—cement staircases opening onto expansive courtyards, the reflection pool, the fluid flow of students who witness again and again one-legged Terry Fox as he runs, stilled for an eternal moment in his bronzed marathon across the country—and I thought, “this too is possible.”

This moment of arrival stops me: I am learning to sound my presence in a space that has not yet realized that I have arrived.

I lose my breath, become breathless on Peggy Phelan’s temporal rackety bridge[^5]—swinging wildly between first utterance of sound and light and motion—I am here!

How will I be received?

Do they know yet what they have done?

Who will I be?

bell hooks writes,
Only by coming to terms with my own past, my own background, and seeing that in the context of the world at large, have I begun to find my true voice and to understand that, since it is my own voice, that no pre-cut niche exists for it; that part of the work to be done is making a place, with others, where my and our voices, can stand clear of the background noise and voice our concerns, [our fears, our joys, our love, our hopes, our presence] as part of a larger song.[6]

This weekend we are singing loudly!

*This too is possible.*

Theatre director, Eugenio Barba, exhorts his actors when working through scripted theatre to seek the breath of being in presence of each other. He writes,

> not walls
> of cement, but…
> the melodies
> of your temperature—

singing the space
> there are meetings
> and I am transformed.[7]

*How will you receive me?*

David Appelbaum in his book, *The Stop*, writes that in a blind man’s journey across an unknown terrain, he may encounter many obstacles—a boulder, a tree root, a street curb, a child’s tricycle—that call him to attention.[8] A stop is simultaneously a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity. A stop is a moment of arrest during which new possibility—if we are attentive, if we are listening—announces its presence. A stop is a moment in which it is realized that choice of action[9] is required. And with choice of action arises moral responsibility.[10] A stop, as Maxine Greene might say, is a moment of coming to wide-awakeness[11] in which a person recognizes that which he or she has not yet considered.

Appelbaum writes,

> Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity.
> The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other.
> It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways…
> It is the stop.[12]

A stop is a calling to attention to what is hidden—a vulnerability, an intimacy, a forgetting. A stop is a new awareness of encounter—a recognition of oneself in relation to others and one’s location, as if for the first time. A stop calls us to question our habits of engagement and invites us to re-imagine, to engage anew. A stop is simultaneously a moment of caution, a moment of release. A stop requires us to be brave. A stop invites us to take a first step into the abyss of uncertainty—mind the gap—into grace.
I encountered my first stop in the academy, when, after years as a performing arts educator, I came to the University of British Columbia to undertake doctoral studies. My question, *what happens when you bring drama and storytelling into a science classroom?*, propelled me on a journey of conceptual and practical exploration, culminating in the theorizing and articulation of performative inquiry. [13]

After three years of research, I sat down to write my dissertation. It was a difficult time; I struggled to find a voice, a language, an entry point. I was, as I wrote in an early draft of my thesis, reluctant to reduce complexity to linear lines. How do I speak to the elusiveness and joy and heartache of a moment of learning? How do I write with the integrity and spirit of the work through which I engage others? How do I make visible what Peggy Phelan calls “holes in the visible”? [14]

> Wait, the moment whispers,  
> You know me.  
> This space-moment resonates  
> Go to your being, becoming

I remember writing these words, and thus, finding my way into performative writing as scholarly writing. [15] I interrupted my doctoral text with poetic fragments, metaphors, creative inventions, dialogue, white space; these turns of scholarly text surprising, delighting, illuminating, as I sought a voice, a language, a melody of invitation to share my work, to speak the stops that come to those of us who engage and inquire through performance.

I was, I confess, singularly blessed, working with the support of individuals such as Carl Leggo, Karen Meyer, Patrick Verriour, and Brent Davis. I remember Patrick saying at one of my thesis committee meetings, the others nodding in agreement, “Lynn, do what you need to do, we’ll find a way to get you through.”

A gift of recognition, a gift of permission.

I was lucky, too, being among those of a generation of new scholar-adventurers, Rishma Dunlop, Renee Norman, Gary Rasberry, Erika Hasbe-Ludt, Airini, Wanda Hurren, among others, as we dared to reimagine scholarly inquiry, scholarly writing.

The turning point for me in which I realized that I could bring a performative poetic text into my scholarship was a noon hour talk in 1996 by Quebec scholar Jacques Daignault. [16] He spoke to us about his frustrations in trying to write a non-fiction book about a bicycle trip he had taken across the country, following his marriage breakdown. It was only when he decided to write a novel, he tells us, about a middle-age professor in a mid-life crisis on a bicycle trip, that he began to write a text that resonated with the truth of his experience.

Listening, I received from Jacques permission to reimagine conventional academic writing as he spoke to *la doublure* [17] of creative non-fiction, textural interplay embodying truth, resonance, recognition within the creative writing of non-fiction events. Tears traced their presence on my cheeks.  
A poetic stop that frees the scholarly spirit.

Daignault encourages us in our writing to welcome words, welcome characters, welcome
body emotion feelings, welcome intertextuality, welcome grace, however we may come to understand grace—welcome the unknown. [18] A revolutionary act—place duct tape on your delete key, send the editor who haunts you, constantly critical, out for coffee, be present in the moment of writing.

We sing in a new language and are transformed. [19]

May I touch you? Will you touch me?

How shall we write each other?

Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen, philosophers in search of a new media philosophy, echo Jacque’s invitation in their book, Imagologies:

[The work] should not be limited by the linear logic of the past…[it] must also be riddled with gaps, spaces and openings that invite the reader, the listener to write. White space becomes the site of transaction in which the event of understanding occurs. [20]

The university, outrageously declare Taylor and Saarinen, is approaching impending extinction, no longer relevant in the digital multi-media age of cyberspace. [21]

Are we dead?

Not yet. As I look around among you, I see a robust body of poet/scholars. But I am becoming nervous. I am unbecoming in my confidence that the academy will continue to humour our presence. Some days, particularly now, as a corporate vocabulary that champions such words as productivity, impact, vertical lay-offs, and economic sustainability, increasingly pockmarks academic discourse, I am tempted to abandon ranks and dash into a quantitative embrace.

Last year, the Faculty of Education was in the process of remodeling the Teacher Education Office of my former university. A sign was posted on one of the new glass room dividers: Do not enter or lean against. It was a caution. It was a dare.

Are we leaning too hard against the academy?

In March of this year, I attended a gala celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Faculty of Education [22] an event bracketed by departmental budgetary cut-backs, and discovered the entire front row of seats out of bounds. Each chair bore a sign, RESERVED. These signs seemed ominous spectators as I bounded onto the stage as the event’s Master of Ceremonies. Reserved for whom? Are we, I wondered, as I stared blindly out into the bright lights, in our roles as performing academics, perceived by others merely as the evening entertainment? A master of ceremonies, a writer of tribute poems, a performer of scenes? Are our conventional colleagues whispering snidely, enviously, jealously, dismissively, behind our backs, “academic-lite”?

Karen Meyer, whose work in living inquiry is a fine example of poetic scholarly engagement, warns us to be wary of the academic police loitering in the corridors, poised as they are to hustle us out of the building. [23] Once I thought her warnings of academic
police were merely in metaphorical jest; now I hear their heels sounding sharply on the concrete path behind me. Am I becoming paranoid? Is this what happens when you finally attain a tenure-track position?

We live our practices within an inquiry and performance of resistance, desire, thoughtfulness, caring, integrity, and renewal. Yet, let’s be honest, we are also capricious, suspect, sly, and disarming. We rally our colleagues of like-mind to join our doctoral committees, to sit on editorial boards, to join us in conference presentations. We cite each other, assign each other’s writings to our students, advise colleagues’ students to take our courses. We angle for promotion, we seek merit increases, we send out a flurry of papers to be considered for publication, we are hungry for acceptance. We scribble outside the lines, yet remain cognizant of whose colouring book we are defacing. This is how we play the game.

We desire connectivity. We seek a critical mass. This is how we will survive.

This event, the world’s first poetic inquiry symposium, is simultaneously a triumph and yet, also one rife with potential danger. Transparency is a dangerous act; we can no longer sneak around the back alleys of the academy, slipping agilely between the wall-dividers. We are becoming visible. What cracks and fissures exist amongst us, within our academic communities? Poetic justice wears many faces; this announcing of our presence, bold and brilliant, is an outrageous act of political solidarity and it will not go unnoticed.


> I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures…. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger…. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language."[24]

The oppressor’s language is becoming loud and commanding, as universities turn increasingly towards ventures that forefront financing, income revenue, corporate sponsorship. The breath of the oppressor is present in the room, here, now. How do we stay true to our passions, yet meet the demands of our profession? Are they incompatible?

Where is flesh in a bottom-line?

I am afraid. And so I take to the streets, laying down a path in walking…[25]

Architectural stops are those that invite us to consider alternatives: architectural stops transform the landscape; they imagine as-yet unknown horizons beyond our present location. Architects are poets of form and space, stillness and movement, function and intent, presence and absence, light and darkness, within a context of place, hope, desire, yearning, relationality, and responsibility.

Years ago, I played tourist in Old Montreal with my brother, that long ago architect of Lego buildings, now an artist. I remember him stopping and saying to me, “Look at those buildings across the street. Imagine each one has its own melody. What sound would that
building on the corner make, or that one over there? What will we hear if all these buildings, in Old Montreal, speak now, in sound, to us?”

We stopped and listened, and within the silence of our listening, each building, graced with its own unique architectural detail, voiced its presence. I remember the awe I felt listening to the buildings sounding in symphony—the poetics of the as-yet unspoken, the as-yet unwritten. It is a stop.

And now, years later, I am called to another architectural stop. This week, on Monday, still writing this paper in my head on my walk home, I crossed Alma Street, and trudged up West 8th Avenue, scuffing soggy autumn leaves with my sneakers. On the corner of West 8th and Crown, there is a cottage with a thatched roof similar to those from the olden days of England, transplanted onto Vancouver soil. The thatched roof—the kind that requires a skill of artistry—has cedar shingles crowded one on top of the other, like children’s grins before we erase their dental uniqueness with orthodontic intervention. This thatched-roof cottage is one of two surviving in the city of Vancouver, a quirk of architectural play. Each time I pass the cottage is a poetic pause, a sensual moment, an invitation to reimagine the architectural and educational confines of our lives sounded anew through form and time and place and language.

On this particular Monday, I stopped, not for sentimental or romantic reasons, but because, on this day, the house was in distress, calling me to attention. The windows and doors were boarded up with plywood, words crudely painted in blue scrawl: *Do Not Enter. Trespassers Will be Prosecuted.* The warning reminded me of the broken sign, *Trespassers W.* outside Piglet’s door. (The W being short for Will, as Piglet explains to his friend Pooh, which in turn is short for William.)[26] And encircling the thatched-roof cottage was six-foot high
sky blue fencing forewarning imminent destruction and the inevitable arrival of new architectural presence on this corner block—most likely an oversized residence that will boast at least five bathrooms.

And it is this impending loss to our neighbourhood that stops me—a flesh/architectural wounding that reminds me of how vulnerable we are, even in this initial flush of success as we celebrate poetic inquiry. The dismantling of the cottage will be brief and brutal. In a decade’s time, will only I, and those who attend to its destruction, remember the cottage’s lost grace? Will our presence here in this revolutionary meeting of scholarly poets, poetic scholars, be forgotten, perhaps remembered by only a few in twenty, thirty years—what traces will remain? Who will sound our absence or honour the architectural reimagining that is our scholarly endeavor, our scholarly texts?

I do not mean to be grim in this, the last of our presentations during our gathering here together. I am only sounding a note of caution, expressing my alarm at how easily a thatched roof cottage, a poetic rendering of architectural memory and playful musing, can be dismantled, unless alarm, protest calls us to action.

Will our presence today be silenced, forgotten, erased?

Or—

(as a professor newly met two months ago in a parking lot outside the hotel housing a faculty meeting asked me)

—will our students, those who walk along side us,
look into our eyes and see eternity?[27]

Will the absence/presence of a thatched-roof cottage sound as loudly as the bells of the Notre Dame Cathedral that called me to presence, as I stood on a street in Old Montreal, listening to the buildings sing?[28] As Leonard Cohen advises:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.[29]

We should not be deceived or seduced by the poetic offerings that attend our work, nor should we be afraid to name the perceived, real, and imagined threats to our collective sense of accomplishment and academic wellbeing. I am proud and thankful that we have called each other to attention. This gathering is our stop. It is our light.

We live in dangerous times. The academic renaissance that heralded the natality of our presence here within these walls is threatened. Yet such challenges keep us on our collective toes, they force us to remain vigilant, daring, wise, outrageous in our acts of political solidarity—may we continue in our quest to be vulnerable, to invite others into vulnerability, to be open to new possibilities, willing to be reborn into the moment.

And I am hopeful. Last month, I chaired the doctoral defense of a new scholar, Jana Milloy, whose thesis is a phenomenological inquiry into the experience of writing through
writing, that is, writing within, through, and of the moment.[30] We must learn to surrender to the moment, she writes, we must be willing to linger within each moment. Every moment, she tells us, *a child of duration*.[31]

In the poetic inquiry that is our presence, we engage in surrender, we offer an invitation of possibility; each moment becomes full with our presence, if we are willing to receive its blessing.

We will not apologize.

May this moment of our inquiry together be a stop.
May this moment of our inquiry be a child of duration.

[1] My gratitude to Dr. Ted Aoki for introducing me to the interplay of meaning-making between words adjoined by a backslash, and the attention to be called to the space between.


[3] The 1st International Poetic Inquiry Symposium was held October 26-28, 2007 at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. This gathering of poet-scholars from across disciplines sought to articulate poetic inquiry as it is envisioned, practiced, and represented within the academy. A post-doctoral Social Studies Humanities Research grant spearheaded by Dr. Monica Prendergast with Dr. Carl Leggo has facilitated the indexing of examples and representations of poetic inquiry across the academy throughout North America, culminating in the symposium in which this author was the final speaker.


[13] Performative inquiry falls under the umbrella of arts-based research, and speaks to a theoretical positioning in which investigation through the arts may be understood as an


[15] It was only later, after my thesis was defended, that I discovered Della Pollack’s article that introduces performative writing as academic writing. See Pollack, 1998.

[16] I attended Dr. Jacques Daignault’s presentation at the University of British Columbia, January 2006, specific date not known.

[17] “la doublure” refers to the silk lining of a jacket. Also refers to the interplay of creativity and experience through fictional/non-fictional writing.


[19] Variation of a quote from Barba, 1995, p. 165. Actual quote reads, “Singing the space there are meetings and I am transformed...”


[22] The 50th anniversary of the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia was celebrated in the academic year 2006-2007.

[23] Dr. Karen Meyer offers a theoretical reading of living inquiry, and has taught an annual graduate-level course on living inquiry for the past decade at the University of British Columbia. Inquirers of living inquiry dwell in the everydayness of life, calling attention to place, time, language, and relationship between self and other. See Meyer, 2008 and 2006. For her thoughts on the academic police, see Nicholson, D., Schnellert, L., Rideout, B., Meyer, K., and Cameron, B., 2007.


[27] My thanks to Dr. Allan MacKinnon for this poetic re/calling of what matters in the academic work we do. In conversation, April 2007.

[28] Currently, a building proposal is being considered that would see the preservation of the cottage with the construction of additional living accommodation.


[30] I am delighted and grateful to Jana Milloy for her inquiry into the experience of writing
within the moment; her commitment to attending to the moment of writing; her passion of lingering within a moment, and by doing so, coming to her notion, *every moment, a child of duration*, and for our conversation in which she explained how moments unfold, one into the other, so that each moment is simultaneously fleeting and eternal. See Milloy, 2007.


**References**


**About the Author**

**Lynn Fels** is a writer and assistant professor at Simon Fraser University. Her research embraces performative inquiry, performance and technology, performative writing as scholarship, arts education, curriculum, teacher education and professional development. Lynn recently co-authored *Exploring Curriculum: Performed Inquiry, Role Drama, and Learning* with George Belliveau (Pacific Educational Press, 2008).