

Aesthetically Pleasing, but it's (not) Research: Responding Poetically to a Question of Methodology

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performativity,
poststructuralism,
poetic inquiry,
dialogue,
epistemology

Abstract: Moving across the textual landscape of a (re)membered moment of finding myself a "researcher on the margins," I seek to engage in collective dialogue through a poetic rendering of process and response. Through the motions of present, poetic, and performative epistemologies I seek to create openings where multiple voices might begin to shift or disrupt the meanings of (re)search, inviting us to embrace the possibility in what we have been and what we might be(come). As words and space perform upon the page, room exists for interpretation—inviting multiple voices to enter into an improvisational performance through the messy work of (un)knowing.

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1. Knowing, I am Here

I remember the room
white
sterile
in my proving
She looks at me
quizzically
My breath
shallow
hands shaking
I wonder
what
will she see
hear
think
(Pretty) pictures
performances of people
being
across the barren
and lively
spaces of humanness
or something else
that is not
right

I am a (re)searcher who lives along the margins, who regularly is asked to prove the value of the work I do and who at times wonders why, those who may judge my work as (not) research cannot, or choose not, to see that proof may exist in the experience itself. There are moments when I find myself overwhelmed with a desire to invite those who challenge my sense making of experience, to (re)turn to an awareness of Being, and there are times when I want to run away and hide, to live in a space where I might speak or dance, laugh or cry as loudly as I please, within my re/searching without fear of being silenced. BEHAR (1996) writes, "I am here because I am a woman of the border: between places, between identities, between languages, between cultures, between longings and illusions, one foot in the academy and one foot out" (p.162). Here I write as a white woman of privilege, but even from this position I can hear the echoes of my own otherness as I search for myself across the blurred borders of ambiguity and knowledge. In the Academy, I am asked to prove myself as a knower; however, is there not value when we begin to stop searching for answers and instead become present as we engage and interact with the living moment of (not) knowing?

I do (not) see
feel
I wonder
imagining what it is
for you
or them
me and we [1]

Knowing is constructed through interactions with/in the present that might shape the steps of our body/mind, all of which are drawn from the movements of experience. Yet as EISNER (1997) notes, "knowledge as a process, a temporary state, is scary to many" (p.7). Far too

often we find ourselves caught up in the cacophony of findings and absolutes, confounds and protocols, Truth and validity, so often in fact that we may not be present to our thoughts with/in (the) experience, open to learning or the construction of new meanings. IRIGARAY (2002) articulates eloquently the challenges of being part of a culture that places value on the accumulation of knowledge. [2]

We know more things, but we return less to ourselves in order to examine the meaning of all these things for a more accomplished human becoming. We are discovering that many realities have remained unknown to us up until now but the discoveries we are making are so numerous we forget somewhat the reality and the limits of our own human being. And the risk exists of knowing a thousand things, of finally reducing ourselves to an effect of acquisition of knowledge, but of no longer knowing anything about who I am, who you are, who we are. (p.94)

Risky movements
I am told
upon the page
they close the door
and I stop
to listen
afraid
of what I might hear
about my work
my living
in the (not) known [3]

Searching for Truth, for validity, limits our ability to connect, to be present to meaning(s) with/in experience as it evolves becoming a part of the living dialogue. BARTHES (1977) challenges validity and particular perceptions that identify the Truth of the text as a constant absolute to be stated and received, remarking, "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, non of them original blend and clash" (p.146). The writings that weave and rip, fuse and crack within the performative space of text do so as part of something living, active, breathing, made up of the stories of many sel(f)ves.?? Within this living dialogue meanings and experiences interact, a/part of oursel(f)ves and those who may or may not be like oursel(f)ves; it is a dialogue that is never ending, continuous and fluid, even when we are gone. Experience, like curriculum opens space for new ways of encountering and perceiving knowing, but to grow we must be present and willing to step upon the at times unstable ground of new ways of thinking and making sense of the experience (TODD, 2003). In a sense it is the experience we know, this is all we have but when we enter into the dialogic space of performing experience, the depths of understanding become something layered and living as well as always be(com)ing.

Dwelling
Who is it
Who listens and speaks
through our performances of being
or might shut the door
wondering
if this might in fact
explore
something (not) to be
 known
or perhaps whisper through the keyhole
It you are not
 have not
 will not
prove
this. [4]

2. Meaning to Experience

"In living inquiry, research is subjectively informed and subjectively co-produced; viewers / readers take up where the artist(s)/author(s) left off, continuing the complex and multifarious act of meaning making" (SPRINGGAY, IRWIN & WILSON KIND, 2004, p.909).

 I begin, returning to the moment
 having stepped
 room after room
 watched
 and questioned
 by people I know and respect [5]

My inquiry re/turns me to a time, less than a year ago, when I found myself interviewing for a tenure track position at the university where I was currently working as a visiting assistant professor. I wanted to be offered the position, but also found myself conflicted, wondering due to the nature of my epistemological leanings regarding research, whether this was really the best place for me. The days leading up to the interview, left me feeling anxious and eager to continue on with my work.

Thursday morning

I am reading today, exploring poetic texts. I find myself inspired, excited about the possibilities of what poetry and other performative texts have to offer the (re)searching world. My interview is tomorrow, my exploration today will really help me as I finish my final preparations on my job talk. (Personal Journal Entry, January, 2007)

Thursday afternoon

I am frustrated, feeling like I don't even want to go through with the interview tomorrow. I was printing some more papers to read and one of my colleagues asked, "Are you doing another art show for us, tomorrow. Come to find out." When I had presented my job talk for the visiting position last year, a number of folks felt challenged by my (re)search. I got the job because of my reputation as a teacher, but they did not see my (re)search as legitimate. I want them to get it, to see that there is value when we (re)search

within the performative space—that confounds might offer possibility rather than simply confusion or mistakes. (Personal Journal Entry, January 2007)

Friday

They asked and I responded and for the most part, I felt like people were open to learning about the work that I do, open to entering into a dialogue about the possibilities of poststructuralism within educational research and the possibilities of arts-based and performative forms of inquiry. For the most part ... Yet I hear the echo once again "It may be nice, and it certainly is aesthetically pleasing, but this is not research. (Personal Journal Entry, January 2007) [6]

Within this performative piece, I seek to bear my vulnerability, to play with/in spaces of being—as (re)searcher, artist, teacher, woman, situated within a cultural institution that still places emphasis on the values of positivism—as a means to step out of an epistemological place of hiding. I (re)mark throughout (my) performance of inquiry, using both image and poetry, space and text, upon the delight, excitement, anger, confusion, and feelings of loss that occur when one lets go of knowing, hoping that within this varied and shifting textual space we might place our senses within the ambiguity of notions of knowing experience, offering up what they might be for One—while leaving space for the possibilities of what they might be for another. In a sense, I write to engage the speaker who does not see performative inquiry as (re)search, yet at the same time, I hope to enter into a collective dialogue exploring the experience of being on the margins of the world of scholarship, while also becoming present to the possibilities that exist when we engage in the work of improvisational and performative (re)searching. Using the metaphor of dance, SNOWBER (2002) explores the improvisational nature of the inquiry process as that which requires form, technique, and practice, while at the same time requiring one to be flexible and fully present, ready to respond as we engage in the messiness of being, so that we might grow in our unknowing.

"Improvisation is the artistic practice which both reveals and masks at the same time. One does not know what will happen, where h/she will go next in movement, or what word will come up as the body explores the turns and twists of gravity. It is a fertile place where inspiration can not only be born but nourished" (SNOWBER, 2002, p.7).

Bodies present
sharing
what might
or not be
named [7]

3. (Re)Writing Meaning through Action

"... text is often only linear and, therefore, temporal; in text the meaning must be precise or risk disbelief" (JONES 2006, p.69).

What happens

when we choose to risk?

Stories flow spoken in echoes—never finished, never known, but shared ...

"No single point of view is more valid than another ..." (JONES, 2006, p.70).

Writing of the work of MAMET, DENZIN (2003) remarks, "... the words in the play do not change or carry the meaning. Action carries the meaning; words are set and unchanging" (p.40).

Upon the page
the words are set (perhaps)
spoken
waiting
until
another (presently)
reads
speaks
performs
becoming those words
dancing through the lens
of interpretive subjectivity [8]

Across this performative text the words exist and while I have made my own actions across space and placement of words, each individual interacts and reacts with/to the image(s) differently; the action thus becomes a never ending living dialogue, a performance where "... performed experiences are the sites where felt emotion, memory, desire, and understandings come together" (DENZIN, 2003, p.13). The living nature of performative inquiry invites the body to enter into the dialogue, as a means to explore both body and mind performing and becoming something that it may not have intended. It is not uncommon to lose one's way within the performance, the (co)creating process, as we let go of what we thought we knew (WILSON, 2004). Upon this page I find myself at the edge of knowing: from a poststructuralist standpoint the struggle that I inquire into is not something that I believe can be named; there are only fragments within the (collective) story that might lay brush strokes of what is or what might have been, across the landscape of the text. Yet I remain aware of EISNER's (1997) reflection: "We tend to seek what we know how to find" (p.7).

She looks
at me
waiting for answers
I do not know
C o n f u s i o n
SPEAKS
I want to move
know
but the light that shines upon the road
is veiled by the shadows
branches floating in the wind
to go further
I must become
presently
aware

Praxis (re)shows me—(re)learns me through the moment of being in that sp(l)ace of not knowing—I (re)learned something I say all the time in my teaching—that it is the letting go

that we find, that we cannot be found until we are lost. Yes this is what I have learned—I
learned, (re)learned what I know but forget or hang on too lightly (deCOSEN, 2002, p.24).
[9]

I look
her in the eye
my breath superficial
I want to hide in acceptance
created out of an avoided
becoming
I hear a whisper in my ear

"Facing our own avoidance,
we move away from the
Marxist dream of 'cure,
salvation, and redemption'
and toward our vacillation
between knowing and not
knowing" (LATHER, 2003,
p.265).

4. Presently (Dis)Comforted

At times I find mysel(f)ves avoiding, afraid to become present with/in inquiry, hoping that in my
hiding I might find a place of comfort, in which I might bask in a restful sense of acceptance—
perhaps even achieving the coveted tenure.

Back Forth

I AM NOT

BUT WHAT

My voice shudders

body knowing

what I cannot

forget

To attend to struggle with/in questioning can be a dangerous act as one may return to painful
aspects of sel(f)ves that s/he might not be ready to face; however, it is the danger that invites
praxis by actively engaging multiple aspects of Being. WILSON (2004) explores this further as
she considers the work of Ted Aoki, attending that embracing loss allows one to come face to
face with experience, creating spaces so that we might engage in the possibilities that exist in,
"(o)pening ourselves to the daily struggles we bring to our work, our teaching, learning, and to
our research" (p.44).

You taint the work, she says to me
voice firm
body tense [10]

I want to respond with EISNER's (1997) words, "human feeling does not pollute understanding"
(p.8). Performance, sel(f)ves, and text can intermingle—weaving praxis through the boundaries
of past indoctrination, so that we may begin to move, opening oursel(f)ves up and becoming
aware, present, and able to be part of the living interaction and becoming that exists within the
performative.

How is it, that one might be able to enter into this unsettling space?

(re)searching through the storied
images
words
movements
I hear the echoes of myself(ves)
and She
or He
who may be
or not
(like me)

The point we are seeking to reach is where we can act directly in the present. Direct action stems from direct perception, the ability to see reality in the present, as it is, without prejudice and act accordingly. This is what it truly means to live in the present moment (IYENGAR, 2005, p.137) [11]

A voice speaks: [49]

In the moment

Myself(ves)

tremble

There

are no answers

These generalizations

you

mention

Is it possible to reach

to arrive

and leave behind the

moment

Images, stories, movements

where are the answers?

How is this research?

How can you come to overarching
generalizations?

It is spoken

set

Possibility appears in the remark.

You want

Permanence

Interpretation

changes

in

the act

I look at her this woman

speaking

at me

For a moment

I am silenced

I cannot hear

Voices

this is not

(re)search

It is not

It is not

It is not

relevant

to knowing

methods

like I

know

You must

follow the system

What if

I think

We forget the words

and we forget

What do we do?

What do we know?

Then? [12]

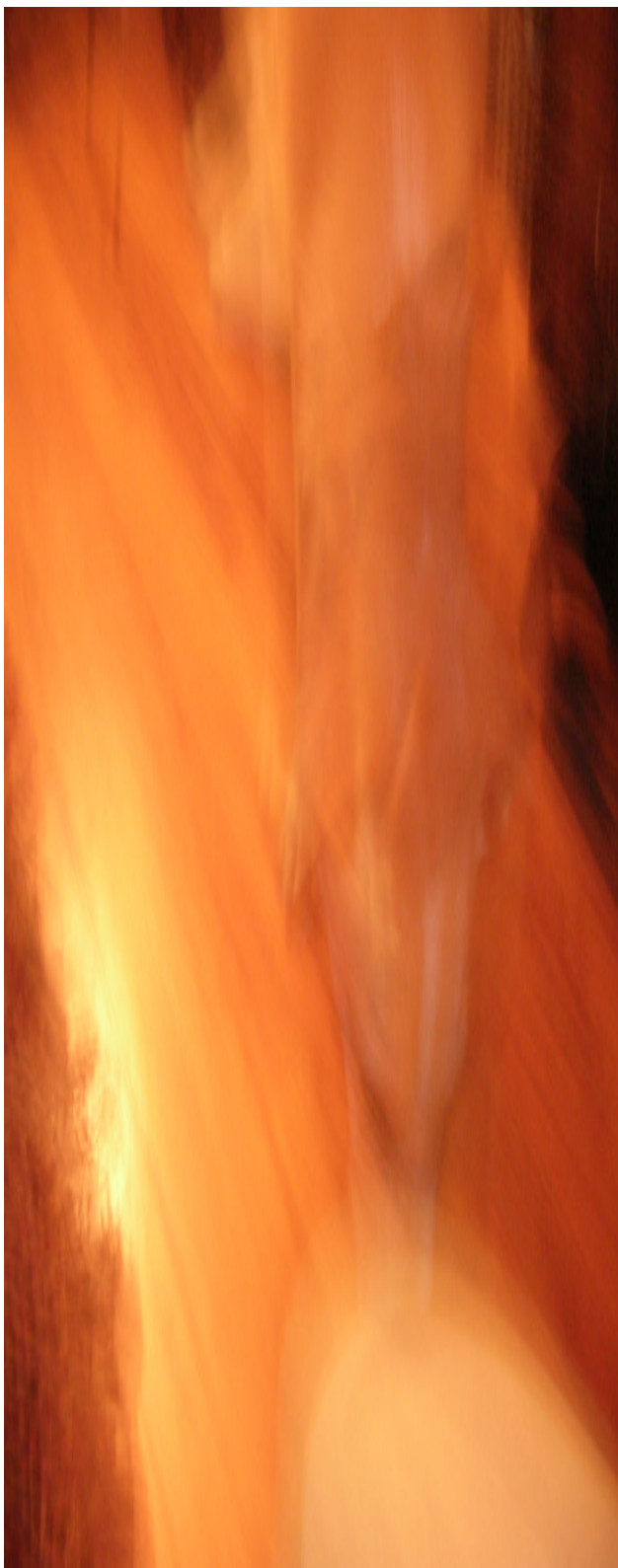


Figure 1: Without a Name

5. Interpre(PLAY)tations of Being

I am alone
 in my space
 thinking
re/turning to experience
 I try to remember
 the feelings
 the thoughts
 my body becomes
tense
 I breathe
 allowing my thoughts
to transform
 my being
 in this moment
What are the negotiations of be(com)ing One?
 I consider
I see a reflection of myself in the glass
 variations of color
 my body
 mind moving
I take a hammer to the glass
 the sound surprises me
 it does not jar
 or demand notice
 instead it is soft
pieces
 varied
 the colors have changed
 shifted
 some have moved
 away
 while others have
 come
 together, overlapping
Again I see
 my/self(v)es a reflection
 in the glass
I focus my camera on this image
 momentary
 shifting
 of multiple lines and shades
 to be considered
 by
me
 or you
or who
 Is this be(com)ing?

D i f f e r e n c e

What is interpretation, but an encounter

a negotiation of meaning (SPRINGGAY et al., 2004)?

To consider the nature of interpretation, look at the image *Without a Name* (a piece I had given a name, but chose to release, becoming aware of the silence that might be produced by that naming): what is it you see? Perhaps it is a blurring of color that seems to be more of a mistake than an intentional image. Or maybe you see a bird struggling to fly outside the flames? Or is it hell that you see across the waves of red and orange? It is not necessary to believe that any one of these interpretations is wrong or right; instead, may we look presently—engaging with our momentary positions as co-creators of the experience. Poststructuralist theory highlights the importance of considering the historical and social positioning of the creator of the interpretation. Becoming present allows us to explore, through all the senses, the folds (SPRINGGAY, 2005, DELEUZE, 1992) at shape our being and knowing in this moment.

I see
differently
know
differently
engage
seperately
connected [13]

Through the process of interpreting, and perhaps for some naming, the image, the reader becomes a co-creator of the work. BARTHES (1977) identifies this relationality across the dialogue of image creation and interpretation, remarking: "The language of the image is not merely the totality of utterances emitted ..., it is also the totality of utterances received: language must include the 'surprises' of meaning" (p.47). As I consider my own intentions and understanding across my (re)search, creating to make sense of my "knowing," I recognize that the process is fluid and dialogic, evolving as new voices utter the experience of interaction across the text; thus shifting the context and character of the language and story of the experience.

This voice
(be)longing
to You
to We
There were moments
I believe
when I would cling
to answers

Today [14]

Mysel(f)ves speak:

my response embodied
muscles tense there is a sickness in
my stomach
 I want
 to scream
emotion is not absent
 in this
moment
 (re)searching for sel(f)es
 upon the landscape
 of the
text.

Instead
 A rumble shudders
 across my being
perhaps
 I am not
 willing

K N O W I N G S H A T T E R S

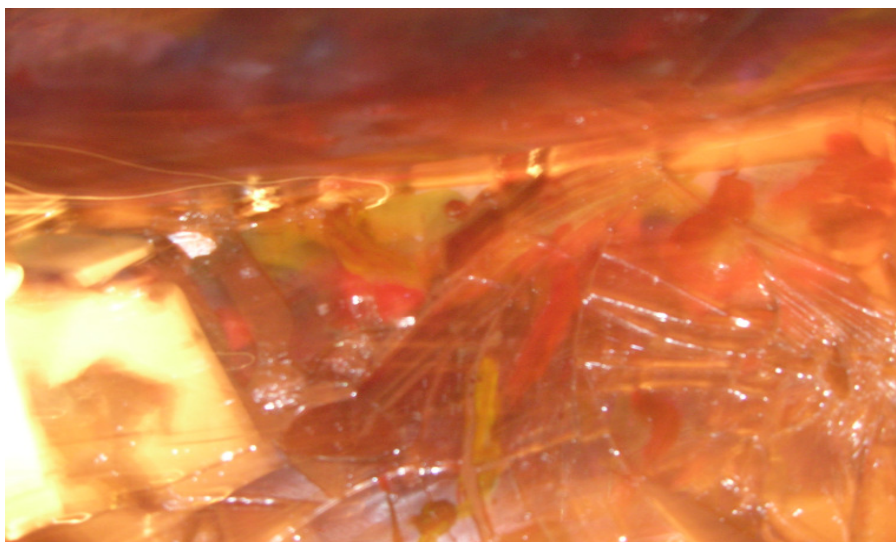


Figure 2: Un/certain Strength

(re)searching amidst
cracks and crevices
darkness and light
I wander presently
waiting

being

remembering

IRIGARAY (2002) remarks:

"It is not, therefore, a question of uttering truth valid once and for all but of trying to make a gesture, faithful to the reality of yesterday and to that of today, that indicates a path toward more continuity, less tearing apart, more interiority, concentration, harmony—in me, between me and the living universe, between me and other(s), if that is or becomes possible, as I hope it is, given respect for the living universe and its temporality" (p.22).

A gesture

my path

an interaction

with Her

with Them

when I

(re)searcher, artist, teacher

might stop

to listen speak

speak

I wonder

where

is silence

once again

(be)longing [15]

6. Performing (Be)Longings of Experience Together

This collective dance of confusing experience is one that invites both discomfort and aporia (deCOSEN, 2002); however as we begin to unfold and (un)tangle the layers of story, marking our own graffiti (GRUMET, 1988) of subjectivity upon the text, we begin to move upon a landscape holding spaces of ever evolving, pedagogical possibility.

"The other is one whom I shall never reach, and for that reason he/she forces me to remain in my self in order to be faithful to him/her and us, retaining our difference" (IRIGARAY, 2004, p.9). [81]

Difference

yours

mine

ours

who

does it belong to,

the experience? [16]

Laurel RICHARDSON (1997) asks "How can we write lives so that our writing has mattered?" (p.79). Several years ago I came across Genevieve JURGENSEN's work *The Disappearance* (1994), being read aloud on public radio. Within this collection of letters, JURGENSEN returns to the memories of her daughters who were killed by a drunk driver. I searched out the book,

and even today find myself returning again and again to the text, which each time bears some different meaning. As I heard JURGENSEN's voice echoed within my own, something came alive in me, a knowing that had not existed before. I felt a loss that belonged to another, yet it remains so raw in my own consciousness. [17]

You never knew my daughters,
neither
did you
know me as I was
when they were alive.
I will have
to tell you
everything.
(JURGENSON, 1994, p.4)

She had been writing to a friend, but by the time I had finished reading her collection of letters, I had grown to love her daughters, to perhaps see them as she might have, to see them as myself, and to feel so many senses of loss as I read of the fullness before and the emptiness that remained, following the crash that took their lives. [18]

"Since then I have not called Mathilde nor Elise. Or if I have called my eldest daughter it was without the hope that she would reply. It was to feel the vibration in my larynx of those syllables chosen when I was twenty-five years old, the arrangement of clear vowels and aquatic consonants that were to name the first of my children, to accompany her all her life, to act as her passport, to announce her arrival, to be said with only a hint of shyness and finally—in the mouth of the one who would love her—to betray all the emotions that this girl would one day elicit, that she alone would arouse in one young man, a young man who will never know her, who lives and who does not live to love her" (JURGENSEN, 1994, p.20).

I also found myself connected to my own longing for motherhood and reminiscing about the possibilities and dreams my own mother might have imagined for me as I dwelt within her womb. My own experience as a reader interacting and becoming leads me to respond to RICHARDSON's question in the following manner:

We live
You and I
and sometimes
We forget
to tell (share)
the colour of a child's hair
the smell of the salt that lingered on her skin
the piercing pain
when the call came
We forget
the moving stops
Perhaps someone will write
of the experience
words upon the page
out of context answers
And we can no longer
see or feel or smell or taste the way it was
in that moment
Writing like it matters
means we
sure as hell better
live within the words
and breathe within the spaces
so that Others
like Me or You or We
might come to know
and Be
like or unlike
Ourselves
knowing
in that/this moment

"Our fragmented selves and the textuality of our existence moves us back and forth
between wor(l)ds, between the private and public, between people and texts" (NORMAN,
2001, pp.148-149). [19]

Returning again and again to JURGENSEN's letters, my understanding of myself, the story of
loss and becoming that unfolds through her telling, as well as my own connections to the
dreams and desires, the agony and hope, the experience shared began to shift.

I s t h i s (not)

r e s e a r c h? [20]

6. On Purpose

Perhaps this brings up the question of the purpose of research here, the possibilities and facets of (un)knowing that speak as we come together sharing experience. There are no answers spoken here, just the raw emotionality of Being; yet (un)knowing exists, breathing through one's interaction with the text and the fluidity of living presently. It is in this space of present rawness, I believe, that we begin to better understand and engage with the nature of experience—with being human. [21]

I want to speak to Her,
she who speaks of research
in terms of organized and structured
methodology that proves or disproves
hypotheses, answers that remain
generalizable

never

echoing across moments.

There is no breathing
in your answers
they remain
laying upon the tomes of academic distinction
validity
reliability
where is the relationship
where are the voices?

I do not speak to disregard the work of more traditional forms of research—they serve an important purpose and often open doors for dialogue. My intention, instead, mirrors the thoughts of DUNLOP (2001), who remarks, "... we need to combat the fear that endorsing work of researcher-artists will devalue our academic currency at a time when qualitative research is finally gaining acceptance in a still quantitative world" (p.21). It is important to engage with the possibilities of the performative within (re)searching, to speak of experience from a place of unclaimed meaning as opposed to knowing, even from the margins. It is a risk to expose oneself in understanding and making sense of experience, we become vulnerable. In our vulnerability, we may lose our footing, but even in the fall we may become present, discovering new insights we might never have *claimed* as our own or have been able to share with another.

Our performances

Movements of sel(f)ves
are never ending
In life and death
we share
be(com)ing
(un)knowing [22]

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