

From the Stillness of Burgundy,
Through the Movement of Bayou Blue,
To the Embodiment of the Green of Change

A Journey to Be(Com)ing a Self-Reflexive Oral History Performer

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Abstract

From The Stillness Of Burgundy, Through The Movement Of Bayou Blue, To The Embodiment Of The Green Of Change: A Journey To Be(Com)ing A Self-Reflexive Oral History Performer

Maria Luisa (Nisa) Remigio

In this thesis, I document my journey of transformation from a collector and disseminator of life stories to a self-reflexive oral history performer. The purpose of this study is to find my voice amongst the voices I interview/speak/perform/write, and identify the positioning of my performative-I in relation to others and self, while analyzing how this self-awareness affects my deep listening of interviewees and performance participants.

A feminist, phenomenological and autoethnographic approach will guide me. Performative inquiry, performative writing, storytelling, oral history and oral history performance are my tools. I diarize and examine my journey through the Master of Arts in the form of a research/creation oral history solo/participatory performance, entitled *Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage*.

I also detail my health journey, a brain injury and an autoimmune illness that affect my memory and movement, which is something that is ever present, at times unsettling, others encouraging, both are always a gateway to knowing. I cannot separate these two journeys.

KEYWORDS: autoethnography, body, embodiment, emergent knowledge, empowerment, ethics, fiction, memory, narrative, oral history, oral history performance, pain, performative inquiry, performative social sciences, performative writing, performative-I, phenomenology, research/creation, senses, story, storytelling, voice

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The Color Scheme

Burgundy: a dense color that does not reflect light, absorption, inwardness, stillness, immobility, self-doubt, a good glass of wine.

Bayou Blue: the ocean and the sky, open spaces, infinite possibilities, movement, questions, my playground as a swimmer and future paraglider.

Green: growth, life, voice, transformation, breath, embodiment, empowerment.

These are the colors that inhabit my embodiment. These are the colors that guide me and let me know where I place myself in my development, in my quest. Am I still? Am I in old thoughts? Am I moving? Am I willing to question? Have I embodied any kind of change?

Needle And Thread

This thesis is about my journey of transformation from being a collector and disseminator of life stories to a self-reflexive oral history performer. The purpose of this research is to find my voice amongst the voices I interview/speak/perform/write, and identify the positioning of the (my) performative-I in relation to others and self, while analyzing how this self-awareness affects my deep listening of interviewees and performance participants. This framework places this study at the intersectionality of communication, facilitation and mediation (B. McKay, personal communication, November 6, 2019).

A feminist, phenomenological and autoethnographic approach guide me. Performative inquiry, performative writing, storytelling, oral history and oral history performance are my tools. I am diarizing and analyzing my journey through the Master of Arts in the form of a research/creation oral history solo/participatory performance, entitled *Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage*, as I search through it, the (my) place and meaning of acting in oral history performances.

I am also documenting my health journey, a brain injury and an autoimmune illness that affect my memory and movement, amongst other things, which is something that is ever present, at times unsettling, others encouraging, both are always a gateway to knowing. I cannot separate these two journeys.

The core of my writing will be on becoming aware of the steps in performative inquiry and honing in on and sharpening my skills, listening, evoking and identifying emotions, trusting myself, challenging myself to do/experience something new/different, acquiring knowledge, giving myself permission to move, to say, to feel, to ask and to question, embodying, raising questions like how and what, taking risks, improvising, being assertive, relying on the knowledge in my body, becoming free of the inner critical voice that paralyzes me, identifying and overcoming my biases and, finding and developing my artistic and political voices.

This text will take the shape that the process itself took, which is to say it will be emergent and disruptive. Emergent because it comes without warning, unapologetic, as bursts of words that appear almost magically onto the tip of my tongue or the tip of my pen and movements that rise to the surface of my body.

Disruptive because it is not a smooth sequence of cause and effect, or a developmental strategy with a beginning, middle and end, or even a quest for the answer to a hypothetical question raised from the get go, but rather a pull and push of clashing thoughts, physical feelings, emotions, words and movements that demand and command my attention in the moment, unceremoniously.

It is a style and a practice that speaks of the immediacy in which words and movements cry out to be materialized, an erupting volcano that has held within it scorching hot bubbling molten until it no longer can withhold it.

Please do not mistake this narrative style (Abrams, 2010; Kohler Riessman, 2008) for a lack of coherent and critical thought. Nor is it lack of organizational and developmental skills. This is my voice pushing through the fears, charging like lightening bolts in the midnight sky. This is a voice that needs to be unfiltered, a voice that needs to break through its own imposed restrictions. This is my synaptic network revealing emergent knowledge through free connections, until I can make sense of (Abrams, p. 122) and absorb this new way of seeing into my being (Applebaum, 1995). Sheftel states that oral history methodology is messy (as cited in High, 2014, p. 56) so too, is this thesis.

The structure of this paper will also reflect the process of my learning, which has been hindered by a brain injury and has obliged me to accept my new reality. So repetition will be a constant throughout. Flashbacks to specific dates refer to texts written in and around those dates and new texts created from memory and notes. Flash-forwards appear when a new way of thinking emerges after having read the previous text.

This thesis is about revealing questions hidden from my conscious consciousness, hidden within my angst unbeknownst to me. Answers are few and far between, as they will come from further reflection and praxis and will always be dependent on context and the here and now. The first step was finding the words to enounce the inquiries. No, the first step was not this. It was to find the courage to begin the process, to leave the stillness of Burgundy and begin the movement of Bayou Blue.

This document is written at times as a personal “conversation” with my supervisors, Warren Linds, Luis Sotelo-Castro and Steven High, various performers, authors, colleagues and friends with whom I have engaged with. It is also a self-reflexive conversation with my body, my thoughts, my emotions, my values, my words, my movements and my pain. These conversations and experiences are at times presented as fictionalized texts. Therefore, unless it refers to transcriptions, the exact wording will resemble more paraphrases than the original. The essence of what was said remains intact.

Visually, this thesis will look like a quilt. Each entry unit a self-sustained and contained story, all weaved together to reveal my process, to reveal me, to reveal my story.

I look at the pages of handwritten notes I have written, the underlining, highlighting and comments I made on the sides of printed and digital articles, I read the typed transfers of all of these, testimonies that I have been here before, and yet I have no memory of these facts. I reread them all as if for the first time. How odd to be confronted with proof of a moment and not recollect it.

Yet, I know I learnt the material because I have changed my way of thinking and analyzing issues related to my field. I am at a loss on how to resolve this issue, but I will keep trying.

In *Great Expectations* (Cuáron, 1998), Ethan Hawke's character, Finnegan, says at the beginning of the film, *"I will tell the story not how it happened, but how I remember it."* This is exactly how I will proceed. I will allow these learning episodes to rise to the surface in the order of priority my whole being suggests and in the interpretative slant in which I archived them.

I am often asked to state clearly and succinctly my thesis purpose. I feel trapped. How can I reduce to one sentence the immensity and multi-layered nature of this journey? Here is my attempt at structure. Research question: How (in the Movement of Bayou Blue) do I move from being a collector and disseminator of life stories (the Stillness of Burgundy) to being a self-reflexive oral history performer (the Green of Change)? Will this do?

For the sake of clarity, I make one more sustained push. I find the words to my quest.

Where/what is my voice amongst these voices I portray?

How do these stories affect me? The audience?

How do self-awareness moments in a performance affect the performer? The story? The audience?

What part of my narrative am I concealing and which am I revealing in both my research methods and my performances? Do I really not share my story? Do the choices I make not reveal part of who I am? Can the audience tell the difference?

What stories, memories and interpretations does my body reveal?

How does self-awareness influence the deep listening of others?


What are the ethical issues surrounding storytelling? Are there differences in my responsibilities between being an oral historian and an oral history performer?

The Quilt

“Write through the resistance,” Warren says. “Write the randomness and unrandomness,” he continues. “Find the structure. Imagine a quilt” (W. Linds, personal communication, November 26, 2019).

“There was nothing structured about this learning process! How do I create structure for the immediacy of emergent knowledge?” I resist.

By night’s end, my body relaxes and the fluidity of thought emerges, headings emerge. Movement seeps to the tip of my fingers as I sew together the patches.

In the “unrandomness” that is the narrative of my quilt, click on the title of the “random” patch/story you wish to explore. To return to the quilt, click on the icon  at the end of each individual text.

My Quilt

<p><u>The Story</u></p>	<p><u>Performative Writing</u></p>	<p><u>The "Researched" And The "Researcher": One And The Same</u></p>	<p><u>Discovering My Shape-Shifting Body</u></p>
<p><u>My Fight Song</u></p>	<p><u>Where I Need to Be</u></p>	<p><u>Position Yourself!</u></p>	<p><u>Design And Fabrics</u></p>
<p><u>Tension</u></p>	<p><u>The Day Of The Show</u></p>	<p><u>Finding The Words</u></p>	<p><u>Dancing On The Edge Of Chaos</u></p>
<p><u>The Purple Sand Tree</u></p>	<p><u>Letting Go</u></p>	<p><u>Fear Or Intuition?</u></p>	<p><u>Positivism And Hermeneutics</u></p>
<p><u>Landscapes</u></p>	<p><u>Joy</u></p>	<p><u>Fictionalize! Hmmm?</u></p>	<p><u>The Power Of Performative Social Sciences</u></p>
<p><u>Undesired Goods</u></p>	<p><u>Second Time Around: An Edited Conversation</u></p>	<p><u>Gratitude</u></p>	<p><u>A List</u></p>
<p><u>Sewing The Patches Together</u></p>	<p><u>The Letter</u></p>	<p><u>My Community</u></p>	<p><u>References</u></p>

The Story

Flashback to Monday, January 15, 2018

There once was a woman who lost her voice. For years, she had championed the stories of other women, speaking their words, expressing their views, and acting their movements and emotions. And that was fine, for her quest was to share their voices with the world, a world that was unaware of their existence.

But as time went by, she could no longer hear her own voice amongst these voices she spoke. And to complicate matters, a brain injury compounded by an adrenal insufficiency compromised her memory and her movement. She became trapped in the Stillness of Burgundy.

This thesis is the story of how this woman discovered her place within the academic world and how she reconnected with her memory, her body, her voice, her ethics and her creativity. It documents and analyzes her development through the Movement of Bayou Blue.

This is Nisa's story. This is my voice. This is my Embodiment of the Green of Change.



Performative Writing

Flashback to sometime leading up to Wednesday, April 29, 2017

Act I

Scene 1

A cold and crisp Monday morning. Nisa walks down Park Avenue, somewhere between Milton and Sherbrooke. She is on the way to see her supervisor, Warren Linds.

Nisa

(Thinking to herself)

“How odd that such a form of studies exists? Performative Inquiry.”

Again, I must stop myself. This doesn't feel right. It feels so removed from me. It is not the imposition of structure (W. Linds, personal communication, 2016), for I know and have experience in writing scenarios. This is a cry of ownership of my voice, the profound need to use the pronoun “I” as a way to assert myself.

On a cold and crisp Monday morning, as I walked down Park Avenue, somewhere around the intersection with Milton Avenue, on my way to see my supervisor, Warren Linds, I thought, *“How can this paper be considered academia? It is so personal. It is written in the “I” (Applebaum, 1995, p. 79, Bleakley, 2000, p. 17, McNiff, 1999, p. 70), mixing analysis of text with the perception of the here and now. A constant interruption of flow. A constant interruption of thought development. A constant return to an embodiment.”*

I remember thinking that someone else, like my professor, could analyze what I wrote. Then it would be an object/subject matter for academia.

I can still see Warren's reaction as I told him this story, how I had to break my own prejudices about what academia is (Eisner, 1981, p. 8): a twitch of the shoulders, a quick rotation of the head to the right and back to face me, a disapproving yet friendly utterance, and a reassuring smile.

“He falls, gets up, loses himself, falls again, is hurt, and gets up again, paralyzed by the confusion” (Applebaum, p. 14).

I want to feel it (my being) growing, changing, starting over, defying, and settling in only to restart the process. In one word: movement.

And A Colt Was Born

~~This is my story.~~ Goldberg (1986, p. 60) would tell me to skip this line and go straight into the story, to get a deeper connection, to live it, sense it and take you with me on this journey. I am a researcher in training at the Masters level at Concordia University. ~~This is an account of my journey,~~ on a quest that has led me to take the course PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY: Dancing on the Edge of Chaos, supervised by Warren Linds. In the next few pages, I will describe my learning experience through a dialogue with the readings, my supervisor and myself.

No, this won't do. I am once again stuck describing through facts (p. 82). Shades of Burgundy reappear. Goldberg would command me to “(t)ell me who you really are” (p. 82).

I am a newborn colt. I lie there in the wet hay, feeling for the first time the air on my skin, and the light, somewhat blinding, in my eyes. My legs are under my belly and I struggle to get up. I bring forward my right foreleg, then my left. They are both arched and with a push forward from my torso, I lift my hind legs. I am wobbly, unable to find my center of gravity. My legs don't know how to support my weight. They bend and buckle and I stumble to the ground. I repeat this movement over and over again, for there is a force within me that reminds me that I do know how to do this (Gallwey, 1974, p. 13). I look up to see this beautiful chestnut Thoroughbred standing majestically in front of me. She inspires me as she embodies beauty, assertiveness, awareness and self-confidence. Aahhhrrr! One more push! My abdominal muscles tighten, my neck stretches, and in the most ungracious set of

movements, I get up and stagger across the stable, searching for my balance until I come to a final halt. I'm afraid to lift a leg off the ground, for I am sure to fall again. I take a step with my right foreleg. I wobble ever so clumsily, drunken by the space, the light, my body, and all this knowledge being absorbed into and projected out of my core. And there I am, standing tall, ridiculously beautiful, knowing I am on my way.



The “Researched” And The “Researcher”: One And The Same

Flashback to Friday, April 29, 2016

“This is a postmodern article that is nontraditional in its form, content, and mode of representation. Upon recognizing that we share interests and common experiences as artists, we decided to collect life history information from each other about our artistic experiences. Thus we have become, simultaneously, “the researched” and “the researcher.” In these conversations, we explore the ways in which we were each guided by our past, very strong aesthetic and artistic experiences. We also include the voices of other researchers and artists in our conversations as we explore the influences of art in the formation of our worldviews” (Finley & Knowles, 1995, p. 110).

I used to feel that breaking convention for the sake of simply breaking it was a futile exercise. When I “saw” this article, the formatting that it was in, I was brought back to this thought I used to entertain not so long ago. Yet, this is exactly why I decided to come back to university at the graduate level.

I want to experience, in the confines of a safe place, thoughts, feelings, physical experiences different from what I have been living. This is not to simply do yet another exercise.

Push my limits, question them. I realize that I am not looking for results as much as I am interested in the process. It is irrelevant to me, so to speak, if I change my way of creating or reconfirm it. I am craving new experiences in the now. As I am writing this and as I am

saying it out loud in my head, I can feel my body stretching out with open arms to its outer limit, all the while sitting comfortably on the sofa with my computer on my lap. I become bigger in presence, reaching out to something that I do not know where or what it is. But I can feel it. And while there is a lightness associated to this movement, I feel at the same time a core saddled within my basin that makes me feel grounded.

As Robert Lepage (2016) mentioned in his recent talk at Concordia, I want each representation to be a reflection of the being I am at this precise moment. I want to know who that being is and I want to feel it growing, changing, starting over, defying, and settling in only to restart the process. In one word: movement.

“Thus we have become, simultaneously, “the researched” and “the researcher”” (Finley & Knowles, p. 110). In this process of movement, I need to look into myself with the tools and skills of the researcher. I need to become both object and subject – the researched. I am trying to find my voice within the voices I portray.

Through this journey in academia, I turn to *“the voices of other researchers and artists”* to enter into *“conversations”* and *“explore”* other possibilities unbeknownst to me. I am not afraid to enter this world that I am unacquainted with. I feel serenity and a desire to surrender to it. Actually, it is more like a need.

When it comes to the issue of art in my life history, I am flooded with contradictory memories. I begin to breathe more deeply in an attempt to escape the anxiety and pain. A deep sadness and need to cry overcomes me.

I recall being pushed as a child and as an adolescent to excel in my ability to resolve problems and not be nurtured in the arts. I could never understand this split, to me it required the same kind of imagination, the same kind of permission to go and feel outside of my limits. To this day, I still don't understand why the academic world keeps science and art apart.

Individual episodes come gushing in through my memory. I am 4-5 years old, sitting on the floor of my Tia Elvira's (aunt) living room, and coloring on a glass table with my cousin Lisa who is five years older than me. The smell of the crayons is so vivid. I can see the stick of magenta color. The adults tell me that I have to be more like her, because Lisa colors within the outlines of the images. No regards to our age difference and our hand-eye coordination skill. I can hear them ask me what color is the grass – green, the sky – blue. I am but a parrot, mimicking the world as they see it. No regards to the desire to just enjoy the coloring process regardless of the outcome. No regards to imagining a world where the grass could be purple and the sky, silver. Everything had to be perfectly realistic – there was but one-way. I would feel so inadequate.

My third grade report card mentioned that I excelled in music and science. My parents and their entourage congratulated me for the science mark and totally ignored the one on music. I learned very early on to split myself down that line and watched a part of me dwindle away, just like an unused muscle, atrophied by the lack of use.

When I was nine years old, I moved to the Azores. I remember how difficult that move was for me, and particularly the fact that I had been sent back three school grades. On my first day in class, we were given as an assignment the completion of a text/story that ended in suspension points. It was a story about a seed and the wind. My teacher was so surprised at my mastery of the language as a foreigner. She wrote my work on the blackboard and made my classmates copy it onto their notebooks. She called other teachers to see it. Everyone congratulated me. All I remember is that nobody took notice of the story itself. All they saw was the correct grammar.

By the time I reached fourth grade, I believe that my voice had silenced itself and had opted instead to express itself through realism. For my art exam, I remember I drew a replica of the local garden palm tree with such mathematical precision – science to the rescue! I got a perfect score. I crack a smile as I write this down, almost used an emoticon there.

I realize today that part of my difficulty with contemporary art stems from these experiences. I feel I lack the vocabulary to understand it, and perhaps more importantly, I do not give myself the permission to imagine and feel what it can be potentially about, at least to me – I tend to want to know what the original creator’s meaning is.

Then one year, I was already a young adult when my mother, Maria Luisa, read a poem I had written for her. She told me that I should have been a writer. Even though it felt good to finally be recognized and get approval, it was too little, too late, the damage had already been done. The lack of confidence had planted its deep and ugly roots into the very core of me.

A couple of years later, and still in my twenties, I was teaching at a Portuguese community Saturday school. I was given the task to teach History to 7th graders. The catch? There was no new curriculum so I had to repeat the 6th grade one. I couldn’t bear the thought of putting these kids through this a second time, especially since they had all passed the school’s exam requirements. But that was what I had to do. So, I decided to change it up a bit. On the first day, I came with a list of themes and asked the students to organize themselves into groups and choose a topic. I challenged them to research the topic and write a play, which they would perform at the end of the school year. The topics were linked in a way that it impacted their choices so they needed to consult the various teams to create the final story. The students loved the challenge and dove right into it. About a month into the project, the administration got wind of it. They shut it down because that is not how you teach History. I was fired.

I could go on and on with examples like these. I realize that these episodes have had a great deal of negative impact on me. I never pursued and perfected the skill and knowledge to manage any artistic medium, and thus I do not refer to myself as an artist, as Boal exhales in despair!, even though a part of me wishes I did. Something in me wants to burst out of my seams and express itself. Fear of being accepted for what I want to say and how I say it inhabits me. But the fear of what can happen if I don’t is even greater.

While reading this article, I become aware of two contrasting feelings that stem from the dualistic premise that is science versus art. On the one hand, I am looking at it as a scientific article, and the unconventional format obliges me to pay more attention, to feel more active in my reading, as if I am always on the look for something. On the other, it reminds me of how plays are scripted, and I feel I am following a story, a narrative between two people who are each telling their own story, sharing and comparing their life/artistic experiences and how they relate to their worldviews.

Finally, with regards to the text as a whole, I realize that this style of writing is easier for me to read and follow. I can make connections more rapidly than in other readings laden with abstract concepts. I feel a link, somewhere just below my diaphragm, a two-way flow of energy and knowledge through an imaginary tubular structure... a conversation.

The time has come for me to connect these two sides of me, to articulate these experiences, to contextualize them, to expose myself to other ways of being and seeing and feeling and to construct my story with new tools and express my voice. It is a time for healing and to become one again. Find my strength again through my vulnerability.

Flash-back to Tuesday, August 6, 2019

Steinman, Goldberg, Allen, Laird, Saramago and now Gambs... with every reading, I discover a new pigment, a new hue, a new tone, a new texture to add to my color-palette. I do not wish to copy these author's styles, words and voices. I yearn to copy their courage and honesty, lay it all bare on the paper.

Flash-back to Friday, August 30, 2019

From the Stillness of Burgundy, Through the Movement of Bayou Blue, To the Embodiment of the Green of Change: A Journey to Be(com)ing a Self-Reflexive Oral History Performer

I like the play on becoming and being and I feel it reflects the dual aspect of the journey and the goal, which are intertwined and always being brought back into question.



Discovering My Shape-Shifting Body

Flashback to June, 2016

“Simone Forti is a dancer for whom animal studies have been primary investigation since 1968. It is not uncommon at one of Forti’s dance concerts to watch her explore the simple shift of weight from leg to leg in a way that has the same tireless inevitability as the movement of an elephant in his pen at the zoo. In a workshop with Forti, one might work for a period of time on evolutionary studies. Lying on your belly on the floor, you might explore how extending your limbs out to the sides causes the spine to ripple fishlike to move the body forward” (Steinman, 1986, p. 6).

In reading this quote from Steinman’s *The Knowing Body*, I was immediately brought back to a time when I was studying Biology at Concordia University. I excelled at the laboratory in Comparative Anatomy Studies, albeit failing miserably in the theory section of this class. I recall the teacher, whose name escapes me right now. I remember him telling me that I was one of four students in his 25 years full-time teaching experience to be able to perform a semi-circular canal extraction without injuring the organ. No small feat: three hollow canals sitting in a 3mm hole incased by cartilage laying somewhere in the inner ear. He said I had hands of gold and an intuition of where to go that was special, and that he would not hesitate to give me a reference letter for medical school to specialize in surgery. How odd, I thought back then, that he would say that, especially since I was so close to failing his course because of the theory section.

Today, I look at this situation and I realize that there is no inherent contradiction, just two different ways of feeling, of knowing the world around us. I recall how my hands would glide over the organs and through the empty spaces as if performing a dance. I remember, at times, having my eyes closed and trusting the tactile feedback I was receiving, the intense listening, not necessarily for sound, but for information, sensation, knowledge, truth, story.

I believe Forti's quote is about discovering the body as simply that, a body, stripping it away from cultural and social identity, bringing it back to its physicality, connecting deeply with its cellular memory.

So, I decided to go on a journey and replicate Forti's challenge to find within me my own animalistic evolution and (re)connect with my body. I am bridging together my knowledge of Biology (my very first area of study at the university level) and my desire to play, to move, to feel other sensations and learn other truths about myself through other methods and realities. Or perhaps simply find where my voice begins.

The Dance Of The Shape-Shifter

I am an amoeba, a single-celled organism with no defined shape, floating in water. I go where the current takes me. Yet, sometimes, I must swim in a different direction to avoid an obstacle such as the wall of the pool. I concentrate and push my cytoplasm, the viscous material within my boundaries, into one area of my miniscule body and create pseudopods that help me propel forward to where I want to go. I have a plasma membrane that keeps me from bursting. As I attempt to create another pseudopod, I can feel my belly pushing outwards, stretching my skin and hardening my stomach muscles. My arms try to extend slowly as well as my legs, but they don't feel as gelatinous as they should. I don't like this feeling. It's too much effort to obtain even the slightest movement. I feel constrained.

I decide to facilitate my locomotion by evolving into a *Paramecium*, a freshwater elongated, oval single cell visible to the naked eye. I am covered with thousands of hair-like structures, cilia that, with a sweeping unison movement, send me off at a greater speed. My left arm lies across in front of my waist and my hand holds on to the right side. My right arm is behind me and my hand holds onto the left side. My legs are twisted together. As I move my right shoulder back, the left one follows in a forward circular movement. The tension that is created at my waist flips my legs around and I move forward in a rotational manner. I push the water behind me. I stop quickly, flap my cilia (fingers in this case) and change direction. I use the reverse motion and swim backwards. I tire quickly and get dizzy. This shape also feels uncomfortable to me.

I realize that being a unicellular organism is very limiting. I want to go further, faster, I want to see more, feel more, be aware of other ways of being, of knowing.

I become a flying fish. Not content with just being in water, I develop fins that feel more like wings and so I use them to “swim” or “fly” above water. As I use the butterfly stroke to mimic the airborne feeling of “flying” parallel to the water, I realize that I am not interested in what is above water. I want to go back in.

I feel limbs pushing outwardly from my slimy body. I am a salamander. I decide to change my means of locomotion and attempt a terrestrial experience. My awkward right-angled limbs move only one at a time. I feel flattened, limited. I feel so vulnerable even though I have the power of regeneration. I can't leave the water just yet my skin is too porous to be exposed to the sun. But I discover a new sensation that of breathing air. A sense of coolness moves through my nostrils, down my larynx into my thorax. Oddly enough, I don't really feel it coming out.

I'm hungry. I'm T. rex and I must make my way to the kitchen that is in the back of the house. I am huge. My massive feet pound on the floor (I hope my downstairs neighbors are not home!) as I run towards food. My stride is large, my legs apart, a ripple goes up my spine as my feet hit the floor. My legs are slightly bent to obtain more bounce forward with each stride. My arms feel tiny in comparison to the rest of me. I have enormous teeth, but instead of my head being proportionate to my teeth, I feel as though it is still Nisa's head and the teeth don't fit in my mouth. I struggle with the place of my jaw. It gags me. I believe I have to be violent in order to be a T. rex and somehow I cannot summon this emotion. Everything feels off.

I could never be a reptile. It feels so unnatural to me. I am so uncomfortable in that shape. I don't like the feeling of my dried up skin. I wonder how I'll feel when I grow old and my skin no longer holds moisture and collagen?

I continue my terrestrial experience as a Border collie. It is a beautiful warm sunny day outside. I'm in the park, my back rubbing against the grass. I can smell the broken stems (Oops! I hope my laundry detergent can get the stains off my coat!) I move my hips and shoulders right to left, left to right, as my paws (hands and feet) come together waist height on one side of my body, then the other as I rotate from side to side. I get up by pushing with my thorax forward until I can get my paws (hands) on the ground, which helps me push up my legs. My mouth is open, I am panting, and my tongue sticks out. My mouth becomes extremely dry very quickly. I gasp for air. I realize there and then that I am not a dog.

I am a falcon. I am majestic. My head is held up high, my thorax protruding forward and I am standing erect on my own two feet. I run down the corridor, flapping my arms to take flight. But my left arm won't flap – time to see the Thai yoga therapist – I feel like my wing is broken. I hold it folded, close to my body in a protective way. I don't feel like a bird, yet I want to fly, I want to learn paragliding, feel the wind currents taking me away, seeing the world through a different perspective... But, today, I don't want to see the world, I want to see me, dive deep within...

When I was growing up in the Azores my friends nicknamed me The Dolphin. I would swim in and out of the water like dolphins do when they are skimming the surface as they swim in front of boats. I loved that feeling of playfulness. It was so joyous, full of life, full of movement. As I try to replicate it, I bring my arms forward, hands together as if to form the shape of a Bottlenose dolphin's head. I dive into the water but only deep enough to wet my whole body. My legs and feet are joined and are used as a propeller. It feels very hydrodynamic. Yet, I am uncomfortable with this boost of energy. I don't feel a connection with myself. As I am thinking this, an unexpected and spontaneous metamorphosis happens.

I transform myself into a Sperm whale diving deep into the ocean blue. I feel the immensity of my body yet the support from the water renders me light, graceful in my movements. It is serene down there and the deeper I dive the more serene I am. The sense of depth on the outside of my body is paralleled with a sense of interiority within me. As I swim effortlessly

to the bottom of this ocean of blue, as the water passes behind me, an energy moves through me from the inside, starting from my head, moving towards my sacrococcyx (the end of my spine) and out through my feet. It feels like a filter cleansing me. I no longer feel me, Nisa. I have become the Sperm whale. I am a Sperm whale. I can only see an image of a sperm whale accompanying my movements. It's not another whale, it feels more like my mirror image or an out of body experience. All I feel, what I enjoy, is the silence. I feel the power moving up my body, through my body into my shoulders and my head as I prepare to re-enter the water. I feel my column extending, curving until it reaches an apex formed by the bend of my upper and lower body. Finally, my tale (feet) re-enter the water with a strong push, yet barely disturbing the water surface.

I slowly make my way back up for air. My head sticks out of the water just enough for my nostrils to be exposed and take in the air I need. I repeat the same motions and sensation to return to the bottom. I can be in this state forever. Actually, I don't want to leave it.

In my human form, I have skipped all the stages of development. I am a seasoned dancer. I am in the kitchen. The music blares from a 1961 Telefunken Allegro 5183W Hi-Fi stereo. As I move through the floor, in different combinations of footsteps and arm movements, I experience liberation and an awareness of the space I inhabit. I feel the freedom of a child, feeling my body younger regardless of the fact that there are various positions I cannot hold because of my aging body. The wisdom acquired through experience creates a deep sense of serenity.

As I hear the music, I see choreography/movement, I do not hear individual instruments. All my senses pick up different stimuli, but the actual experience does not feel so compartmentalized. What begins as a dialogue between myself, my body, the music and objects surrounding me quickly dissipates to become simply movement. All embodied in one. Just like when I took on the shape of the Sperm whale, I can watch myself dance. I am not Nisa, the dancer, but simply a dancer.

I can still recall Remo's insistence on how I placed my foot on the dance floor. Remo was my Ballroom Dance teacher. What movement can I generate from a planted foot? What movement is restricted when on my heels? How does the ball of the foot help me with my posture in Latin Dance? Remo taught me to feel the different parts of my body and what movements I can create from the different weight distributions and transfers. He made me aware of the physicality of my body and the interconnectedness of its parts. He made me aware of what movement is and the artistry one can convey.

Thanks to this awareness, I can express myself as well as interpret the world around me without words or two-dimensional images. I realize now how much I miss this part of me, how silenced it has been in the last few years. I don't know why it's happened.

While doing Forti's experiment, an issue other than the pure physicality of movement and body awareness came to light, the issue of embodiment, "becoming" something else other than myself. Or is it really so?

These moments of fusion Nisa/Sperm whale, Nisa/dancer, confuse me. While I absolutely love the sensation they procure me, I don't know where my voice is and I feel lost. A battle between the desire to totally surrender and the need to control the moment possesses me.

This sensation is further aggravated when I am playing a real life character. When I am telling the stories of these immigrant women, paying deep attention to their every word, every hesitation, every facial expression and body language as to reproduce it with the utmost precision and respect, where am I in this representation? And why is this matter important to me now?

There are times that I don't worry about representing these women faithfully. I just simply narrate their stories. I use a soft, low voice yet self-assured. I don't need to shout to be heard. Actually, I believe this self-restrained style is more intimate and makes my listener a more active one, as they have to truly pay attention to hear the story. In this case, I am well

aware the stylistic choices that I am making and of myself. *“Aren’t the stories also in the bodies?”* Warren asks (W. Linds, personal communication, July 11, 2019). The smile on my face tells me I don’t need to answer.

From a purely intellectual reading, I can see how I am in, I am a part of, and I am the character/animal I play. My years in Film Studies help me with this concept. Where I place my camera, the formal choices I make when filming and editing a documentary is always from my point of view, so it is a reflection of me. But when it comes to “incarnating” a character, I have difficulty understanding this. The lines are blurred, assuming there are lines to be blurred. I don’t feel it in my bones. This is my quest, where my anxiety stems from. A feeling of immobility and a build up of pressure in my head possess me. I begin to hyperventilate. This is what I want to break out of. This is why I crave movement. I am flooded with one liners and methodologies. “Fake it until you make it,” “Change your behavior and your attitude will follow,” the Actor’s method, the naturalistic method, ...

In the end, I just want to be. But what does this mean really? I get glimpses of this when I feel aligned as Steinman points out (1986, p. 11), when I am in my partner’s arms, eyes closed, dancing tango across a crowded room, gliding on the dance floor, flowing with the crowd in a total feeling of control and abandonment, of trust and alertness, me and my partner, two beings forming one entity, one entity in the midst of so many others, becoming one with them until there is no feeling of separation of parts, just a full communion, a greater oneness.

I miss play. The freedom to simply be anything no matter how insane it may seem. Feel the joy of choice and the fearlessness of others’ judgment. I miss movement.

I just want to be. Am I really two entities, “me” and “the character I perform”, or do “I” come through in the performance? If so what part of me do I share? What memory embedded in my cells, my muscles, my organs, my bones, my being am I calling to the foreground?

Forti's exercises allow me to feel my body anatomically. They allow me a deep understanding of what I can express physically. They allow me to experience the sense of oneness that represents a holistic approach to expression. Yet, there is still a part of me wondering who am I in this equation. Perhaps this quest of searching for my voice has more to do with being assertive than it is with the message.

Post-script: When I refer to my voice, I am actually speaking of my artistic expression. What I mean by being assertive is the permission I give myself to be an artist. And, the message is simply my point of view. This feels like a breakthrough. Now, how do I embody it?

Looking back through my writings it struck me how each paragraph on my relationship to art was about the lack of validation, the silencing of my artistic voice. It became much clearer to me than when I wrote it in the first place. Furthermore, I could see the connection of words and expressions like "my voice", "assertiveness" and "message" to this premise. It felt like an epiphany. It was immediate and spontaneous. It gelled with my body. It felt like a cellular memory brought to the foreground.

Mixed feelings invaded me. Joy of self-discovery, for sensing a moment of breakthrough knowledge. Sadness, similar to mourning, for all that time lost in this atrophied state. Forgiveness for not having the courage and strength to push through the self-imposed boundaries and the obstacles set forth by others and myself. A commitment to nurture that voice once again and express myself. It is time for me to write/dance/perform my story and help others discover and nurture their voices.



My Fight Song

Flashback to Saturday, August 27, 2016

“You learn only to adjust your energy to fit the spaces allotted to you by others, and never find out how to manage and enjoy the natural flow of your own energy in the world” (Allen, 1995, p. 22).

Permission. Not from others, but from myself. Permission to imagine, to be, to express, to challenge, to break out of, to experiment, to embody. Permission to find my voice and voice it out loud. These are my first thoughts and desires.

Breaking free from the “allotted spaces” (p. 22), the permitted spaces, that my parents, my educators, my family, friends and acquaintances, my employers and colleagues have pressed upon me and that I so easily accepted. *“(G)rass – green, the sky – blue.”* “Easily” is an understatement, at the cost of silencing my own creativity.

Growing up in a family and community that did not nurture the arts limited my artistic voice. Adapting to their expectations was first and foremost my priority as a sensitive and sensible child. Repeating traditional art forms, such as embroidery or folk dancing, was encouraged, but only to the point of perfecting the stitch or dance step. Never questioning the model nor creating new knowledge. I am but a parrot, mimicking the world as they see it.

Encouragement to try something new, to create and nurture individuality was not of importance. Actually, it was frowned upon. The new, the different, was to be feared, distrusted.

From this experience was born my own inability to have “(t)he courage and curiosity to make contact with the imagination and the means to make a mark” (p. xi). This said, I feel a paradigm shift inside me. It is time for me to find the courage within me and surround myself with people who will help me on this journey. “(F)ind out how to manage and enjoy the natural flow of (my) own energy in the world” (p. 22).

Trust. Trust the process (p. vii). Trust that I have something to say, something to share, something worth listening to. This sounds like a search for validation and in a way it is. However, the first step that I really want to put into practice is to find my voice, my truth, my story and be able to use it and project it outside of me. To own it.

My friend, Carlos (C. Miranda, personal communication, 1992), once told me that the film he wanted to make was in his head. He had already seen the final version. If it never got made, it was the rest of us who didn’t get to see it, experience it. I understand what he is saying. Yet, I feel the need to get it out of my head and give it an external life that can be shared by and with others.

To do so, I have to give myself permission and trust the process.

A white Lusitano horse runs freely in a sea of green pastures up a hillside, its tale arched up in the air, its mane flowing in the wind.

As I continue my walk, I’m feeling the ever so slight breeze caressing my skin. I stretch out my arms just enough to feel it pass over and under them. My hands are stretched out and tilting just like the wings of a bird when it glides or those of an airplane when readying for landing. I feel like I’m floating, gliding, I feel so light as if gravity has no say. My mind navigates through these sensations. I recall an episode of active imagination (p. 117) of the embodiment of a woman dressed in white. A fury of questions on how to both live these experiences and write about them arises. Will they lose in intensity if I write them from memory? What exactly will they lose? What can they gain? If I stop to write or even audio record, I am no longer in the experience. How do I balance this quest of awareness of the

present moment? What am I willing to sacrifice? It became clear to me that I had to continue in the experience. Leave the recording for later. So far, not too bad. I know I already forgot a few details, but at the time, embodying the moment was much more important.

This last series of questions remind me of a struggle I had with photography: the choice that one makes between living the moment and capturing the perfect image. I eventually resolved this issue by choosing ahead of time if I was going to be in the experiencing of the event or I was looking for the best frame. This way, by stating my intent, I would be in the here and now of either of my choices. Perhaps, I should try the same approach to writing?

Allen (p. 24) goes on to say “(w)ithout action, however small, our intentions cannot manifest but remain wishful thinking.” I feel I need to expose myself more, to different forms of art, information that is new to me, learn but I also have to do, make, put myself out there. As I write these lines I realize I resist using the word “try.” If I try, I am, on the one hand, not committing to what I am doing. On the other, I feel like I’m protecting myself from a result, an outcome, deemed by others and myself unworthy (?) Not good enough? I don’t want to quantify, qualify, evaluate the outcome. Right now, I just want to do. Dance, write, sculpt, paint, ... Just feel the different mediums and what they say to me, evoke in me.

I stand tall and assertive. My body begins to flow, my arms extend to the right in a rippling motion from my shoulder to the tip of my fingers, my torso sways and my hips rotate, my feet respond with an up and down movement. I smile and I dance to Calysta Bevier’s 2016 rendition of Rachel Patten’s *Fight Song* (2014) playing in my head and that has become my anthem.

Like a small boat
On the ocean
Sending big waves
Into motion
Like how a single word
Can make a heart open
I might only have one match
But I can make an explosion

And all those things I didn't say
Wrecking balls inside my brain
I will scream them loud tonight
Can you hear my voice this time?



This is my fight song
Take back my life song
Prove I'm alright song
My power's turned on
Starting right now I'll be strong
I'll play my fight song
And I don't really care if nobody else
believes
'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me
(...)

Where I Need To Be

Flashback to Monday, September 12, 2016

It is Monday night, sometime close to 6:30pm, a group of students ready ourselves for Luis Sotelo-Castro's Oral History Performance PERC398/AA, INDI 620/R in my case, Fall 2016 first class. We are in the MB 7.101 SWG, a theatre classroom. Wall to wall windows on the northwest corner of the building cast a view onto the Mount Royal Mountain and surrounding buildings. The trees resist changing the color of their leaves from green to hues of autumn reds and gold. Outside, below us, people hustle past each other, oblivious to the fact that I am hovering above, watching them and creating little stories in my head about their movement. Inside, there are no desks. A black standup piano with a stool, twenty odd thin blue mattresses, some thirty black metallic chairs with plastic seats and perhaps five grey folding 8*4ft long, or maybe 6*3ft, tables, all stacked perfectly in their respective categories tucked away in different corners of the room. Close to the glass wall that separates the classroom from the corridor, a large screen hangs from the ceiling. A closet filled with audiovisual equipment announces the endless possibilities of use of this room. Thick heavy brown (no black, I went back to check) curtains hang the length and width of each wall. I don't like it when they're drawn. I feel claustrophobic. I want to connect with the world outside. Yet, I can see how them being drawn shut can offer a sheltered haven for me, and my classmates, to explore safely and privately our questions, answers, thoughts, fears, emotions, feelings, bodies and movements.

We each take turns presenting ourselves. We are a small group, fourteen perhaps. Luis gives us the curriculum and asks us to share what we think of the image on the cover, *Colombian Girl* by Jesus Abad Colorado. It becomes immediately evident the various and personal filters we each hold.

Tension. This is a word that will haunt me for the rest of my journey into the Masters. Don't like tension, yet I can see how from it I can create ... and more so, how I can make an audience and myself reflect on an issue.

We proceed to do various exercises on oral history storytelling/performance. What happens when we narrate ourselves as a first person? What about the third person? What happens when we narrate other people's stories in the first person? And in the third? How does the audience relate to the two? And what about our understanding the language? And what of listening to a translation? How does it change my interpretation both as actor and audience of what is said? What messages am I getting from body language?

I realized there and then that I was exactly where I needed to be.

Suddenly, and for the first time, I saw how my practice as an oral history performer was stuck in the Stillness of Burgundy.



Position Yourself!

Flashback to Monday, September 19, 2016

Luis would use these words over and over again, "*Position yourself!*" It wasn't until much, much later, two years later, at the Oral History Symposium held at Concordia University that these words would profoundly resonate in me.

Flash-forward to some time in July 2019

That evening (Wednesday, October 10, 2018), I participated in Luis Carlos Sotelo-Castro's ***Not Being Able to Speak Is Torture***. Prior to entering the installation, the participants were invited to feast together and exchange personal stories about food. This provided a chance to create a sense of group, which was essential to the exercise of group listening once inside the installation. At the end of this sound installation, the group discussed their experience.

00:16:33 - 00:18:53

Me: ""(...) *the two people beside me sat down and I was very, I was standing Tall and I was trying to listen but listen with everybody, so I was very aware of the physicality of the people beside me, and I was feeling out of place because I was standing so tall. And, and then to not*

want to move, to listen as much as I possibly could, but at the same time wanting to sit down but not wanting to interrupt the other people and their listening, but then I realized we are listening as a group so all of it is part of it at the same time. But what was interesting also about the stillness of it all, was that at one point, I could see dust particles. And so it felt like time had stopped and I was just listening to this story in the present of something, I don't know how present it was in the particular case of this lady, I mean, I know the history of it but not this particular interview, and, and there was just this stillness, where, I was just trying to be immersive, I was trying to imagine, especially with the beginning of the recording to me, the sounds that it was making made me think of a train and being leaned against a wagon wall or having to sit down and not move, not move, not allow myself to move, you know, so you're not caught, you're not seen, you're not heard, like she kept saying, trying to physically reproduce those, those cues that they were saying, you know, you can't make noise, you can't do this, you can't do that, and, and, it was, it was disconcerting. Yeah, because on the one hand, I felt I did not have the right to feel that way because I didn't live it. Ah, so you know, how phony am I being? And, on the other hand, I, I, I felt like, I really wanted to empathize and I could, I could use these skills that I have of, of, of, of being kinaesthetic, and, and, and, and using my body to try and bring, and raise those emotions, you know? So, so it was, it was very difficult for me to negotiated that, you know, for me.”

00:25:03 – 00:28:12

Luis: ““(…) one of the purposes of doing this as well is to see not just how to facilitate listening between families but also in an intercultural context, in this global cities where (...) where emotions connect with different places. And in that sense, I have a little bit of a problem with the term empathy, in the sense that, I kind of, kind of avoid that term. Um, it's fine you describe your emotions the way you want but for me, the focus of this experience is you, it's not the person telling the story, is you and that's why it's a maze, that's why it's physical. It's how you have to negotiate things because your decisions in space made your experience. And these are the decisions that actually interest me and that I think probably interest you. [I just made the connection with finding my voice amongst the voices I hear and speak.] And yes the story interests us, oh, but the fact that you wanted to take distance because of a number of things. And, a, similarly, that you wanted to observe a point, that, that is what actually

matters in many way, and that is probably where we can start a conversation about, about, the, the, the, the effect of listening to these kinds of stories, right? Um, so in that sense for me it's less about empathy and more about what I call positioning, like a self-positioning. How do you position yourself in relation to those things? [Made me think of not wanting to be on the transcripts.] Physically, do you want to be outside? Do you want to be inside? Do you want to sit or be, a, standing? So that is a positioning and a, and a there, but some people approach it in a more empathic way and there are risks in doing that. So, a, we experienced someone who is an actress and wanted to experience it so empathically and close her eyes and she was crying at one point. She was really trying to, you know, experience it as if she was, she in the other person's position. And I think that's the, that's the, in general, like, a challenge in oral history and in oral history performances eh, yeah, where is it (???) and who is it for?"

I hurt. I'm trying to get it "right." I feel this opposing pull between Oral History and Oral History Performance. How can I serve two Gods? Can I serve two Gods?

I am not quite sure why I feel they are at odds. *"(T)he focus of this experience is you, it's not the person telling the story,"* he said. *"Not the storyteller?"* I ask.

My belly pushes up against my contracting diaphragm producing a breath of defeat, while my lips part ever so slightly and a broken, fragile voice exhales, *"Help me, please!"*

I am stuck again in quicksand, immobile. The Green of Change fades away before my eyes, while the Movement of Bayou Blue leaves my body until I am fully immersed in the Stillness of Burgundy.

I surrender to sleep.

The next day, I cross paths with Luis and two other people who were present the night before. We pick up the conversation where we had left off. This time, I am free of my fear of "getting it right" and the shame of having focused on myself. Fully aware of this new found vision, I give myself permission to have a voice, my voice, and I proceed to tell them in

detail about my self-positioning: the struggle I had with not wanting to disturb people as I wanted to finally sit down, the struggle with the concept of touching someone else while unaware of their level of comfort with being touched by a “relative stranger,” the struggle I felt with regards to the participant who was obviously distraught and left the maze and my need to go and comfort him all the while realizing his need to be alone and, my active and constant negotiation with my choices of who to listen to, i.e., the story coming through the walls that I could return to, the people with me in the maze, the person in need, and/or my own body, thoughts and emotions.

I hear Luis’ voice once again:

00:05:20 – 00:06:09

“It’s about creating a framework that is a spatial and social framework for people to listen. The space gives you options (...) it places you in a social situation and that’s part of the experience. So the entire thing is to avoid that content is the sound only. The content is actually what may emerge in the process of approaching that content. So that is why we thought of the maze (??) forces people to move, it still gives you that possibility, but still, still, like a container.” (I just made a connection with why I did the wedding reception).

And I am reminded of Butler’s (2007, p. 362) description of John Cage’s concert:

“As the realisation dawns that the performer is not going to perform, the listening attention of the audience inevitably drew to the sounds around them; the movements and noises of the area outside the hall, and any breathing, coughing or shuffling that happened inside it. As a site of meaning, the concert hall is transformed from highly ritualised and (self) controlled area into a dynamic, complex place where potentially anything could happen.”

Now, I feel possibilities opening up to me. I realize that performing oral history is not only about empathizing with narrator. It can also be about how I, researcher, researched, performer and spectator, position myself, and what questions and conversations can arise from these experiences. Whilst a little voice keeps asking me, “*What about the storyteller?*” I still don’t have the answer. But shades of Bayou Blue reappear in the horizon.



Design and Fabrics

Flashback to sometime in November 2002

It was a beautiful crisp autumn morning. My friend Humberta Araújo, a journalist by profession, and I sit at an oceanfront terrace and sip away at our perfect espressos, while the sunbeams warm our uncovered skin as ships sail past us, some seeking adventures into the open waters, while others bring tales from far away lands to the safety of the Ponta Delgada harbour in the middle of the North Atlantic.

We are in 2002, the year prior to the 50th anniversary of the first official Portuguese large-scale immigration wave to Canada. Celebrations across both countries are being prepared and publicized to mark this occasion: the arrival of “(s)ixty-nine men aboard the *Saturnia* (...) at Piers 21 in Halifax on May 13, 1953 (Pier 21).”

“And what about the pioneer women?” Humberta cannot contain her disbelief. *“Shouldn’t they have a voice?”* she rhetorically asks. *“I want to do something to show these women’s points-of-view.”* Her speech and body language confirm her determination. *“You work in film-making, what do you think about making a documentary on this subject?”*

And with that invitation a whole new chapter of my life began to unfold.

I confess. I smile. This is my mischievous salute to Alexander Freund (2014). Little did I know back then that this would lead me down an 18year long project/pathway that would bring me back into the academic world. When I embarked on this journey, I had no idea that what I was doing had a name: Oral History.

I had no training in interviewing techniques, just an intuition that served as a beacon throughout. I had no idea of the ethical issues that could cross my path. All I had was my own moral compass to guide me through and navigate the storms.

I was driven by a deep curiosity for the human component of this (hi)story and a deep respect for these women's lived experiences. *Vivências*, as we say in Portuguese, a word whose root origin derives from the Latin verb *vivere*, to live. A word I have difficulty translating into any of the other three languages I master: there is an embodied quality to these "experiences," as if seared/engraved into the flesh and soul of the person who has lived them.

Alas, the documentary would not come to fruition. Yet, the desire to hear these women's voices would effervesce inside me like the hot springs in Furnas, Azores. I could not let go.

In 2007, I spent 3 days at the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Library, in Lisbon, and 55 days in the Azores at the Biblioteca Pública e Arquivos Regionais de Ponta Delgada, the Biblioteca Municipal da Lagoa, Biblioteca Municipal da Ribeira Grande, Biblioteca Municipal da Vila Franca and Biblioteca Municipal de Nordeste. I visited or contacted 15 other libraries where I found little or no documents on the subject. In total, I digitized 65,000 documents pertaining to women's immigration requests to Canada between the years 1953-1959, and to official communication between the Portuguese Ministry of the Interior and the Embassy of Portugal in Ottawa.

With this information I created a database. My hope was to track these women and interview them about their 50+ yearlong journeys, to listen to their stories, their voices and their reflections, and to uncover their perceived identity and sense of belonging. I wanted to add their interviews to this database, alongside personal photographs and audio-visual recordings, and visual representations of memorabilia that was of importance to them. Ultimately, I hoped for/wanted to show the hidden diversity amongst these women and dispel the stereotype of the little old lady, all dressed in black and with gold earrings that was trapped inside her patriarchal community and blocked off from the world beyond it.

Flashback to sometime in February-March 2004

Questionnaire

Humberta Araújo, an Azorean journalist, and I created a list of questions, in typical Western style story chronology of past to present, for the interviewees. We also researched the political context in which this immigration occurred, to better understand the women's answers.

Part I – A Portrait of the Times

In the 1950's, Canada needs immigrant manpower for its agricultural and dairy industries, amongst other specializations. Concurrently, the Azores–Portugal is stricken with over-population, joblessness, earthquakes and weather calamities. The closure of emigration to Brazil and the United States by the late 1940's worsens the Azorean problem. Thus, a protocol is signed in 1951 between Canada and Portugal to remedy these situations. *Saturnia*, is the first ship to sail with 18 Azorean passengers on board. It arrives at Piers 21 on May 13, 1953, the day of Our Lady of Fatima, patron saint of Portugal.

In the early years, only the men were allowed to immigrate. Their geographical movement led them from Piers 21, Halifax–Nova Scotia to Quebec, all the way to British Columbia by 1956. Then, due to a slowdown of available jobs in agriculture and railways out west, many

of the men eventually return east to cities like Montreal and Toronto. The concentration and the establishment of the communities in the 50-60's is a direct consequence of these migratory patterns, of the search for employment and above all else, the arrival of the women and children to Canada.

Part II – Women's Lives Prior to Departure

What were the social, cultural, religious, and economic realities of the day-to-day lives of Azorean women before their departure?

How did they meet their future husbands? How was the courtship?

How was the correspondence with family, husbands and fiancés already in Canada? What did they write about in their letters? What photographs did they send? Did they send money from Canada, and if so, what was it for? Did they send "*barricas*," barrels or large bags with clothing and other goods, including chewing gum and candies for the children?

Part III – Departure and Arrival

How did they prepare themselves for the departure? What papers did they need? What was the departure like? What articles did they bring? Did they bring a Holy Spirit crown and "Santo Cristo" (Ecce Homo) figurine, the two local religious symbols?

What did they expect to find?

How was the trip? And the arrival in Canada? What airplane or ship did they take? How were the airport/port conditions? What were the support services from the local emigration in Portugal? And the reception by Canadian authorities? What support did other immigrants already established in Canada offer?

What did the women find?

What is their first memory? Their first impressions? Were their expectations met?

At arrival, how did their families and husband greet them?

Part III – Organizing Life in Canada

What were the first living-quarters like? How did they reorganize the “suite” to resemble an Azorean home?

What was their first job? What were the working conditions in the fields and in the factories like? How did other Azorean women “with seniority” in the factories treat them? How did they feel upon receiving their first pay and what did they use it for? Did the men help out at home with the daily chores?

What was their role in relation to men in the community who were not next of kin?

What did they think of the local food? How did they get Portuguese products? How long before the first Portuguese grocery stores and bakeries opened?

How did they keep their religious traditions? How did they feel about going to mass in a foreign language? How did they organize the first religious festivities within the community? What was their involvement in the construction of Portuguese churches and community centers?

Did they learn the/either official languages? Where and how did they learn? Were they dependent on the children’s knowledge of the official languages to communicate with the “outside” world? How did the politics of language applied by local authorities influence their learning the official languages?

How did the isolation in farms, woodlands and big cities affect them?

How did they cope with the climate?

How did they relate to women of other ethnicities? What differences and similarities did they find?

What was their first house owned-property like? How did this contribute to their autonomy in Canada?

How was it to give birth in a foreign land? How did the children's upbringing in this new homeland compare to their own back in the Azores? How did they cope with the cultural differences raised by their children? What level of academic education did they have and their children? Did they rely on baby-sitting? Did the women dedicate themselves exclusively to the home environment?

What were the issues that the new nuclear family model brought upon them? Did they suffer from solitude resulting from the lack of support by the traditional extended Azorean family? Were they victims of marital violence? Did they have recourse to local authorities to defend their rights? Did they keep up appearances in front of the community?

What was it like to go to the doctor? How did they communicate with non-Portuguese speaking doctors? Did they ever address mental health issues?

Did they break away from tradition to guarantee their own survival and that of their children's? How did they experience widowhood, separation and divorce?

Did they get involved in the social and political life of the adoptive land?

Did they sponsor their old parents? Were the grandmothers used as baby-sitters? Did the grandparents' pension contribute to the family finances?

Part IV – The future generations

How were the communication and relationship between the three generations: grandmother, mother and daughter? What were the contradictions between the cultures of the mothers, the grandmothers and the young girls born or raised in Canada?

What professions did the next generation follow? Were they manual labor or liberal professions? What were the reasons that led to their choice? What are the pioneers' lessons for the next generation?

How do they see the new generation of women scholars, entrepreneurs and other liberal professionals? What do they think of these women's political participation and full integration in the local development? What do they think of the future of the Portuguese community?

Do they teach Portuguese to the grandchildren? Do they take them on trips to discover the land of their ancestors?

Part V – Identity and sense of belonging

How do they see their contribution to Canadian multiculturalism/Québécois integration? And how were they influenced by it?

What does Azoreanism mean to them now?

At journey's end, what are they the most proud of? What is their greatest remorse? What do they wish for today? Was this journey worthwhile? Why?

Would they ever return to the Azores to live? Why? How do they see themselves today, as Azorean, Portuguese, Québécois, Canadian? Where do they feel they belong?

Flashback to sometime in May 2007

It is a beautiful sunny morning. I am returning to Montreal later in the day from my stay in the Azores. I go meet Margo to say my good-byes.

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do since my apartment is still under a sublet lease," I confide to her.

“Why don’t you start looking for the women for your project?” she says to me in a matter of fact way.

And so it began, my journey across Canada on the Via Rail train, going from community to community searching for these women.

My second to last stop is Victoria, British Columbia. My mother has a friend, Dora, who lives there and has agreed to take me in, offer me room and board, and find women for me to interview and take me to them. Dora and I have never met.

I take the bus from Port Hardy to Victoria to meet with her. As I go down the bus steps, my eyes search for a clue, like a sign with my name to tell me whom Dora is. Suddenly, I see this petite, lively woman, with a Portuguese flag in her hand.

“Dora?” I inquire.

“Yes, yes, it’s me. I thought the Portuguese flag would be the perfect way for you to recognize me,” she says enthusiastically, proudly and believing wholeheartedly that this was indeed the best, and perhaps the only, way for me to identify her. I smile.

Flashback to Saturday, June 6, 2007

Noémia greets us with much delight. She strikes me as a confident woman. She is elegantly dressed in a red and beige patterned dress, medium-sized thick gold hoop earrings, and with a watch, bracelet and rings embellishing her hands and wrists. Her light ash blonde hair is perfectly coiffed and her make-up is subtle.

She guides us through a narrow corridor lined with Bisque porcelain dolls, her pride and joy. She gives us a tour of the house, always pointing out her treasured dolls. There are hundreds of them. I experience a deep sense of malaise. All those glass eyes staring at me from all corners.

The living room is filled with family photographs, porcelain figurines, and both real and fake plants. Each tabletop and plant holder has an embroidery centerpiece laid out over it, including the back of the sofas and armchairs. I recognize this type of decoration as a typical immigrant Azorean household. The only thing missing is the plastic covering still on the canapés.

Noémia sits back comfortably into the far end corner of the 3-seat beige sofa. Not an ideal place for filming with my Panasonic PV-GS500 3-CCD Mini DV Camcorder, but I do not want to disturb her. I hope that by adding an extra frontal light in postproduction I can remedy the issue. As I prep the camera, I make sure I have no dolls in the frame. I cannot bear the distraction. I have stripped Noémia of part of her identity.

I explain to Noémia the reason for this interview. I want to collect life stories of Azorean pioneer immigrant women. I want to make these stories known, grant audience to them. I want to make a documentary, curate museum exhibitions and do storytelling events. What form precisely this interview will take eventually, I do not know at this moment. Noémia consents to this openness and agrees that the experiences of these women should be shared.

Back in the Azores, Noémia was a seamstress, working for another woman. Five years later, she decided to become self-employed and work in the town for people who were financially secure. She earned twelve escudos a day with breakfast, lunch and dinner included.

Noémia was also a singer for the church choir ever since she was a little girl. She sings to me *Adeste Fidelis* (King John IV of Portugal, 1640), a song she proudly performed as a soloist every Christmas midnight mass. Years later, she would return to choir singing in Victoria at the Portuguese church, which was at first in a makeshift room with an altar organized by Padre Manuel. And at the time of this interview, she was still performing.

The days before her departure were very busy, going into the city to get all her documents, buying items to bring with her such as the Sacred Family figurine. They were days filled with excitement because she would see her husband soon.

“Oh! This is at the end of the world!” she says as she tells me of the four planes she had to take to get here from São Miguel-Santa Maria-Toronto-Vancouver-Victoria. *“I arrived very tired. The trip was very long.”*

Her husband had already bought a house for them. He made a down payment of \$1,000, *“as it was custom for those days,”* followed by the monthly mortgage, *“like everyone else.”* *“He showed me the house, but it was only the next day did I go see it. I was too tired on arrival. I turned off the phone and told him we were going to sleep. And it was our wedding night, again. It was nice,”* she says with a sigh.

She learnt English mostly by ear while working with Canadians. Eventually, she went to night school to learn how to conjugate verbs in the past, present and future. *“It was my interest in the language that made me learn it,”* she says with pride.

Two and a half years upon arrival, Noémia began to work cleaning private homes, then offices at night. She got her driver’s license very early on, which gave her much autonomy to do things on her own.

She gave birth to three boys, who completed 12 Grade and went on to work as a mechanic, a construction supplier and a carpenter. They all understand Portuguese, but only one of them speaks it, *“because he married a Portuguese girl, whose family also spoke the language at home.”* Her grandchildren speak even less, but she does her best to help them by translating into English.

Noémia does not stick to the Western-style story chronology that my questionnaire is built on. Instead, she lets her memory make the connections and speaks her voice according to her own agency. She frequently uses dialogue as a narrative form, which renders the telling more engaging, and plays with her voice intonation, both in rhythm and pitch, reeling me into her world. She speaks fluent Portuguese, but every once in a while switches to English, sometimes just a word here or there, others full sentences.

Throughout the interview, Noémia is at ease, sitting back with her arms crossed. Then, suddenly, she becomes animated, brings herself to the edge of the seat, moving her head and arms a lot as punctuation marks to her speech, and also as directions of here/there and past/present. Once these episodes done, she returns to her original position.

What I admire the most in Noémia is her ability to laugh at herself. Each story she tells is followed with a giggle or an outright burst of laughter, and a comment about “*the way things were back then.*” She displays all along a self-reflexive attitude with regards to both past and present.

The interview comes to an end. Hopeful promises are made of meeting up again one day to have a coffee together at her favorite café. Somehow, we both know this will not come to be. Still, we part with a deep connection stemming from an emergent trust, respect and the deep listening we have just experienced.

Noémia shared with me many other stories/anecdotes from her journey. I know my editing them out is another form of stripping away at her identity, her voice. Only this time, I am doing it because they are being withheld to premier on another project.

Flashback to Monday, November 14, 2016

"You will create a performance based on an interview that you will conduct," Luis directed us.

Immediately, I thought of the immigrant women's interviews I had done in 2007. And just as suddenly, the topic emerged. I would do a series of sketches on courtship.

Why courtship? Why this theme in particular when those conversations were of the life story construct of identity and sense of belonging? I do not know why. All I could hear was Noemia's words, *"Era muito, muito restri, muito restrict. Era muito demais. Isso também afetava o sexo da rapariga."* *"It was very, very restri, very restrict. It was too much. This also affected the girl's sex(uality)."*

The class is divided into small groups to discuss our individual concepts. We assemble on the floor. To my right, a young man with curly dark hair sits tall, speaks clearly and analytically. To my left, a *petite taille* woman supports her head with one arm anchored on her knee, her expression revealing curiosity and deep listening. I cannot wait for my turn. I am a rocket ready for launching.

I can see it all. From my eyes, I project into the vacuum of the classroom 3D images that rise from the floor as if created by interior design software. There will be a wedding reception. The guests will be the audience. It will be a participatory performance. I will tell the stories. I will use my parents' nuptial cover. There will be food and drinks.

I pause for a moment. I still don't know the reason I am doing this or why I am doing it this way. I simply trust the images that are coming forth. I hear Allen (1995) reminding me that *"the image is the messenger of your soul and never comes to harm you. The misperception of art school critique is that the image needs to be improved through criticism. The misperception of art therapy is that the image must be analyzed. Both approaches try to overpower the image with intellect. The image needs to be known, seen fully with loving attention and encouraged to speak, treated as you would treat an ambassador from a different world. Then it will develop and reveal itself according to its own logic"* (p. 60).

I quickly make a list of what I will need for that day and what tasks I need to accomplish. My planning and organizational skills are front and center, in full production mode. This all comes easy to me. Certain of my choices, I frantically draw a sketch of the possible layout.

But what about the content? Clips of interviews emerge. I take fragmentary notes of this avalanche of stories.

Start with "*ranger das cadeiras*" (screeching chairs)– verbatim – find dolls to put all around her on a table behind her like she had in her home, the piano stool – pearl necklace? Followed by Celina's husband giving her the ring in the car before arriving at home – verbatim – move around like Celina did.

Then Elvira being the only single girl in Edmonton – the story I created of her being in church all eyes on her, choosing to get a job and discover the world, not get married immediately – inspired by – have a hand bag with mirror and lipstick, rouge, put on make-up – pearl necklace?

Three chairs, each one a woman? Perhaps a projection in the back with mom and dad's wedding? Mom and dad's "*colcha*", nuptial bedcover, on the floor. A bridal veil, and perhaps some rings?

What to do about sound?

Note to self: check if I have time for all this.

All these details keep emerging through my body, into my mind onto the paper to eventually make it onto the stage. Spry smiles as she recognizes my homage to her book *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* (2011). And, still, no idea what questions I am raising, what my intent and purpose are.

I ask to be the last one to present as I remember how discussions around feasting can go on and on. I don't want to deny the participants that experience nor do I want to move into other classmates dedicated time slots. This way, we are free to stay as long as we wish.

1. Final List of Production Materials And Cost

	Task	Items	Quantity	Cost
☐	Call prop shop to find out if they have available the items I need	List of dishes, cutlery, glasses, tablecloths, napkins and decorations	-	0.00
☐	Call Theatre department Reserve room for setup	5:15 Mb7.101		0.00
☐	From school	Bride and groom long table	1	0.00
☐		Small side tables	2	0.00
☐		Chairs	14	0.00
☐		Long table for bed	1	0.00
☐		Mattress for bed	1	0.00
☐		Stool as night table	1	0.00
☐	From home for bed	Set of bed sheets	1	0.00
☐		Mom and dad nuptial bedcover	1	0.00
☐		Pillows	2	0.00
☐		Bed skirt	1	0.00
☐	From home for tables	Living room and bedroom curtains and sheer lining	3	0.00
☐	Buy at second hand store	Tablecloths	3	15.00
☐		Safety pins, needle and thread double and single sided-tape	My sewing kit	0.00
☐		Scissors	1	0.00

☐	Buy what is missing from second hand store	Glasses	14	8.00
☐	Buy what is missing from second hand store	Plates	14	8.00
☐	Joe	Forks	14	0.00
☐		Serving plate	1	0.00
☐	Joe	Cutting glass knife	1	0.00
☐	Make napkins with Lisa	Protectors	14+2	9.00
☐	Buy at Dollarama	Candles	4	5.45
☐	Buy at Dollarama	Matches	1 box	2.30
☐	Alati-Caserta	10-12 portion tiramisu cake	1	40.00
☐	Buy at Jean-Talon market	Rose petals	2 bags	9.20
☐		Ribbon for cake	1	3.45
☐	Food and drinks	Parchment paper 12" circle	1	2.30
☐	SAQ	Bottles of Moscatel de Sétubal	2	26.20
☐		Bottle opener	1	0.00
☐	Buy at grocery store	Bottles of apple juice	2	3.00
☐	Joe	Cooler	1	0.00
☐		Suitcases	3	0.00
☐		Ice packs	3	0.00
☐		My dinner	1	5.75
☐		My dental kit	1	0.00
☐		Notebook and pen	1+1	0.00
	Total Cost of Materials			137.65



Tension

Flashback to Saturday, November 26, 2016

Sitting at Café Saint-Henri in the Jean-Talon Market, sipping at my espresso, I describe to Richard the sequence of sketches that will compose the *Stories of Courtship, Desire And Marriage* performance I am creating.

“These are all great stories,” he says. “But where is the tension? What questions are you raising? What do you want the audience to retain and reflect upon?” Richard continues, “Have you heard of The Letters of a Portuguese Nun (La Vergne, 1669)? It seems to me that they would be the perfect counterpoint to create the tension you need in the performance” (R. Simas, personal communication, November 26, 2019).

He spoke of Marianna Alcoforado, the Catholic nun who had a torrid affair with a French officer within the walls of a monastery in the 17th century.

Suddenly, I began to feel the tension. It made me think of the grip the Catholic Church culture had on the women I interviewed, how it was atrophying their sexuality. And, yet, here was this nun surrendering herself to the pleasures of sin.

Richard helped me understand what kind of questions the performance could raise. Thank you. Now, all I have to do is find the words.

*The honor of your presence
is requested at the union of*

Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage by Immigrant Women

To The Letters of a Portuguese Nun (Marianna Alcoforado)

*Friday, the twenty-eighth of November
two thousand and sixteen
at half past eight in the evening*

*Concordia University
Rm: MB 7.101
Montreal, Quebec*

Reception and dance to follow

Hosted by Nisa Remigio

Menu

*Mouth Watering Performances of Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage
Steamy Readings from The Letters of a Portuguese Nun
Decadent, Moist, Sinful Tiramisu Cake Tasting
Heavenly Moscatel Wine Sipping*

RSVP

*Kindly respond by the twenty-first of December
two thousand and nineteen*

at nisarem@gmail.com



The Day Of The Show

Flashback to Monday, November 28, 2016

“(...) I am convinced that to discuss performance without some accounting of its essence as art is, at best, misleading or, more strongly stated, fraud. It is the equivalent of talking about lovemaking without reference to touch. To accept that duplicating the performance experience in essay form may be impossible is not, however, to succumb to silence. A report can establish a metonymic connection to the performance event by privileging the experiential and the artistic. When done well, the reader may gain some feel for the event, some understanding of the participant’s perspectives, some grasp of its aesthetic power. When well done, the reader senses the dual presence of art, that of the original performance event being discussed and that of the performance event occurring on the page. The artistic or poetic report, then, may possess a kinship, commensurate with, but distinct from, the phenomenon under study” (Pelias, 1999, pp. ix-x).

It is Monday morning. I don’t remember what the weather was like. I am anxious, no, not anxious, excited, looking forward to the moment I perform later in the day. Just a little worried. I don’t want to forget any items. I don’t want to forget any words. I don’t want to forget any movements.

I make my way to the Jean-Talon Market to pick up the rose petals. Will they have enough? Will they all be red? How expensive will they be? What will I do if they don’t have any? I cannot quiet this little voice inside my head that seeks perfection. It does not allow me to imagine an alternative. I acknowledge this little voice and hope for the best.

The florist hands me the brown paper bag with lots of petals. Not all red as I feared. The price is affordable.

I go to the other floral shop in the market and purchase another bag, just for safe measure. I can make due with the two bags for sure. I can use the non-red petals as a base and sprinkle the red ones on top. One concern laid to rest.

I make my way to Alati-Caserta, the Italian bakery on Dante Street, across from Our Lady of La Difesa Church known for its ceiling fresco of Mussolini on horseback, to pick up the Tiramisu cake I ordered a few days earlier. I suddenly remember that there was slush on the ground because I feared falling with the cake in my hands. What then? I breathe deeply to once again alleviate the tension.

It is 5:00pm. Joe drives me to the John Molson Building. I have to carry an oversized suitcase, another large one and a backpack, all the while juggling the cake box in my hand and the brown bags of rose petals that I do not want to crush. His offer is a welcome gift, another appeaser to these tiny electrical impulses of fear running through my body. How I made it from the entrance of the building to the Mb701.1 classroom on my own, I do not recall.

I had reserved the room from 5:15-6:30pm to set up for the performance. I begin by preparing the bridal party's table. I open the 8x4ft, or was it 6x3ft, folding table and cover it with a white satin tablecloth. I need to tie the ends so the participants don't step, slip and fall on them. I bring out the pins and realize that they too can injure someone. I turn to double-sided tape and safety pins and they do the trick nicely. Make sure they are hidden from view so they don't interfere with the whole aesthetic. Still looking for perfection.

I brought sheer white curtains to make a head table scallop, also known as a swag. Oddly enough, I don't remember if I used them.

Next, I prepare in the same way the two square tables for the remaining guests.

I bring out the dishes, the glasses, the cutlery and the cloth napkins and set them with the precision I was taught at Colégio São Francisco de Xavier, Ponta Delgada, Azores, in my teenage years: the plate placed at 2.5 cm from the edge of the table, dessert cutlery set at 1cm from the top of the plate towards the inside of the table, the glasses to the right past

the dessert cutlery and the folded cloth napkins to the left of the plate (or was it on top of the plate? Both are acceptable practices). The repetitive preparatory movements and pattern of place settings embody a ritualistic experience that soothes me. I take pleasure in attending to these details.

I bring out the cake, sliding it out of the box onto the serving dish, holding my breath, in fear of imminent disaster. As if holding my breath would help me control the situation? I measure and cut the whitish golden sheer ribbon that will cloak the circular cake as I am looking to recreate a feeling of lavishness. This hides its *café au lait* color. As I wrap the ribbon around the cake, my fingers get a smear of frosting. “Mmmm, let’s not let it go to waste,” as I lick this heavenly feast. “Now, for some wipes to clean my hands.” On top of the cake, I place the circular cut out fitted parchment paper and cover it with a bed of non-red petals and top it off with red ones. Red, the color of lust or is it love? I notice that some petals actually have hues of burgundy. “*Burgundy!*” At least now, I am not trapped in its stillness.

As I prepare for the final touches, a couple of classmates enter the room. Their faces are filled with disbelief and enchantment. They offer to help. I graciously accept even though I had hoped to finish before anyone arrived. We move the tables along the windows against the southwest side of the room. At this point, I am grateful they are there to help with this maneuver. We place the candles, the bottles of Moscatel de Setúbal wine, the bottle opener, the glass cake cutter and spatula with its serving plate and sprinkle red petals on the tables. We draw the thick black velour curtains in front of the tables to hide this treasure from the rest of the class. Our own little secret, ready to be revealed at 8:25pm, the moment my performance is to commence.

We now turn our attention to another long folding table. I open it and place a blue exercise matt on it. I take out the bed sheets, pillows and my parents’ nuptial bedcover from the over-sized suitcase and place them on the piano stool, standing in as a night table, beside the bed. My classmates help me hide these props behind the black velour curtains on the northeast wall of the room.

Now, we wait. Now, I wait.

I am the last performance of the evening. Everyone leaves the room except the colleagues that helped me set up earlier on so as to move the tables into their final position. We create a V-shape with the three guest tables: the bridal party is parallel to the southwest windows and each of the two square tables to the sides. The bed and stool are placed in front of them in the opening they create. At each plate setting a chair, and an extra one is at hands reach for me. We light the candles. They leave the room.

I change into my deep olive green velour gothic dress, accentuated with almond lace. This is a dress rich in textures begging to be touched. This is my power dress. This is the cape/cloak that transforms me into my superhero. I take one long slow deep breath. I am ready to receive my guests. There is a metamorphosis that happens at this moment, which I am still unable to explain. Do I become/am the performer? A performer? Am I the character I portray? Am I Nisa? All of the above? Do I switch along the way?

I imagine Thompson (2003) telling me that, *"we are all 'marked people' who exhibit patterns created by the 'little dramatic performances' of others, in and through our daily actions. (...) We are not tabula rasa and we would not aspire to such erasure, but different forms of human interaction simultaneously affect and are dependent upon the way we have embodied (mentally and physically) past experiences"* (p. 52).

What I do know is that the energy in me is different and that my personal horizons expand. Is this simply permission to play and be something/someone else, something/someone hybrid, be/create me, a new me?

I open the door. *"Good evening and welcome,"* I say with a smile. In front of me, 14 pairs of eyes at different heights focus on me as I am still in the doorway. *"Please come in. There are no seats assigned so please choose where you would like to sit,"* I continue.

As the participants walk through the door, I can see and feel their collective bewilderment. Quiet, reserved “Ohs” and “Ahs” and “Wows” fill the room as they take in each detail. They take their seats.

“My name is Nisa and I will be your hostess for this evening. I would like to invite you to take the time and immerse yourself in your surroundings. Feel the silkiness of the tablecloth, the weight of the cutlery, the chill of the crystal glasses, the warmth of the candlelight. Smell the rose petals. What do they evoke in you?” as my fingertips caress the table.

“This evening you will enjoy forbidden stories of courtship, desire and marriage from immigrant Portuguese women alongside steamy readings from Marianna Alcoforado’s experiences in The Letters of a Portuguese Nun. Furthermore, on tonight’s menu, you will savor a moist, decadent, sinful Tiramisu cake made of sweet Lady fingers dipped in espresso coffee, layered with a cool Mascarpone coffee frosting and topped with a sprinkle of heavenly cocoa. A Moscatel de Setúbal wine will tickle your palate with aromas of candied orange skins, dry apricots and sweet spices,” my soft, haunting voice, a devilish invitation to partake in sin. The participants’ smiles and body twitches confirm their willingness to partake.

I make a mental note to self, *“Should there ever be a next time, make more of an effort to include culinary vocabulary rich in sensual double entente: biting, luscious, mouth-watering, sizzling, ardent, intense, nectarous, piquant, “eat me!”, melt in your mouth, fold into, drizzle... Also add more verbs.”*

I turn my back to the guests as I make my way closer to the bed. I am readying myself to change character. This gives my guests/participants time to enjoy privately the memories that their senses evoked, and ready them for what lies ahead. I turn to face the participants.

“Hello, my name is Noémia Ribeiro. I was born in 1935 in the village of Vila Franca do Campo, in the Azores. I met my husband when I was sixteen years old. In those days, courtship was different from today. We weren’t allowed to go out on our own with our boyfriends. We were always chaperoned by an aunt, a younger sibling, our mother.”

"We had no privacy. My boyfriend and I would talk, him on the street and me, from the upstairs window, because my father would not have it any other way. He would say, "If he doesn't like it, he can just roll down the street." To my father this was the respectful way to court a girl."

I bring the chair that was reserved for me to center stage and sit. *"To get around this my boyfriend asked me in marriage and that's when he was allowed in the house and we would date from inside the house, with two chairs, I would be sitting in one and he would be by my side and my mother sitting on another one to watch us... it was a really big thing. Sometimes my mom would be falling asleep (I bop my head, arms crossed in front of me) and my boyfriend would reach over to give me a kiss (I lean over to the imaginary chair beside me). We had really old chairs and they would, (I mimic the screeching sound of the chair), she would immediately open her eyes and my boyfriend would get upset. He would say, "But why doesn't that woman go to bed!"* Laughter erupts in the room. *"It was very, very restrict, it was too much and this also affected sexually the girl because we didn't want to do anything to go against what our mothers warned us, "Don't do this, don't do that..." It was a dilemma for us, always afraid of abusing the rules of our mother and father."*

I move towards the bed and ask for a participant's help. We take the bed sheets and start to make the bed.

"It was a tradition in our village for friends and family members to decorate the nuptial bedroom. Decorate! They would use this to prepare all sorts of pranks. They would empty perfume bottles on the pillows, remove the wooden planks from the bed frame and make a bicycle trap from the sheets. Do you know what that is?" I take the top sheet and tuck the ends on the headboard side imitating the fitted sheet. Then I fold it on itself in such a way that it only covers half the length of the bed all the while looking like the bed is properly made. *"When you get into the bed, your legs can't stretch all the way, you become trapped and as you try to straighten your legs one at a time, it looks like you are pedaling, that's why it's called the bicycle. All these jokes were to delay the moment of intimacy, the moment we newlyweds were all looking forward to."*

I fondly hold my parents' nuptial cover in my hands. *"This bedcover was my parents' nuptial cover. It is 50 years old. It is made of a rich silk in patterns of bas-relief. I keep it as an heirloom. Would you like to feel it?"* The participant stretches her arms and respectfully runs her hands through the fabric and gives it back to me. I then turn to the other guests and let them share in the experience. Finally, I finish making the bed with my collaborator and thank her for sharing this moment with me.

I do not have time to read the extract from *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*. I come to center stage and thank everyone for participating.

Weaving A Narrative/Quilt From Participants' Feedback

A round of applause. I smile. A sense of accomplishment, relief invades me. *"So what are your impressions?"* Luis asks the participants as I prepare to take copious notes. Or was it serve the Tiramisu cake and Moscatel de Setúbal wine?

"The first thing I noticed was the fabric and the care that was taken with the choice of all the objects to evoke all the senses. All this took time to prepare instead of the consumerism and the disposal culture we are used to today. Plus, there was a sense of delayed gratification as the cake came later. This experience was a way to pass on tradition. These stories brought the past into the present," one participant said as he continues to stroke his fingertips along the tablecloth.

"In my country, we have the same traditions, like the making of the bed. I just realized how these rituals are common to many countries," said another. I reflect on his words, *"The opposite is also true – that we may use different customs to express the same value."*

"Even for someone like me who does not know the culture or have any experience with weddings, it drew me in and I learnt something," she says as her upper body mimics the idea of being drawn in.

“This is important work, for even today there are people living in very closed cultures like the one I was raised in.” You can hear it in her voice that this is a first-hand experience observation.

“This performance would be totally adaptable to a fringe festival. I can see a group of women as the audience. It would definitely speak to them,” said the woman with an artsy look.

“It could be performed for men as well, so they can learn about the other side, the women’s point of view and what they go through,” replied a young male. I am pleased with this answer, for I believe we need to know more about each other to better communicate and live together.

“Having a mixed gender crowd as in a real wedding, men and women end up naturally separating into groups, men to one side, women to another, it would allow for them to continue talking amongst themselves,” said another participant. That is also why I intended to end with a dance, so participants could continue the conversation in each other’s arms.

“I felt like I was speaking to my grandmother which I will never again have the chance,” she said with gratitude as tears run down her face. I am grateful that the emotion I invoked in her was comforting. I do not know how I would act if it distraught her.

“This is very generous of you,” is the sentence that is most repeated throughout. *“It is my pleasure,”* I say. And indeed it is.

“I would like to know more about the woman, Noémia,” a participant inquires. Suddenly, I freeze. I cannot remember a single detail about this beautiful woman’s life story. My fear of forgetting the words has come true. I try to focus, searching for that end bit of wool that will unravel the yarn. Someone asks me for the wine opener and I get swept away into the whirlwind that is being a hostess. I never got back to that request.

The young male is curious about the letters. I offer him the reference so he can look it up.

“What wine is this? It is so yummy!” someone asks. *“I know, it is one of my favorites,”* another retorted. I bring the bottle to them so they can take the reference and we begin to tell stories of wineries and wine.

Everyone is enjoying this feast. It looks exactly like a wedding reception, lively conversations and expressions of pure pleasure. I am pleased.

We stay way past the end of the class. Slowly, people begin to leave. A few stay behind to wrap-up and help carry the suitcases to the metro. We continue talking about the performance during the ride home. A warm feeling of gratitude invades my body. A warm feeling of compassion towards myself also percolates throughout. I did it. And I am proud. Just enough. I smile at my stab at the Judo-Christian values of my upbringing.

Flash-forward to Monday, December 5, 2016

Participants’ Adjectives (or Expressions) to Define the Performance

Sensuous	Steamy	Can I have more?	
Pointieux (French for sparkling, tingling, ticklish, delicate, minutiae, detailed)			
Immersed In Craving	Legend	Soulful	Risk And Reward
	I’m Hungry	Appreciation	Sweet
Femininity	Good Women	Quality Women	Values

When You Simply Cannot Find the Words: Stretching in Joy and Satisfaction

The conversation continues. A participant describes the performance as delayed gratification. Another concurs, *“You made us crave the food and the stories, mixing the verbal language and the senses, with the description of food intertwined with performance.”*

“I saw you through the performance. You found your voice through your body. You were very sensuous. You used your senses to tell the story, to embody the story. Even though you used someone else’s words, you came through the performance. And you revealed a side of you that

no one knew, for example by wearing a dress. It was the first time I saw you in a dress,” said another. Yes, it is true. I am always dressed as if I’m ready to go on a long distance hike. I had never worn a dress to class. The contrast between the elegance I chose to portray that day and my usual casual self did not go unnoticed.

Flashback to Tuesday, November 29, 2016

Hello everyone!

I want to thank each and everyone one of you for being the perfect guests at my performance last night. Your presence, your energy, your attention, your pleasure, your body language, the smiles, the eye contact, the head bobbing, the laughs, the suspended breathing were all so communicative and inspiring. Your afterthoughts gave me plenty of foods for thought. Thank you for this gift.

A deep felt gratitude goes to those of you who assisted me in the set up and wrap up of the banquet. It was lovely to feel your support and share those extra moments of kindness and camaraderie.

You all turned a simple class assignment into a memorable experience that I shall always cherish!

It was an honor to host for you. Cheers!

Nisa

Flash-forward to Monday, November 4, 2019

Today, to push the experiential and participatory performance to further mimic a wedding, I would format the Thank You note as an actual physical card with a picture from the

performance and send individually, like the photographic keepsake that newly weds send out to their guests.

I wonder, “Does this answer your quest, Pelias?”



Finding The Words

Flashback to Friday, November 2, 2018

Description of *Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage* for the Oral History Association Symposium application

Puritanical

From the 1930s to the 1960s, Azorean women were raised in a strict set of values based on Catholic teachings. They viewed their body as sinful, unless it was to guarantee procreation. Courtship was chaperoned. Intimacy of any kind was denied. They carried a sense of shame, guilt and suppressed desire. Many married only to achieve a degree of freedom from their parents' grip.

A collection of stories from interviews with Azorean women is performed to showcase the progression of their amorous life.

Scandalous

In the late 1600's, a Portuguese nun falls in love with a French officer and has a torrid affair inside the convent walls. Her lover promises they will be together forever. Their love is discovered and he is shipped back to France. She writes to him letters filled with details of her raw desire. These letters will soon become the reference for French Erotica of the XVII century and the inspiration for Romanticists.

Extracts from the translated version of *Les Lettres Portugaises* by Gabriel-Joseph de La Vergne, Paris, 1669, are juxtaposed to the above first person accounts. As a side note, Myriam Cyr (2014) contests this authorship. She defends Marianna Alcoforado, the nun in question, is the true author.

Sensorial

The guests (audience) are immersed in a sensorial experience: from the texture of the tablecloths, napkins, glassware, porcelain and tableware, the perfume of flower bouquets, the warmth of the scintillating candles and the explosion of mouth-watering flavors to the captivating melodies of the storyteller and ultimately, the communion of personal stories while dancing in the arms of another.

Sensual

These three universes are blended into each other through the power of words carefully chosen to depict double-entendres and evoke various emotional and physical experiences.

Flashback to Monday, February 4, 2019

Stories Of Courtship And Desire (Working Title)

Two women's love stories are shared during a wedding reception where the audience participants are the banquet guests. Noémia (1935-) and Mariana's (1640-1723) testimonies on courtship, intimacy and forbidden love "reveal sociocultural values of the times and invite viewers to question the politics of romances and relationships, sexuality and sensuality in present day society" (R. Meier, personal communication, February 4, 2019).

Thank you, Rhonda, for finding the words.

Flashback to Wednesday, September 25, 2019

Stories Of Courtship, Desire And Marriage

Two women's love stories are shared during a wedding reception where the audience participants are the banquet guests. Noémia (1935-) and Mariana's (1640-1723) testimonies on courtship, intimacy, forbidden love and marriage rituals reveal sociocultural values of the times and invite viewers to question the politics of romances and relationships, sexuality and sensuality in present day society.

Noémia is a Portuguese immigrant woman born in 1935. She meets her future husband at the age of sixteen and marries him by the age of twenty. She recounts her courtship and the lack of intimacy imposed by Judo-Christian mores at the core of her upbringing.

Marianna is a Portuguese nun born 1640. She professes at the age of sixteen, meaning she marries God in body and soul, and meets a French officer by the age of twenty-five. From this encounter with the latter ensued a forbidden love affair. He is shipped back to France. In a set of letters, she details her desire for him.

In the tradition of the dinner-theatre, stories of courtship, desire and marriage rituals are shared at a wedding reception. The audience will be the banquet guests, and sketches are performed for them throughout the meal. During the dance, the audience will be invited to share stories with their dance partners. A discussion follows on the topics raised by the performance.

Flashback to sometime early to mid-January, 2019

Noémia, Marianna and Me

Stitching Together the Patches to Create a Performance Narrative

From my translation of the interview with Noémia, at her home in Victoria, British Columbia, on June 6, 2007

Noémia

““My name (...) is Noémia da Costa Matias (...). I was born (...) in 1935. On the twenty-sixth of April.””

Nisa

00:00:30.13

““My name is Noémia de Melo Matias. I was born in 1935, April 6th.”” (I made a mistake in the name.)

Nisa

00:00:41.71

““You asked, you want to know, how I met my husband? Well, that's quite simple.””

Noémia

““He was my neighbour. (...) He always walked behind me, where I went, to parties and everything. He looked a lot at me and I saw that he was kind of interested in me.””

Nisa

00:00:51.65

““In my small town, he was my neighbour. And, I would be going to my aunt's house, to the store, and this man would follow me. He was always there. He would walk up and down my street, look at me, pause, look at me. I found that odd. My neighbour, he could talk to me.””

Cultural context not mentioned by the interviewee, with the exception of her suitor staring at her more than at other girls and Noémia realizing that he might be interested in her.

Nisa

00:01:21.11

““Tttt (sound of negation.) Back then, we're talking fifty odd years ago, men weren't allowed to speak to women. Only, uncles, brothers, fathers, cousins, nobody else could speak to us.

And I would go to these parties, the town festivities, always around the Saints' dates. You know, it always had to be religious. And he would be there. And he would look at me, and he would stare at me. More than he did to the other girls. And I thought to myself, "Hmm, he must really like me. He must be interested in me."

So, one day we were sitting in a room, it was the Holy Ghost festivities, and after all the prayers we had done, we had started a game. And this game consists of saying, "Eu suspiro." I long for, I desire. So, I would say, "Eu suspiro" and the conductor of the game would say, "Por quem?" For whom? And I would answer, and I would say, "Eu suspiro por Luis," for Luis. And then it was Luis' turn, to say whom he yearned for, and you would say, "Eu suspiro." "Por quem?"””

Luis

““Nancy.””

Nisa

00:02:59.21

““Nancy. Who's Nancy? Is Nancy here?””

Luis

00:03:04.18

““No.””

Nisa

00:03:04.28

““No. Ah! Oh, no, you just threw me a curve ball. So this would go on, ping ponging from one person to a new one. But at the beginning, you never let anybody know whom you really yearned for. But as round two and round three came along, you would notice that the person would always be yearning for the same one. And that was a clue. You would know, "Ah! They want to get together." So those were the ways we found out that men were interested in us.””

Noémia

““And one day, I went to a friend's house, and we went out to her backyard, and there was a balcony (???). He was walking up and down the street below and I was up on the wall. He told me that he liked me a lot and that he wanted to date me. And I said to him, "I have three single sisters, they are dating and my mom feels very tired from all this dating, watching over those dates," like it was done in the past, which was a problem. I often went out with them and their boyfriends because they weren't allowed out on their own. I thought I didn't want to date yet. I was sixteen. But he never stopped talking to me until I said yes, that I would date him. And we dated from that moment on.””

Nisa

00:03:40.55

“Now getting back to my story of how I met Eduardo. I went to my girlfriend’s house and we went into the backyard. In the backyard, at the end of the backyard, there was this wall, sort of like a balcony. And we went all the way to the front of that. To the back. And we looked down, and there he was. Eduardo. And Eduardo starts talking to me and that’s where he tells me for the first time that he really likes me, and that he wants to date me. He wants to court me. And I’m taken a bit aback by that. (...) I’m only sixteen years old, I’m going to start dating? Besides, I had three sisters who were single, all dating, all that had to be chaperoned, by me, by my mother, by my brother. I mean that was a lot of work. I was, like, I’m not ready for this. But he insisted. And he kept on talking and talking and talking. Well, I gave in. I said, “You know what, sure, let’s date.””

Noémia

“My father did not want us, none of my sisters, to come to the door downstairs to date, because my house only had a window on the top floor and a door on the bottom. He wanted us all to date from the window at all times. And he would say, “If they don’t want to, the street is on a slope and they can just go down it. If they like you, they will date you from up there in the window.””

Nisa

00:04:57.39

This adaptation, while not exactly what Noémia said at this moment of the interview, is also an accurate representation of what other women experienced.

“So then we started dating. What was dating like? Well, we would meet in front of the house, my house. We would lean on the door, me on the inside of the door, him on the outside of the door, on the street. He wasn’t allowed in the house. Ah! Hey! We were a proper home. Him on the outside, me on the inside. Every once in a while somebody, in the back, checking what we were doing. We weren’t allowed to touch, never mind kiss. We were there.””

Noémia

““Oh, we used to go to my sister's house a lot. If he wanted to kiss me, I had to go to my sister's house, because I dated from the door with him on Sundays, without anyone seeing us, we would kiss. That was such a big thing.””

Nisa

00:05:33.13

““Every time we wanted a little bit more intimacy, I would find a reason to go to my sister's house, who was already married, and he would meet me there. But again, don't think it was rock'n'roll. Tttttt (sound of disapproval). It's like every once in a while we would steal a kiss when nobody was watching. Cross through the corridor and just slide our hand against each other. That was all we were allowed to do, all.””

Noémia

““I dated for two years (...). Then he went to the army. (...). He came from Ponta Delgada, every weekend, to come and talk to me. (...) And, of course, it was a big problem for my boyfriend. Especially when he came from the city to talk to me on the weekend, at the end of the week. So, I said to him, "Look, if you want to sit next to me and be closer to me, you can propose to me." He then asked me to marry him, and that's when he was allowed inside the house and we were dating from inside the house. On two chairs, I sat on one chair and he beside me, and my mother sat on another chair to watch us. Yeah, it was a big problem. Sometimes, my mother was dying to fall asleep, but if she felt the chair screech a little, she would immediately open her eyes. (She laughs.) And my fiancé would get upset. He would say, "But why doesn't that woman go to bed!" (She laughs.) It was very, very restrict, restric... It was too much. This also affected the girl's sex, because we didn't want to do anything against the things we heard, that our mothers warned about, "Don't do this, don't do that, don't do that other." And then it was also a problem for us, always afraid of wanting to abuse my mother and father's laws. But fortunately, love is very strong, when we are born for each other, it is really for each other.””

Nisa

00:06:02.89

“We did this for two years. At the end of the two years, he had to go and serve in the army. He was stationed in the town, not our own, so he was in Ponta Delgada and I stayed in Vila Franca. And he would come home on weekends. Just to come and talk to me. And so here we were, same thing, the door and him on the outside, and we would talk. And he was getting upset. He was tired of this. He wanted us to have a little bit more intimacy without everybody on the street walking up and down, checking us out.

So, I told him, "The only way we are going to be able to spend more time together, closer together, is if you propose to me." And he agreed.”

This adaptation, while not exactly what Noémia said, is also an accurate representation of what other women experienced. To propose meant that the suitor would ask the girlfriend's father for permission to court, become a fiancé, and eventually marry his daughter.

“So, he went to see my father. And my father, again thinking of all the single women that he had in the house that had to be chaperoned, chaperoned, but he figured, "Ok, this is better this way, you know, keep the bad mouths from talking about my daughter." He was allowed inside. He wasn't walking in and out of the house whenever he pleased. No, no, no, no. We would meet on Thursday nights and Sunday after lunch. That's when we would have time for ourselves.

Now, again, don't think we were left alone. Ah, no, no, no. We would be, I'd be sitting, on a chair, he would be sitting on a chair beside me, and my mother sitting at a chair right in front of us, watching us.

But like I told you, I had three sisters that were dating inside the house, and that were being chaperoned by my mother. We were a large family. My mother had a lot of chores to do. Plus chaperoning every night their daughters courtship. So by the time Thursday night came around, she was really tired. She wanted to sleep. And she'd be sitting on her chair, poor woman, trying to stay awake, really trying, and she would be, like, and her head would bob

and she'd be there. And my boyfriend would take advantage of that moment, lean over to give me a kiss. We had these really old chairs and they screech and they would start going crrrrr and my mother would wake up, "What's going on around in this house?" And my boyfriend would get so upset. And he would turn to me and go, "When will this woman ever go to sleep?" And that's the way it was. We weren't allowed any kind of physical contact. And you know, that was difficult for us girls because we would feel all these rules from our mothers that we adored, "Don't do this, don't do that, that's sinful. You are going to go to h, to hell." And at the same time, we would have these feelings inside of us that we would just feel and that we didn't feel anything wrong about them. We just saw as so natural, to come over to touch, to feel, to hug, to hold, to kiss, to feel each others skin. But we weren't allowed to. And we would live with these competing emotions and thoughts. That's how it was. Many of us, honestly, got married just to get out of the households and the grip of our parents. That's the way it was back then.""

Noémia

"During the two and a half years, we wrote letters. Every two weeks, I had a letter from him. And in my letters, I always told him not to forget about me. That, that he remember our times where we were together and everything. And that I had been dating him for many years. And I would tell him, "If you leave me, you are fully aware that nobody will want me, because I have been dating you for many years and it is not easy to find a boy, after dating another boy for many years. Remember this, and remember our past together. May God never let you forget the love you had for me. May you come back to marry me." That's what I would say to him. And kisses and hugs in the letters. (...) And he replied that he would never, he would never forget me. That there may be many girls around, but he would never forget me.""

Nisa

00:10:46.58

"And we would write letters to each other. We were not married, he was still my boyfriend. We would write letters to each other. And in those letters, I kept reminding him, "Please don't forget me, please don't forget how long we've been together and the love that you have for me, because if you do, I will never be able to marry another. No man in our village will accept me after such a long courtship. Come back to me, come and get me, but don't leave me here." And

he would write back, "Don't worry, when I have our life settled here, I will go and get you. Don't worry, yes there are many other women here, but my heart belongs to you." And that would appease me. Two years, two and a half years later, he came back, he came back to marry me.'"

Noémia

"After the wedding, he stayed two and a half months, married, and he came here again to Canada. He sent me the papers so I could come here. It took two and a half months.'"

Nisa

00:11:55.98

"And, he stayed for two months, it took two months for me, two and a half months for me to get my papers, and I came back to Canada to meet him and stay here. And we've been together ever since.'"

Cultural context not mentioned by the interviewee.

Nisa

00:12:16.33

"(...) Pleased to meet you. Come on over. You know, when we would get, how should I say, when we would get married, we'd have to fix the nuptial room. And it wasn't the groom or the bride that would do that. It would be all the friends of the bride and groom that would come to make the bed. Now, we all knew how long it had been for Noémia to get to that day. And what we would always do for everybody knowing that all the grooms and brides had gone through the same trouble of not being allowed to touch each other, well, we made their life miserable on their nuptial night.

First, we wouldn't make a bed like this, you know, like you do normally, like you would fold and you can get in. Noooo, we were sneaky. We would take the bed(sheet). You want to take the end? Bring it up, put it under here. Oops, we will take this, come on up, fold it like this. So, when they tried to get into bed, they'd be stuck, like, wooo hoo ho (the bed collapses and I fall and laugh.)

Okay, didn't expect that. I'm sure a few beds in Portugal, the boards broke with them jumping on top but that wasn't the intended, a, experience here.

So, let me go back, I won't jump on the bed, but I'll explain to you how it was done. So, shall we? There we go. Thank you so much, (...) We would do it like this. So that when they came in, they would get their feet stuck, and they'd get, like, all, they wouldn't know what to do. We called this the bicycle trick, because your legs would be going like this. Then we would fill up the pillows with perfume, can you imagine perfume. The bed sheets with sugar. Then after all that hot, torrid, love, sex that you had, you would be all sticky and gooey. We were so mean, we were so mean (I laugh.) But that's what we used to do.

Now, there you go. And of course, there was always, here we go, the beautiful nuptial cover that we would have over the bed. This nuptial cover belonged to my parents. This was the cover that they used on their special night. Not necessarily the night that I was conceived, but on their very, very special night. Thank you.”

From *The Letters Of A Portuguese Nun*, by Marianna Alcoforado—*The Project Gutenberg eBook*.

“Marianna Alcoforado was born of a good family in the city of Beja and province of Alemtejo in the year 1640” (p. 4).

Nisa

00:16:16.87

““My name is Marianna Alcoforado. I come from a noble family, in Beja. I was born in 1640.””

eBook and personal knowledge

“(…) the subject of the ‘Letters’ forms one of the episodes of the war between Spain and Portugal which followed as a consequence of the Restoration of 1640 and the achievement of the latter’s independence under the House of Braganza. This war, which lasted for twenty-eight years, until the final peace in 1668, was intermittent, and carried on only at long intervals owing to the state of the two contending parties” (p. 3).

Nisa

00:16:29.86

“Those were turbulent times in Portugal. We had just gained back our independence from Spain, after sixty years under Spanish rule. But even though we had gained our inde, or regained our independence, we were still very much at war. Things weren't settled right away.”

eBook

“Her entering the Conception at such an early age is explained by the fact of the death of her mother, which took place at the end of 1663 or the beginning of 1664” (p.7).

“Her father appears to us in the first years of the Restoration as a man in an influential position, well related, and discharging important commissions both administrative and political. He possessed a large agricultural property, which he administered with attention and even zeal, and was a Cavalier of the Order of Christ, besides being intimate with some of the principal men of the time. (...) Tumults were constantly arising from quarrels between the various parts of the heterogeneous mass which then composed the Portuguese army, and hence increased care would be necessary on the part of Francisco Alcoforado in order that would be necessary on the part of Francisco Alcoforado in order that the education of his daughters might be conducted in such a manner as their position demanded. Hence, too, probably, the reason why Marianna and her sister Catherine entered the Convent of the Conception at an earlier age than was usual. Their father, occupied with administrative and military work on the frontier, would be unable to give them the oversight and attention which quieter times would have allowed.

(...)

In this as in most other convents there were two kinds of cells--the dormitories, divided into cubicles, and rooms forming independent abodes dispersed throughout the edifice. These latter the nuns of the seventeenth century called their ‘houses,’--_as suas casas_--and it was one of these which Marianna possessed. The former were in accordance with the

Constitutions, while the latter, though strictly forbidden, nevertheless existed. These separate abodes were, it is true, often necessitated by the growth of the convent population, and generally appertained to nuns of a better position, while the dormitories served for those who were either poorer or of an inferior rank. Many of these *_casas_*, too, were built by private individuals who had some connection or other with the particular convent, and there are indications that the father of Marianna had caused some to be erected in that of the Conception [3]" (p.5).

Nisa

00:16:55.88

"So my father, being the nobleman that he was, had his own army. And he would go out to battle. For days on end.

My mother passed away when I was very young. And so one day my father came back and decided, "I can't raise my daughter as I should, because I am not here long enough to show her how to be proper, how to be raised as a good woman." So, he decided to take me, and one of my sisters, and hand me over to a convent. In this convent, my father built "uma casa," a house, but it's not really a house like you think. It was in the cloisters of the monastery he built a room, which meant that I had a private room. My sister had a private room. Because in those days, all the nuns slept together in dormitories, so it would be one bed after the other after the other. There was absolutely no privacy. So, rich heiresses' like I was and some of the higher hierarchy nuns would have their individual rooms. And that was the rule. It wasn't accepted by the Church, we were supposed to all sleep in the dormitories but since it was the noblemen that were financing the monastery, everything was hush-hush and it was ok."

eBook

"She had been intrusted to the Cloister when a child,[4] as she herself tells us, and her renunciation of the world must have been little more than a form. She had probably made her 'profession' too at the age of sixteen, that provided for by the Constitutions, if not at an earlier date.

The dull routine of her life was suddenly broken in upon by the sight of a man surrounded with all the prestige of military glory--one who was the first to awaken in her a consciousness of her own beauty --the first to tell her that he loved her, one, moreover, who was ready to throw all his greatness, his present and his future, at her feet. 'I was young; I was trustful. I had been shut up in this convent since my childhood. I had only seen people whom I did not care for. I had never heard the praises which you constantly gave me. Methought I owed you the charms and the beauty which you found in me, and which you were the first to make me perceive. I heard you well talked of; every one spoke in your favour. You did all that was necessary to awaken love in me'[5]" (p. 5)

Nisa

00:18:43.03

"At sixteen years of age I professed to become a nun. That means I gave my body and soul and married God. No other man would I ever let come into my world. (Deep sigh) I tell you, life in the convent was dull, all we did was pray, sing the praises of our Lord, work in the garden, sew, cook, and help people in need. That's all we did all day long. No partying, no..."

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"(...) Mazarin, while signing the clause which bound France to abandon the Portuguese cause, determined, with his usual duplicity, that this should not prevent him from secretly aiding an ally whom he had found so useful in the past as a thorn in the side of Spain. Hardly, indeed, had the treaty been made than he began to occupy himself in recruiting for the Portuguese service a number of French officers whom the peace had left without employment. (...) It was not, however, until 1663 that the hero of the Letters, Noel Bouton, afterwards Marquis of Chamilly and St. Leger, arrived in the country, which he was to leave four years later with the betrayal of a poor nun as his title to fame" (p. 4).

"The Convent of the Conception at Beja was founded in 1467 by the parents of King Emanuel the Fortunate, and, favoured successively by royal and private devotion, it had become one of the most important and wealthy institutions of its kind in Portugal. It was situated at the extreme south of the city, near to the ancient walls, and looked on to the gates still called 'of Mertola,' because they are on the side of the city towards Mertola,

distant fifty-four kilometres to the south-west on the right bank of the Guadiana. There is still to be seen the remains of the balcony or verandah from which Marianna first caught sight of Chamilly, probably during some military evolutions (cf. Letter II.), and from it a good view may be obtained over the plains of Alemtejo as they stretch away to the south” (p. 5).

Nisa

00:19:30.73

““One day, I'm sitting, I'm sorry, I'm standing I go outside all the way to the end and there's a wall, and I'm looking out and from this wall you could see the plains of Mértola. You could see the river Guadiana. And I see this group of men, all in their shiny armors and there's this one man that I see, that I lock eyes with. And for the first time, I felt something different. For the first time, I felt like I was, was a woman. I felt beautiful, I felt attractive. I felt desirable. I had never felt anything like that before. And so this gentleman passed, and that was the first time I think, passion awoke in me.””

eBook

“Their first meeting was probably due to the relations which Chamilly, an officer of rank, had entered into with the Alcoforados, one of the chief families in Beja. There are indications, indeed, that Chamilly and Marianna’s eldest brother had met, doubtless in the field, for the latter also followed the profession of arms; and this brother, named Balthazar Vaz Alcoforado, is probably the same as the ‘brother’ referred to in the Letters as the lovers’ go-between.” (p. 6).

Nisa

00:20:49.10

““Days later, I find out that my brother, Baltasar de Alcoforrado, knows the man. He is Noel de Bouton Chamilly (?) A French officer that came over, from France, to help in the wars against Spain.

And I told my brother how I felt about him. And my brother decided to set a meeting.””

Wikipedia (Marianna Alcoforado)

“Custom permitted those in religious orders to receive and entertain visitors, and Chamilly found it easy to get round the trustful nun.”

Nisa

00:21:25.85

“*“Now, in those days, when the army was in town, they would come to the monastery to eat. So that was an easy way to meet him. Ah! Ah, so, in comes all the officers, and of course, ah, of course, I'm always serving Noel de Bouton Chamilly. I...”*”

Nisa

00:21:57.41

“*“So we started writing letters to each other. My brother the go to person. I would give the letter to my brother and my brother would go and bring it to Noel.”*”

Nisa

00:22:17.00

“*“Ahh, but that my dear wasn't enough. I needed more. He needed more. And so he started sneaking in to the monastery at night. To my private room, without nobody knowing. I will not tell you anything that happened in that room, it wouldn't be right. But needless to say, I doubted for a very long time if I should continue being a nun.”*”

eBook

“In 1665, he was promoted to the rank of colonel, and two years later a diploma of Louis XIV., issued,^[8] perhaps, at the instance of his brother, the Governor of Dijon, gave Chamilly a similar post in the French army, with the evident intention of enabling him to leave the Portuguese service when he liked, even though the war with Spain should not be ended. This, taken together with the fact that in the document the space for the month is left blank, is extremely significant, and, as will be seen later on, certainly connects itself with the episode of the ‘Letters,’ even if it does not enter into their actual history.^[2]The diploma of Louis XIV., it may be added, is dated 1667, and the sudden departure of Chamilly

took place at the end of that year, so that it seems probable that the French captain, fearing future annoyance or even danger to himself from his *liaison*, had determined to secure a safe retreat” (p. 4)

“He seems to have left Portugal, too, a little clandestinely (...) Now, we have already seen that it was between 1665 and 1667 that Chamilly carried on his intrigue with Marianna, and it is just in 1667 that the scandal must have attained greater proportions, coinciding with an ending, not in the withdrawal of the French cavalry, but in the sudden retirement of Chamilly to France” (p. 6).

Nisa

00:22:57.47

““But it wouldn't last. People got hold of it, of our torrid love affair. And he got shipped out back to France, probably so that my father wouldn't kill him.””

eBook

“It is now that the ‘Letters’ enter into the history of the lives of Marianna and Noel Bouton de Chamilly. As is well known, they were all Marianna and Noel Bouton de Chamilly. As is well known, they were all written after the latter’s retirement from Portugal, and probably between the December of 1667 and the June of 1668, and they express better than any remarks which we could make the stages of faith, doubt, and despair through which poor Marianna passed” (pp. 6-7).

Nisa

00:23:17.03

““So I started writing letters to him, telling him about my desire, telling him how much I longed for him, and I got no reply. And I couldn't understand why I got no reply.

And the months led to years, and only I was left with this flame inside me. No answer. I tried. I tried to get in touch with him. I wrote him letters, like I said. Here's a little bit of a letter that I wrote to him.””

Nisa

00:24:09.04

Extract from First Letter by Marianna Alcoforado

““You will perhaps find more beauty elsewhere (yet you^[43] told me once that I was very beautiful), but you will never find so much love: and all the rest is nothing. Do not fill any more of your letters with trifles: and do not write and tell me again to remember you. I cannot forget you, and as little do I forget the hope you gave me that you would come and spend some time with me. Alas! why are you not willing to pass your whole life at my side? Could I leave this unhappy cloister I should not await in Portugal the fulfilment of your promises. I should go fearlessly over the whole world seeking you, following you, and loving you. I dare not flatter myself that this can be. I do not care to feed a hope^[44] that would certainly give me some pleasure, while I wish to feel nothing but sorrow. Yet I confess the chance of writing to you which my brother gave me suddenly aroused in me a certain feeling of joy, and checked for a time the despair in which I live. I conjure you to tell me why you set yourself to bewitch me as you did, when you well knew that you would have to forsake me. Why were you so bent on making me unhappy? Why did you not leave me at peace in my cloister? Had I done you any wrong? But I ask your pardon. I am not accusing you. I am not in a state to think on vengeance, and I only blame the harshness of my fate. It seems to me that in^[45] separating us it has done us all the harm that we could fear from it. It will not succeed in separating our hearts,—for love, more powerful than it, has united them for ever. If you take any interest in my lot write to me often. I well deserve your taking some pains to let me know the state of your heart and fortune. Above all, come and see me. Good-bye. I cannot make up my mind to part from this letter. It will fall into your hands: would I might have the same happiness! Ah, how foolish I am! I know so well that this is impossible. Good-bye. I can no more. Good-bye. Love me always and make me suffer still more”” (p.11)



Dancing On The Edge Of Chaos

Flashback to sometime leading up to Wednesday, April 29, 2017

Unveil The Dance Within Me

In 1982, at the age of 18, I became an 8th grade Portuguese and French language teacher in the small, rural yet somewhat industrialized, town of Lagoa. I was also attending the Art Academy in Ponta Delgada, taking classes in Contemporary and Folklore Dances, and Theatre.

One early November morning, seven female students, aged 13-16, asked Julio, a 23-year old math teacher who was also a ballet dancer, and myself for help with their synchronized line-dance routine for the Christmas show. They brought us into an empty classroom, where they had moved the desks out of the way and had set up the music to perform for us. They chose the song Cambodia performed by Kim Wilde (1981), a haunting melody narrating, from a wife's experience, the story of a pilot in covert missions in Cambodia, his difficulty to return to the way things were, and the possibility of never seeing him again.

The girls were filled with pride and joy as they shuffled to one side, then another, arms swaying in the air, all their bodies moving spastically, as they ran after the music and each other. There was nothing synchronistic about this dance. There was also no feeling, no connection, and no artistry. It could have easily been a Richard Simmons exercise routine.

At the end of their performance, they stood there, breathless, eyes wide-open, anxiously waiting for our comments. I couldn't break their spirits with the truth – it was simply horrible. So, without much detail, I agreed to help them. We had four weeks left for rehearsals before the big day. We decided to meet every Saturday morning for four hours at Ana's, one of the performing students, garage. This turned out to be a beautiful white uncluttered wide-open space, with top large windows that flooded the room with light, and high ceilings more reminiscent of an industrial loft.

On our first encounter, I asked the girls to simply dance to the music. I still remember pressing the key on the boom box, the music beginning, and turning around to watch them move. But they barely even swayed. They were petrified, in both senses of the word: fearful and immobile. I was surprised to see how self-conscious they were of each other and me.

So, I took another approach. We sat down in a circle and I asked them if they knew what the song was about. Again to my surprise, they had no idea. We *listened* to the song again and I asked them to describe what they thought it was about. Then, we listened to it again, but this time I asked them to close their eyes and tell me what they felt, what emotions did it *evoke* in them and to identify at what moment in the song they recognized that emotion (Allen, 1995, p. 5). Then, I translated the song and asked them if knowing the lyrics changed what they felt.

At this point, I called the end of our first rehearsal session. The girls were in a panic for they had not rehearsed any dance moves and were afraid they would look ridiculous on stage in front of their peers and teachers. I asked them if they *trusted* me, to which I got a resounding yes. I asked them if they wanted to try *something different*. They obliged.

The following Saturday, I showed up with hundreds of meters of black cloth that I hung over the windows in order to turn the beautifully lit space into pure *darkness*. I didn't want the girls to catch a glimpse of each other. Once again, I asked them to dance but this time with the added *knowledge* of the discussions from the previous week. Over and over again, the song played as I told them to give themselves *permission to move* and asked them to feel their bodies, to *embody* their feelings, the story and the music, with no regard to specific dance steps. Just move to, with and through the music.

With each repeat, I raised the curtains ever so slightly. I began to brighten the back of the room, so that they couldn't see each other but could feel the presence of *light*. Then, with each pull at the curtains, their bodies began to be revealed as if coming through the fog:

first, a contour of their silhouette, then a dense body but with no strong definitions, and eventually in a full-lit room where they could see and interact with each other. By the end of this session, the girls were totally *poised* with their individual and collective movements.

On week three, we sat around in a circle discussing *how* it felt to move that way and what story could we create with the emotions and movements we experienced and the storyline of the song. I asked if they preferred to go back to the safety of a synchronized dance where the steps were memorized or did they prefer to take the *risk* of choreographed *improvisation* (Applebaum, 1995, p. 16). By then, they were *confident* enough to choose the latter.

I proposed to use the haunting tones of the melody as a dream state. The woman would be sleeping and in a nightmarish condition would live through the emotions the girls identified. Upon waking up, she would desperately hang on to the image of the man.

I choreographed a piece where Julio represented the husband/pilot and was placed in the center of a square formed by two dancers per side: one dressed in black, representing the physical body lying down in bed, sleeping and having the nightmare, and the second dancer dressed in white representing the spirit of the woman. Three pairs of dancers represented each one emotion: Fear, Despair, and Hope. The fourth pair was the narrator. The dance started with all dancers lying on the floor, each pair with their backs to each other holding hands, the black on the outside of the square, the white on the inside. As the music started, they began to move horizontally. As the white spirit narrator, I got up and began to dance around all of them including Julio. Then, as the song evoked each emotion, I danced around the respective pair of dancers. The white spirit dancer left the black body dancer and danced with Julio while all others moved on the ground. We repeated this for each emotion.

At the end of the song, all white spirit dancers grabbed onto Julio, who was by then standing up, and the black body dancers onto their respective spirits in a desperate sign of not wanting to let go of his image/presence.

During week four, Julio joined us and we did a full general rehearsal. We fine-tuned the timing of each “emotion episode” and the finale. We checked costumes and discussed any issues the girls felt the need to share. I informed them that two of my friends who were technicians were coming in to help with lighting and smog effects, and they were thrilled. This was their first experience at a real production.

The day of the show is one I can never forget. The girls engaged in and committed fully to the performance. They *asserted* the *knowledge* their *bodies* unveiled and were not intimidated by small town attitudes. They let go of power relations (teacher/student, male/female, individual space/communal space). They were free of their inner critical voice (Allen, p. 47) and were there for each other. When they finished the number, it was as if they had won an Olympic Team Gold Medal. I was so proud to have shared this journey with them: to offer the encouragement to believe in themselves and learn to get in touch with, nourish and assert their *voices* through their bodies.

My students were the embodiment of Descartes 's Samson (Applebaum, p. 29). They “acknowledge(d) the voice” of their own bodies as Barbara Dilley says (Steinman, 1986, p. 14).

Now, I look back at this episode and I ask myself, “*What happened to that 18 year old girl I once was, so in touch with the knowledge and wisdom of her body? What happened to her creativity, her voice? How did she become so immobile and silent? How did she lose her ability to use words to build self-confidence and communicate such powerful concepts?*”

Why I shut down after that, I do not know.

Sculpting My Dance

Finley and Knowles (1995, p. 113), Applebaum (p. 8) and Allen (pp. 10, 60) invite me to look into my past, my childhood, to understand my relationship to art. So many cut off points, so many disconnections, so many forced silences and denials. But Allen (p. xi) and

Goldberg (1986, p. 38) tell me the stories are in me, waiting to come out into the light of day. All I have to do is engage, summon the “courage and curiosity to make contact with the imagination” (Allen, p. xi). Draw the curtains apart, open the windows and doors and let the light shine in, go through me and reflect back out onto the world.

Steinman (1986, pp. 51, 58) proposes “routes of access” – memory, dream, visualizations, hypnogogic images – to accomplish this goal. Allen (p. 76) suggests active imagination and Goldberg (p. 13) tells me to “keep my hand moving.” And so I comply.

Quicksand. I don’t know what color quicksand is, but Burgundy comes to mind: a deep opaque color that engulfs light and ties me, draining the life right out of me. I feel stagnant, immobile, caught in a web of old thoughts. My legs cemented, not grounded, heavy blocks sinking ever so further into an abyss. I know I should not move, but that is my natural instinct. I summon the color white, the sum of all colors, the sum of all knowledge, and ask of her to dilute the burden of Burgundy. As she pours her knowledge into me, shades of crimson, of red and ultimately of pink surface through my pores. The heaviness of the dried up Burgundy quicksand slowly retrieves from my legs and waist, and a path of pink rose petals guides me to safety.

I go for a walk, for walking helps me think. As I walk, full sentences come into my head and out of my mouth. Connections are made, as my neurons light up in a dazzling show of fireworks display. The constant tempo of my steps is a water wheel creating energy that seeps up through my body into my brain. Alas, I can put words to my experience of this knowledge.

Tools and advice are all welcomed. Yet they do not suffice. A paradigm shift needs to happen. I must first acknowledge my fears (Allen, p. 50). Fear of not knowing enough, of failure, of success, of judgment and acceptance. Fear of theorizing, of making mistakes – thank you, Warren, for the new perspective on “missed” “takes (W. Linds, personal communication, 2016), of being ridiculed (Allen, p. 50) and not being taken seriously.

I am but a child. My cousin Lisa's family has just moved houses on the same block on Durocher Street. All the kids are playing outside. I want to go home and I enter into the wrong house looking for my parents. As I go up the stairs, I don't recognize my surroundings, and I begin to feel scared and alone. When I get to the top of the stairs, I realize my mistake. A stranger speaks to me. I panic and, crying, rush out of the house. By then, all the other children are sitting on the porch and laugh at me as I make my way to the right house. I was but a child. A sense of sadness mixed with anger, shame and compassion invade me. My eyes are slightly teary, a weight on my chest, and a sense of numbness and immobility in my limbs.

These are the emotions I transferred to my art, better still, that kept me from my art.

To acknowledge fear is also to give myself permission to feel it, to express it (p. 191). Let fear guide me, show me my inner critic (p. 47). Show me what is at stake for me. Let it be a measure of the risk I need and I am willing to take (p. 63). Let my body's compressed coil spring be released and its stored energy be used to launch me into a new dimension of knowledge.

I need to give myself permission to put myself out there, expose myself and do. Feel the freedom of choice and experimentation. To give myself permission is to embark on a journey, and trust the process I am in (Allen, p. vii, Goldberg, p. xi).

I am a piece of clay that I am molding into something that I don't have a clear vision of what it is yet. I am allowing myself to just feel the medium (me-clay, me-person, me-body, me-movement, me-fabric, me-color, me-design, me-word). As I think of this analogy, I am rubbing the fingers in my left hand feeling the texture and moisture of the clay between them, inhaling its scent, imagining the shape that can become (Allen, p. 37). If I am asking the questions then I am obviously open to the process (p. 37). What do I have to overcome? Or pass through? Or embrace? Or accept? My breathing accelerates. It tells me I'm on the right track even though it feels uncomfortable.

Giving myself permission to fully engage in this process of performance inquiry is to claim intent. Intention to answer specific questions I am faced with, to go deeper into the core of whom I am, to have the courage to experiment (pp. 16–17, 197).

Intention gives me the freedom to explore without specific expected results. It allows me to be in the process, living it, accompanying it, questioning it at each unexpected turn. It is different from having objectives where answers seem finite, contained and defined by success or failure of achievement.

Intention focuses attention (p. 17). Attention to the world around me. Attention to myself: my emotions, my thoughts, my senses/perceptions, my fears, my desires, my motion, and my words. Attention to the here and now. Attention to how I feel, I listen, I do, I communicate, I hide, I trust, I experiment and I surrender.

Through the attention of an eagle's eye, a bear's sense of smell, a dolphin's hearing, a catfish's sense of taste, a human's sense of touch, and a shaman's connectivity, I become aware of my body, of my being and of the world I am in.

I am surrounded by Burgundy. The floor at the Library building, the tiles with the room numbers, the brick on the wall, Concordia's logo. I hyperventilate. How can I be immersed in a tower of knowledge and learning and creativity and feel so immobile, so unable to make connections? I must get out. As I make my way home, my eyes only see Burgundy in a teenager's leggings, a child's jacket, and a woman's purse. I'm weighed down by old thoughts of powerlessness. I can't breathe. I feel claustrophobic. I run to my apartment where I dive into the safety of Bayou Blue in my bedroom walls. I finally feel serenity.

The fluidity of intention, alongside the sharpness of attention, allows me to become aware of the process I am in. Not the beginning and the end result of an action, but the actual moment to moment trajectory (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1985, p. 395), much like a sports commentator describing the play by play of a soccer player leading up to the goal.

And with each play, with each movement, with each thought and each feeling, I have a choice to make at every moment. “(N)ot choice in the sense of deliberative reason but action that choice itself stands on. That action is awareness. Awareness confronts the line between engaging in or becoming disengaged by what follows” (Applebaum, p. 16).

Applebaum calls this moment of awareness “the stop” (p. 16). A place, a time, an action that asks me which road I want to follow: the “(o)ne (that) leads to a repetition of the known, the tried and true, the old, the established (...) (or) (t)he one (that) finds a renewed importance in the unknown, the uncharted, the new, the dark and dangerous” (p. 16).

Through his study of Descartes’ *Dioptrics*, Applebaum (1995) calls for a state of awareness through all the senses by pointing to the pitfalls that come from not challenging our preconceived knowledge and adapting to the here and now. Bob Ernst (Steinman, p. 34) proposes, “(...) attaining neutral (...) to outwit (my) usual thinking patterns.” Allen (pp. vii, x) shows me that through the art process I can “free (myself) of conscious thinking and judging,” that “it is a way of breaking boundaries, loosening out-worn ideas, and making way for the new.”

This is the reason I came back to university. The awareness of the rut I was in, the lack of innovation, the need to see, feel, hear, speak, write, think, do something different led me to take action and accept this challenge. I want to know, for “(t)o know is to become free of the power exerted by contents of mind to limit (me)” (p. 60).

Sculpting A New Dance

Through this process, I am evolving from being a collector and disseminator of life stories to being a reflexive oral history performer (Blumenfeld-Jones, pp. 397–398, L. Sotelo-Castro, personal communication, 2016). This is my movement. This is my assertion (Steinman, p. 2). Allen challenges me to once “(I) learn to trust (my) voice, direct it” (p. 30).

I am moving towards going beyond simply reproducing the life stories I collect. I am feeling what they evoke in me so that I can create works that will further evoke in myself and in others physical sensations that educe memories, emotions and thoughts. I want to create

experiences via these embodiments through which the community and the public can identify issues that I raise and reflect upon them. I want the community and public to raise their issues, and question and reflect upon them. I want to join the community and public in their (and my) reflection(s)/reflexion(s) (Bleakley, 2000, p. 17, Blumenfeld-Jones, pp. 391–398, Gergen & Jones, 2008, Snowber, 2002, pp. 29, 31).

Jones (2002), an African American, in her performance installation entitled *Searching for Osun* personifies this quest I am on. I am particularly inspired by the imagery for her performance ethnography piece to use “Deanna Shoemaker, a European American women (to play) the role of Joni the Ethnographer(,)” (as) Deanna was the embodiment of (her) disorientation while in Nigeria”(p. 6). This “I don’t believe what my eyes see,” this uncanny way to perform Jones’ disorientation is what allows for the questions to arise and be answered, and the experience I ultimately strive for.

Sotelo-Castro’s piece, *Shoemaker’s Ball* (2005/6), is another example that inspires me. This piece “uses the found cultural practice of an English tea dance to collectively and collaboratively perform with the members of the public a gesture that acknowledges and commemorates the significance of the local shoe industry for the production of a ‘sense of place’ in the English town of Northampton. The weaving together of the various layers (social dance, life stories telling, community, space, historic place) as a gateway to sharing of knowledge and forming of a communal performance piece is a method I have not yet explored, but one I aspire to.

Blumfeld-Jones speaks of “a prime intent is to express the qualities of a thing, idea, or person” (p. 392). In the example he offers of Phyllis Lamhunt’s dance about the “evil eye,” she “reported that (she) didn’t make evil-eye movements with her body but rather explored the idea of evil-eye and how that idea manifested in her bodily motion, her use of space and time, and the way she shaped her body” (p. 392). This is the next step in my pursuit to understand my movements and connect with my authentic self.

These examples embody my desire/intent to move from a denotative realistic expression to a creative, evocative one (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002, p. 15). I want to stop simply telling stories, stating the facts and emotions shared with me by the original storytellers. Instead, I look forward to create experiences inspired by these life stories and perform them collectively and collaboratively.

Furthermore, I want to become aware of how my story, my voice is “part of my culture’s story, my ancestors stories” (Steinman, p. 117).

In this quest to search for my voice, to assert my voice, I discover that it is not only what I have to say, but how I say it that is my ultimate goal. This is how performance inquiry is of help to me.

Once again, I see Burgundy, I feel quicksand. I am up to my neck in it. I can hardly breathe. White is not coming to my rescue. My pink rose petals are all dried up. I’m frightened, actually terrified, of what will/what is happening. What if this part of me simply needs to die? Or transform? Or simply be acknowledged (Allen, p. 37)? What if being engulfed by quicksand is a filtration system of sorts, a purification ritual?

Exhausted and unable to pull myself out or make a conscious choice, I simply surrender and trust the process (pp. 40, 63). As the light of day disappears, I cry.

I am in total darkness, suspended in loose clay particles being pulled in ever so deep into the core of the earth. My eyes are closed. I can feel my body being funneled through corridors of hot red lava. Red! I went from Burgundy to red! There is white down here in the darkness, too! I gasp, then, I take a deep breath.

And as I travel through these lava corridors into the depths of the earth’s inner core, I get glimpses of hope and faith in green emeralds, red rubies, purple imperial topazes and blue diamonds in the making. As the tears roll down my cheeks on to my hands and chest, I feel the moisture on my skin reviving me, liberating me from this anguished immobility caused

by the weight of Burgundy clay. Slowly, my body begins to float upwards. And, as I crack through the surface of the earth, guided by the warm sunlight, green prickly leaves sprout from the core of my body with the strength and determination of a seedling. I ultimately blossom into a beautiful fragrant pink petal rose.

Dancing With My New Sculpting Tool

In this pursuit, I (re)discover another ally, another tool, that of *writing*.

I have always loved writing. First, because writing is kinesthetic, it requires movement, my element of choice to decode the world and myself. My handwriting clues me in on how freely I write my thoughts, emotions and feelings or how much resistance I feel towards them when it shifts from fluid, tilted left, tilted right, embellished to straight, and with up and down peaks (Goldberg, p. 28).

I need to reconnect with pen and paper. Somehow, typing my citations and observations feels as though I am missing something, not making a connection. It becomes too far removed. There is no embodiment of the knowledge I am receiving. It all feels so distant all of a sudden. As I return to handwriting, I play with my calligraphy. I am once again dancing to the tune of the Frixon 0.5 pink pen scratching the paper's surface as my hand glides on and the pen does pirouettes as I round out my letters. I'm home.

Writing becomes a mirror of me, for me, with me. One that constantly reflects back the here and the now (Bleakley, p. 13) yet permits me to leave a trace that I can return to, I can remold, I can shuffle and transform as the exploration of ideas unfolds (K. Dyer, personal communication, 2016).

This reflection, what my writings unveil, and reflexion, how I continue to question, allows me to see my biases and limitations. Through writing, I can feel them, I can dissect them, confront them, overcome them. Through writing I can uncover and reveal the multiple layers that I hold within me, 'the multiple realities of past and present, personal and

professional, mythic and spiritual” (Snowber, p. 30). Through practice, I can free myself and develop my imagination (Goldberg, pp. 30, 87–89, Snowber, p. 28). I can finally develop my creative voice.

Here, Bolton whispers to me a truth that resonates through all of my body: that “(i)deas can be sensual, emotional and imaginative (and that) (g)ood theoretical writing should embody ideas and strive for style” (as cited in Bleakley, p. 12).

Finley and Knowles (1995) introduce me to this new way of writing. Goldberg (1986) and Bleakley (2000) give me a template. Dillard (1992) gifts me with an example to cherish. And Spry (2011, p. 28) brings me full circle by telling me to first “understand (my) body-navigating concepts of self, culture, language, class, race, gender and physicality; (to then) (p)ut (my) body on the page, assigning words for (my) body’s sociocultural experience; (and to finally) merge(...) body and paper (lifting it) up to the stage, crafting a persona as a method of personal inquiry.”

Bleakley (p. 13), through the words of Bolton, speaks of ‘dynamic learning’ as a process/practice that emerges from the union of “reflective practice and the craft of creative writing,” which “involve(s) cognitive, intuitive and affective dimensions.” I would expand this to include kinesthetic and sensorial dimensions as well.

Paper and body are the canvases where all my stories are registered.

Words and movement are where all my stories create meaning.

Coda

I am no different from Applebaum’s Descartes, after all. He was calling to attention that there were other ways to achieve knowledge beyond what the eye (I) can see. His Samson embraced this fact and overcame his blindness by relying on the other senses to convey and process information and knowledge.

Now, I stand still. But I am not stuck in the Burgundy of quicksand. Just like the silences in music, this stop moment is one of heightened listening, awareness and embodiment. Slowly, I let go of the need to say “I” (p. 17) as a way to assert myself, and instead become the Sperm whale and the dancer in *Discovering My Shape-Shifting Body*. My voice asserts itself through all the movements I dance (Steinman, p. 2) and through all the words I write.

My chest has cracked open revealing secrets and treasures of my sunken ship. To bring them to the surface, to voice, write and perform them, is my pirate’s quest. Just now, right here, right now, as I am typing my thoughts, I am transformed into an accomplished pianist, playing the words from my keypad, my fingers and hands gliding across it in such graceful, elegant and assertive motions. The sense that I understand what I am transferring to this virtual paper is creating a beautiful melody that I can dance to.

	Awareness	Voice	Movement	Word
	Trust	Embodiment	Poise	Permission
	Stop	Purpose	Process	Courage
Engagement	Intention		Attention	Journey

These are the new notes to my favorite melody.

Thank you, Warren, for reminding me of this tune, for now I can freely “Danc(e) on the Edge of Chaos” (W. Linds, personal communication, 2016).

Nota Bene

Writing in the theoretical parts was an act of performance inquiry in and of itself. The resistance I felt to writing them, the paralyzing deep fear of not being able to do so, overcoming old knowledge and beliefs, the paradigm shift provoked by the willingness to

engage, the effort to get through this, the not worrying about the result, just simply trusting the process and being in the here and now – all these steps are reminiscent of the poise, the stop and the new way of knowing so dear to Descartes and Applebaum (Applebaum, pp. 99–104).

I smile. A sense of pride invades my body. My shoulders relax and an energy flows to the tips of my fingers. My forearms stretch out forward, my palms facing upwards. This is my gift to myself and to the world: a connection.

I surrender to the task. Beaten, broken, I grasp at what glimpses of understanding I can manifest. Always reliable, my body points me the way. I trust the process and dispel the walls that separate me from the knowledge I seek. I still don't master the content, but that's all right. These glimpses will do for now. It's a process, after all.

I realize the pack of lies I have been telling myself: this fear of not being able to *do*.

I am a beautiful Thoroughbred colt, standing proudly on my four legs, looking forward to the moment I discover the sensation of walking, trotting, kicking, jumping and galloping in the open green fields.



The Purple Sand Tree

Flashback to Sunday, September 24, 2017

"THIS LITTLE STANLEY BLOCK PLANE, THE FIRST woodworking tool I owned and still one of my favorites, has a surprising heft. I cradle it in my left palm, sole up, where the contours of the lever – the assembly that holds the blade in place – fit neatly into the two deep furrows, what palm readers call the head and heart lines, that mark the deepest cleft of my skin. My hand feels pleased, as always, to discover something that fulfills it so precisely" (Laird, 2001, p. 100).

I smile. I recognize that feeling. My arm reaches out to pick up my Canon Rebel XTI. My right hand clamps onto the camera and we become one. At times, I feel I am the extension of this magic box, guiding me to discover intricate details, amazing patterns, just on the other side of the viewfinder. A world waiting to be noticed. Stories waiting to be told.

Other times, it is the camera that is an extension of myself as I try desperately to freeze a moment, a place and/or an experience, worried that my illness will not allow me to remember.

I cry. I'm afraid of losing who I am, my identity, as I lose these bytes of memory. I'm afraid that my senses will not help me retrieve them. I'm afraid of the emptiness. I'm afraid of the responsibility of not remembering what I have said or done, and the consequences of those actions onto others and myself.

I'm afraid of how this predicament will affect my performance at university. Barry, Denzer, Eisner, Grady, McNiff... Who are you and what did you have to say? I look blankly at my meticulous notes, which I have both handwritten and typed. I have no memory of ever having read these authors.

Allen, Finley, Goldberg, Spry, Steinman... You sang to me a bewitching tune that resonated fully in my body, enticing me to dance, an invitation I could not refuse. What was the melody you sang? What notes composed it? I do not recall.

I know all these authors have profoundly affected me. I know that I have changed my outlook on academia and my approach to writing. I have been exposed to other ways of thinking and of being. Yet, I cannot neatly arrange and retrieve this information in my memory as a spreadsheet, cleanly and clearly delineating and attributing the specific points-of-view to their respective authors. They have been absorbed, melded into me like different color plasticine in the hands of a playful child, mixing all the colors of the world together until they are blended into one and leaving no trace of their origins.

My writing is a reflection of this, a rush of ideas, of electricity moving up my body. Words and sentences formed in my brain and I not able to contain them. I need to say them, write them, spew them out of my mouth or shape them with my handwriting. They find their way onto paper, like a rich torrent of lava. The gush of energy subsides. And just like the volcano, whose trace is left in the solidified molten of the landscape, I, too, find a piece of me trapped in the words on this paper. And I, perhaps like the volcano, have no memory of this explosion.

I feel angst. I need the comfort of something familiar and safe. I pick up my Canon Rebel XTI. What stories will you conjure up for me today?

It is a beautiful sunny day. The ocean breeze sways carefree in the air, tickling my nose with its salted scent. I walk along the Portuguese black and white cobblestone Avenida Marginal on my way home from another fruitful day digitizing long forgotten 1950's immigration requests to Canada by Azorean pioneer immigrant women. After spending five hours in the cavernous depths of dusty archives, being out in the open, soaking in the warmth of the sun is a wonderful reward.

I pass in front of Hotel Açores Atlantico. A man sits alone on one of its side gates. I immediately recognize him as a "*repatriado*," a deportee from the USA or Canada. I hate that I tag him so stereotypically.

The Azorean population does not welcome the deportees, in general. They are blamed for every new crime. They are ignored by the locals if not harassed and even beaten. No one trusts them. No one wants to give them a chance. They are mostly left to a subhuman category of existence.

I smile as I go passed the man and say, "*Good afternoon! Have a lovely evening.*" The look of surprise on his face confirms my reading of the locals' social behavior. "*Good afternoon,*" he replies, "*God bless.*"

For the next fifty-five days, I would look forward to seeing him. I would sit by his side and listen to his story. Tony was from New Bedford, had a son and a wife, a good job, but got mixed up in drugs, and ended up in jail one too many times, thus the deportation.

I can't remember his face or the tone of his voice. I remember his swollen hands of a reddish/purplish color probably from the abuse of alcohol and drugs.

He called me "*the yellow bag lady*," a reference to the oversized yellow bag that transported my equipment and that I carried around faithfully like a fifth appendage.

We had long talks about him finding his way in this alien society, of getting healthy, kicking his addiction, establishing a home, getting a job and making friends. But the cheap carton-box wine he held onto, unfortunately, told a different story.

In all the time we spent together, not once did I take out my Canon Rebel XTI to take a picture of Tony. I don't know why.

I wish I could remember the specifics of Tony's story. I can't retrieve them. Told this way, it's just another deportee story, Joe's, Manuel's, and Antonio's... There are hundreds of them like Tony.

Tears role softly down my cheekbones. Nestled in the base of my skull, my reptilian brain releases snake-like Medusa demons, emitting pain signals throughout my body, paralyzing me.

The crisp air of daybreak creates ripples on my exposed skin. I sit comfortably on a bright lime green folding chair, out on my second floor balcony, surrounded by the sweet scent of basil, marjoram and red cherry tomatoes, bathing in dashing pink color petals of lantana, verbena and geraniums. Some sparrows play hide and seek amongst the branches of the purple sand tree, while others chirp away morning hallelujahs, all of them oblivious to my pain.

Flash-forward to Thursday, January 30, 2020

The alarm clock sings its early morning hallelujahs as it ushers in the promise of a new day. Later this afternoon, I will be interviewing you. Last night, I went to bed looking forward to this encounter, certain of myself that I was prepared to meet you, listen to you.

But as the alarm clock rings, so to does my body, only this time to another frequency all too familiar to me. All I can hear is the pain emanating from the deepness of my being, traveling through my neural network and spreading onto my skin, separating me from the world, isolating me from the world.

What should I do? Should I postpone last minute? You have been anticipating this meeting for days now, telling me last night how you baked a cake for us to feast on. I don't want to disappoint you.

How will this pain affect my deep listening of you? Will I engage even further as a way to escape my own pain? How will it color my understanding of what you are telling me? Will I become more empathetic when you share your own stories of pain? Will it create a great divide between us?

I sit up straight on the bed, my back against the wall, and breathe deeply, slowly, hoping I will make the most respectful choice for you and me.



Letting Go

Flashback to Sunday, September 24, 2019

“This process, which Varela et al (1991) have described as letting go (“rather than to struggle to achieve some particular state of activity... body and mind are found to be naturally coordinated and embodied” [29]), beginning to pay attention to what I am thinking feeling and doing in the moment of (inter)action with others” (Linds, 2008, p. 5).

He is slightly taller than me and of slim built. He has pitch-black wavy hair and he uses gel to slick it back, revealing his full face. His eyes are deep brown and aloof, constantly on the lookout, constantly on the search for his next target. Through the opening framed by his slim lips, comes gushing out memorized New Age theories and mantras about life, relationships, dance...

Ah, yes! Dance. He goes dancing every Saturday night at the same place and at the same time. He talks about how dance makes him feel, how he loves expressing himself... *“Letting go,”* is his favorite expression. As I listen to him pronounce these words, Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s melody (1991) echoes through my body and reminds me of how intense the feeling of mind and body working together can be.

He extends his right hand, palm facing upward, a grand gesture to indicate he is inviting me to dance. I raise my left hand in an elegant arch movement and lightly place my palm on his, barely touching his, a grand gesture of acceptance. Two hands creating a unique connection between dance lovers, the promise of the perfect partner and of the perfect dance.

We walk majestically onto a crowded dance floor. A fast tempo rock tune, which I do not recognize, fills the air, envelops us, possess us. Actually, it possesses him.

As we begin to dance “together,” I immediately realize that this will not be a communion of souls. He has “let go” into his own world, spastically moving around on the dance floor, forcefully tugging and shoving me into movement. No “inter(action)” with me, or others (Linds, p. 5), just an imposition of his desires.

Dancing with him is difficult, jerky and outright dangerous. It is a power struggle between his dominating/dictating attitude and my will for dialogue through movement. He does not listen to others and for others. As his ego fills up the room, claiming his Dancing King title, I have to be present at every moment, every step, and every breath navigating his movements so that he does not harm himself, other dancers and me.

The song finally comes to an end. Instead of feeling exhilarated, nurtured, inspired, I am exhausted, drained, empty.

He has no clue what letting go truly means. And his behavior makes me realize one thing, that the more I am in tune with my body and mind, the more I trust myself to take risks, to be in the here and now, to be able to adjust at every moment, every stance.

A new day. A new challenge. As I sit at my desk bathing in Bayou Blue, my mind is nothing but Burgundy. I have to access a scholarly article through the library website. I’ve done it many a time before. But I am stuck. I’m once again immersed in quicksand.

I have to remember. I’m aware that I know how to do this. But with every keypad choice, with every mouse click, I go deeper and deeper into the abyss of Burgundy and further and further away from where I want to be.

This constant struggle, this forceful imposition leads me nowhere. I stop. I take a long deep breath. I close my eyes and trust the wisdom of my fingertips on the keyboard. No thinking, no conscience consciousness, just movement, touch, sway, music. And before I “know” it, the memory stored somewhere in my cells, (is it muscular, neurological, mitochondrial,

spiritual? A combination there of?), that same memory I could not forcefully retrieve just moments earlier, comes flooding outwards in a beautifully harmonious melody played out on the laptop keys. My fingers come to a stop. They finish playing this aria. A moment of silence, another long deep breath, I open my eyes. Alas, I found my way.

Learning to let go, knowing to let go, is not a sign of weakness, lack of resolution or irresponsibility. It is a surrender that does not come from defeat. Instead, it is a deep trust in myself that I will find a way, my way. It is a state that relies on the melodious coming together of mind, body, ethics, openness and curiosity that guide me, and becomes more than the sum of its individual parts. Beware! For it is not the voice of a self-centered ego entrenched in its ways but the quiet and peaceful knowledge/wisdom of my adaptability to the here and now. I am Samson (Applebaum, 1995).



Fear Or Intuition?

Flashback to Sunday, September 24, 2019

“Sometimes when you think you are done, it is just the edge of beginning. Probably that’s why we decide we’re done. It’s getting too scary. We are touching down onto something real. It is beyond that point when you think you are done that often something strong comes out.

(...) When you continue to stop yourself from going all the way in your writing and coming to a deep resolution, it’s not a dream you wake up from, but you carry the nightmare out into the streets. Writing gives you a great opportunity to swim through to freedom.

(...) If you are on, ride that wave as long as you can. Don’t stop in the middle. That moment won’t come back exactly in that way again, and it will take much more time trying to finish a piece later on than completing it now.

(...) Go further than you think you can” (Goldberg, 1986, pp. 103–104).

The morning is quiet and announces a bright sunny day ahead. I’m walking to McLennan Library to return a book.

“Shhhh,” I whisper to myself. I hush my mind of its thousands swirling thoughts. Suddenly, my legs stop moving without my command. A blast of heat bleeds through my body all the way to my head. This dam that is my body has swollen and is overflowing on its banks. The doors can no longer hold back and contain the pressure of pain. The doors burst open. I let go. I surrender. And as I live through this outward flooding, the tension is released, my body, my dam, returns to its normal levels.

I realize I have brought the wrong book. Was this a sign? Perhaps.

Goldberg (p. 103) tells me to not stop here and take the easy way out. Keep writing. Find the answer. Don't cop out.

The heat rises again. I've exhausted my 15 minutes of comfort. Goldberg (p. 104) tells me not to walk away, the words won't come to me like they are now. But I'm afraid that I will further injure myself and I am not ready to take the risk. I must make the choice between composing this aria and resting my bones, the same bones Goldberg wants me to write with.

I once again give in to the cries from my body. I rest for a few minutes and come back to this prose.

I don't know if my body triggered this pain crisis to tell me something was amiss. Is this the language of my intuition?

I am frequently invaded by thoughts, more like premonitions, fragmented visions and whispers that quietly suggest an alternative to the choice I am about to make and in retrospect confirm to have been the better one. Am I so blind and deaf to these signals that my body needs to create pain in order to stop me on my tracks?

Why do I not trust this inner voice of mine?

The floodgates open once again. This time it is a different pain, one that rises from fear: fear of sticking to concepts, fear of making statements, fear of making mistakes. Everything feels so definite, so set in stone, so immutable.

These are not my values. I am Samson (Applebaum, 1995) stumbling, grasping, crawling yet moving forward, learning at each step, reassessing my choices along the way. I believe in change.

I hear Diana and Ulla's voices (D. Gustafson, personal communication, 2016; U. Neuerburg-Denzer, personal communication, 2016) reassuring me that all academics are on a path of growth, that it is okay to state something today and retract it tomorrow because we are constantly learning new material, integrating it to who we are and what we stand for. Change, hopefully, is what we aim for (U. Neuerburg-Denzer, personal conversation, 2016).

Still, the terrified little girl in me is afraid to commit. I'm afraid of not getting it right and perfect. I can hear my father's voice pushing me to do better on a math test when I got 100%. I can hear my mother's voice stating she always knew best. I freeze. The one feeling in the world I fear the most.

I'm walking home with my friend, Bruce. We are deep in conversation, oblivious to our surroundings. I can feel the constant tempo of our steps fueling energy into our discussion. We don't erase our past, even if we make new choices (B. McKay, personal conversation, 2016). The terrified little girl default system kicks into full gear. I have to accept her existence, make peace with her ugliness when she shows up, and know, that it is okay. She can exist. She can even manifest herself, despite the fact that I am in disagreement with her. I need to remind myself to be compassionate towards the terrified little girl that is just as much a part of me.

These are the same issues as many of my previous writings. Yet, today I do not feel trapped in Burgundy. Nor do I swim in Bayou Blue. Instead, I rest in hopeful Green.

Post scriptum

I recently came across this video on the difference in embodiment of fear vs intuition by author Anne Bérubé (2017):

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/09/01/fear-vs-intuition-anne-berube_a_23192825/?utm_hp_ref=ca-homepage

Oddly enough, I know exactly what she means. Now, I simply have to apply it.



Positivism and Hermeneutics

Flashback to Tuesday, October 3, 2017

Positivism. Hermeneutics.

Countless are the times I come across these words in my readings. And countless, too, are the times I've looked them up to know their meanings.

I turn to Wikipedia (Positivism) (Hermeneutics), for a quick snapshot of how they are perceived in today's world. I get the picture, but as soon as I'm done reading, I no longer retain the knowledge.

I turn to the online versions of Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française, the Oxford English Dictionary and the Dicionário Priberam da Língua Portuguesa searching in French, English and Portuguese, three languages I master. Perhaps I can make a connection through one of them? And still, not a glimpse, not even a tiny recollection of what they mean.

I copy the definitions onto a notebook in the hope that my hand movement will choreograph a dance by which to retrieve them, but to no avail. I type them out, wondering if the sound created from striking the keys will open a door, much like a locksmith listening to the rotating pins of a safe and setting free all that is kept within. Nothing.

I ask of my brain and my body for one extra effort to remember. In the distance a storm is brewing. The serene blue sky that is my body begins to feel grey clouds of pain creeping in from my extremities.

First, the clouds are light grey, the announcement of an agony foretold. As they move up my fingers and toes, through my hands and feet, and onto my forearms and calves, these clouds become denser and denser, they turn to dark grey, charcoal and black clouds, creating so much pressure that my body diminishes in size and my cranium feels like a Jivaro's Tsantsa (shrunken head skull) from the Redpath Museum.

The roars of thunder belt out of my mouth in a dual manifestation of victorious ache and beaten-body surrender while lightning bolts of pain rush through my nervous system, an electric storm in full fledge.

I cry, and as the raindrops role down my cheeks, moistening my skin, the promise of May flowers after April showers.

Positivism. Still nothing.

Hermeneutics. Something to do with the interpretation of sacred texts. Meaning has evolved. That's all I have. It's a start. How I got this far I don't know.

Exhaustion sets in. My brain feels swollen. My body feverish. Accompanying my quiet smile, a tear of joy runs down my right cheek. I rest in hopeful Green.

Positivism. Hermeneutics.



Landscapes

Flashback to sometime between September and December 15, 2017

“I’m not complaining, I’m not bemoaning the loss of something that didn’t belong to me, I’m simply trying to explain that this present-day landscape isn’t mine, it isn’t the place where I was born, I didn’t grow up there” (Saramago, 2009, p. 4).

Terrestrial Landscapes

At the entrance to the village of Maia, in the island of São Miguel-Açores, was a stone arch that bridged over the main road between the properties of Senhor Alberto Vaz do Rego and his wife Senhora Hortênsia, my primary school friend Zirinha’s parents, and the Solar de Lalém, the Manor House beyond the village, built in the 17th century to host the captains of Pedro II, The Pacifist, King of Portugal. This arch wasn’t a particularly impressive piece of architecture, but it did frame the road nicely, almost like a portal, separating the village from the world beyond.

It served as an aqueduct that streamed water from the natural spring on the hillside to the Manor House. It was perhaps six, seven meters in height, give or take, and not even a meter in diameter. It performed its duty well for an era when only horse and oxen drawn carts roamed the dirt roads. Even the first cars, my maternal grandfather Gil’s truck, and the Caetano, Raposo e Pereiras buses still managed to snugly move past it. But it wasn’t long before progress, impatient and unforgiving, claimed it victim and declared it an obstacle to its envisioned future of bigger and larger vehicles.

Unlike the humble arch, the *Araucaria*, a Monkey Puzzle tree, stood tall and majestic on the grounds of the Manor House. This evergreen coniferous tree was almost 40 meters high. Deeply rooted in the beautiful agricultural flatland cultivated with wheat, tobacco, potatoes, and seasonal vegetables and legumes, it rose between the mountains on the one side, with their deep green crown of beechwood, Japanese-cedar, Australian cheesewood forests and emerald pastoral midlands sprinkled with black and white patches of Holstein Friesian cows, and, on the other side, the black solidified lava basalt rock that trickled into

an ocean of blue. This solitary icon was a sort of protector in the imaginary of the villagers, a reminder to the locals of their strength and perseverance, and a beacon to all travelers signaling the way to Maia.

In 1966, the beloved *Araucaria* was struck by lightning and was deemed too dangerous to remain standing. The authorities ordered it to be cut down. That day was one of mixed emotions for the villagers. The people gathered around in awe to watch this giant be brought down to its knees by the arms of a few men and the seesaw movement of metallic teeth grinding away at its flesh. And, it was a day of deep mourning, for the landscape would never be the same.

This is not my landscape. For years, I heard my mother, Maria Luisa, and my father, Dionísio, speak of these landmarks with such fondness, attachment and pride, their personal UNESCO sites. These stories and images are impregnated in my cultural heritage, a memory that reaches far beyond my own experience. I can visualize these landmarks even though they were no longer in existence in my lifetime. My parents' storytelling and the pictures I've seen of these scenes help me (re)construct these memories and claim them as my own. How do I hold on to them and not to my own experiences? How much of the memories I claim as my own are nothing more than constructs from other peoples' narratives?

Celestial Landscapes

Was it a warm summer's night or a crisp fall's evening? Did we bring blankets to lie on or did the thin grass blades tickle our bodies? Did we pass by the bakery to pick up hot buns or did we bring cookies from home? I can hear my cousin's Dionísia's laughter but I can't be certain that this fragment belongs to this memory.

Was it the year of the Perseids or the Orionids? All I can remember was the Azorean TV station claiming it to be the meteoric shower of the century. Or was it the decade? And my father staying up late, better still, leaving the house past his bedtime, to go and watch it with my mother, my cousins and me.

I can smell the ocean salt in the air. I can feel my body lying on my stomach. These details seem plausible but are they from this event or am I conjuring them up from other experiences to complete this picture? It feels like two radio stations competing for the same channel frequency. I get bits and pieces and no clear definition.

We went to the outskirts of town to move away from the glow of the streets lights to get a better view of this celestial promise. And we waited, first filled with the excitement of what was to be. But as the hours past, our belief dwindled, particularly that of my father's. Finally, after one, two, three hours, the heavenly bodies appeared. A green, a blue, a red and white shooting stars danced across the horizon. And that was all. Only four luminous figures rewarded our presence.

I don't recall how we filled those hours in waiting. Did we eat? Tell jokes? Play games? Fall asleep?

In the end, what was the most important detail of this event for me was that my father left home after his usual bedtime to partake in an activity with my mother and me. The lack of real details in nothing changes the validity of this memory for me.

Diminished Landscapes

"(...) but the fact that the poor man lacked the intelligence to know which way the wind was blowing (...)" (p. 22)

"Language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person's life is inevitably a violation," says Josselson (1996, p. 62)" (as cited in Ellis, 2007, p. 6)

I'm scared, confused. I love reading, writing, hearing these stories of family members, friends and acquaintances, with all the colorful descriptions of their personalities, their physical appearances and their quirks. Yet, from an ethical standpoint, do I have the right to use these descriptors? Do I need consent? Am I hurting someone? Am I giving into voyeuristic behavior (Prendergast & Saxton, 2015, p. 280)? Is this a hidden sense of

superiority? What are “(my) responsibilities to intimate others who are characters in the stories (I) tell about (my) life” (Ellis, p. 4)?

What is the difference between writing a novel or a performative piece of real people and writing based on interviews with real people? What do the processes of anonymity and fictionalization offer me? I feel like I’m missing a piece of the puzzle and I cannot get a full picture.

I never thought of these issues before reading about ethics of performance, ethnotheatre and autoethnography.

Onomastic Landscapes

“I don’t really believe in so-called false-memories, I think the difference between those and the memories we consider certain and solid is merely a question of confidence, the confidence we place in the incorrigible vagueness we call certainty. Is the memory I have of Francisco false? Perhaps, but I have spent the last eighty-three years believing it to be true” (Saramago, pp. 109–110).

My mother and I share the same name, Maria Luisa. She loves her name. It was her wish I carried this legacy. Growing up with the same name meant that I was referred to as Maria Luisa Pequena (Little One), an affectionate term, yet one that never let me grow into who I wanted to be. It also meant being compared to my mother and overshadowed by her feats, all her past firsts, i.e., first woman to wear pants in the village, to wear make-up, to smoke, to work even though she didn’t need to, her defiance to authority and having married down from her social stratum. I could never “beat” any of these “triumphs,” not that I particularly cared to win any trophies.

I was at boarding school when my friend Aida called me Nisa for the first time and I was immediately enamored by the name. I loved the phonetics of it and it resonated deeply in my core. Aida had discovered the name while studying *Os Lusíadas* (Camões, 1572), a 16th century epic poem describing the Portuguese voyages of the 15th and 16th centuries as they made their way to India via the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Aida told me that when the Portuguese had reached the Indian Ocean, and the much-awaited arrival in India was now a sure thing, Baccus, the God defending the interests of the Arab merchants, created an illusionary island called the Isle of Lovers. The capital was Nisa, the City of Desire, a place where the Portuguese sailors could set anchor and have all their hopes and wishes come true. Baccus reckoned that if the Portuguese had all their desires satiated, they would have no need to complete their journey, thus leaving the Indian commerce safely in the hands of the Arab merchants. Now, Venus, the goddess protecting the interests of the Lusos, saw right through this illusion and broke the spell. The island turned out to be Madagascar. And the Portuguese set sail and eventually arrived in Goa.

I lived some thirty years believing this account. It has many errors, especially the reference to Nisa, which is not the City of Desire. It is both a reference to Mount Nisa, in Parnaso, where Baccus was sent by his father Zeus to be raised by Nymphs after his mother Semele's death, and it is a city in India that Baccus founded. Whether Aida created a version of it to fit my need of adventure, imagery, uniqueness, even illusion, I do not know. Or was it I who interpreted what she said in this way? It no longer matters. I have created my identity, and continue to do so, around this name that is pleasing to my ears. I can still hear Warren's comment, *"An identity born out of a story! A mythical identity?"* (W. Linds, personal communication, 2017). I smile.

"Fathers and mothers, parents, are/were separate, but their past actions become, marked on the bodies of their children" (Thompson, 2003, p. 53).

"For example, a child can choose to repeat the walk of a favoured teacher, wink like a particular idol or restate the words of an admired sister. In playing with these actions, you mark yourself very slightly, ensuring that your next action will be negotiated through that structure. You can use the potential you already have adaptively and act to recreate yourself for new experiences" (p. 61).

“Nisa” was also a way for me to not completely deny where I came from

DioNISio (father) + Maria LuISA (mother)

NISA

but give enough space to carve my own identity.

I must have been 14 years old when Mário Leandro, a journalist friend, scribbled on a paper napkin at a café in Ponta Delgada the following description of me, which I have never forgotten:

Noites de indecisão	Nights of indecision
Inconformismo ilusório	Illusory nonconformity
Saudades de vivência	Nostalgia of living
Amarguras de felicidade	Sufferings of joy

Did he see right through me or have I chosen the experiences to fit the narrative?

“Pezuda, a woman whose real name I’ve long forgotten, if, indeed, I ever knew it, (...)”
(Saramago, p. 23).

André Galhofa (translation: taunt, scorn, ridicule) was different. He was a small, *petit* man. He had big dark bushy eyebrows arching over deep black eyes, with a crooked long nose, a wide mouth with slim lips and very large ears for such a small head.

I remember him with his shirt tucked neatly underneath his knitted sweater, wearing hand-me-down pants and shoes. He would always start the day well coiffed and clean, but it wouldn’t take long before the locals, children and adults alike, would make fun of him, do pranks and scare him to the point where he would soil himself.

His trademark was by far the *boné*, a tweed flat cap, he wore and the cigarette dangling from his lips: in older times, the cigarette was made of dried cornhusk and chopped tobacco, until recently when he would carry industrially made ones.

André seemed to know things that no one gave him credit for. He knew when the *romeiros* (pilgrims) would come through town and he would first kneel in the middle of the street begging for money and cigarettes. Then, he would accompany them to church, pray with them and accompany them out of town all the while chanting the proper prayers.

He would also solemnly partake in funeral corteges, accompanying the dead to their final resting home, and join other Christian processions all year round, always with his *boné* in his hands, arms behind his back, a sure sign of respect.

He spoke in utterances, which I could not understand. Yet, it seemed to me that for all his verbal limitations, he clearly had a voice.

As a child, I tried to bridge that gap. I tried to reach out, show kindness. My message and intent were not clear to him. Instead, he greeted me with a beating. This episode marked my life for a very long time. For too long, I was afraid to reach out to individuals with mental illness. Thankfully, I have overcome this fear.

I wonder if he knew what his nickname meant? I wonder if he cared? I wonder why people were so cruel? I wonder if anyone ever realized the cruelty and stopped calling him Galhofa?

Urban Landscapes

It's another crisp autumn afternoon in Montreal. On my way to my friend Paulo's place, I need to make a stop at the Caisse Desjardins. I choose to walk on the opposite sidewalk, so as to take in the warmth of the sunny side of the street. I reach my intersection and face the streetlight. I can see the bank where I want to go to. I recognize it. I see the green light, the people crossing, the cars moving in the same directions, while the others on the perpendicular street don't move. My body stays fixed at the corner. I do not know how to

cross the street. I do not know what the green light means. I do not know how to make my way to the other side of the street. I do not know how to tell my body to move, how to initiate movement. All the while, I am aware of all of this, as if I am another person standing beside me and looking at me. This lasts the timespan of two green lights. I just stand there, people coming and people going, all of them oblivious to what I am experiencing.

Bodily Landscapes I

"This routine was my mother's. Is my mother's. I have flashes of memory where my mother would rub her hands together and irritate me as a child" (Thompson, p. 54).

The phone rang. *"Who could this be at this hour?"* I thought.

"I saw you, I saw you on TV!" my Mom yelled with excitement. *"I didn't recognize you at first because of the hood you were wearing. Nor did I recognize your voice. But the way you interlocked your hands together and placed your thumbs flat and straight out, not crossed, just like me, gave you away."*

Scarred Landscapes

Not for the faint at heart (anatomically descriptive)

As I look at my left hand, I see all the scars that punctuate my skin. They are proof of past experiences, some of which I no longer remember. Their lines are just as abstract as their memory.

The middle finger at the level of the distal interphalangeal joint (knuckle closest to the tip of the finger) has a diagonal cut, about 1.5cm long. I can visualize the exact moment the long serrated knife, used for cutting bone, slid off the piece of meat and sliced my knuckle open. As my tanned skin split apart, it revealed the bright white outside layer of the cartilage of my knuckle, then the greyish outer layer of bone and finally followed by the porous reddish brown bone marrow. Still beneath the skin, and wrapping my bone was a slim, shiny, pink layer of muscle. I don't remember feeling pain. Instead, I was mesmerized, fascinated. I was my own anatomical subject.

Strangely enough, my father lost the tip of the same finger in a work-related accident, and my maternal grandfather, did too, while petting an Emperor penguin in Antarctica.

As a child, I would love riding with Tio (Uncle) Laudalino on his BAS motorcycle. One day, that all changed. I got off on the wrong side of the motorcycle and touched the steaming hot exhaust pipe with my bare leg. I don't remember anything of what happened then.

What I do remember is the green and yellow pus that oozed out of the wound, the putrid smell and the excruciating pain that came with changing the bandages, as they would inevitably rip up my skin over and over again. Menina Lurdes, as she was known for she had never married, was the local nurse. Her office was Spartan and pristine white. The scent of ethanol, alcohol, Mercurochrome and iodine was enough to make you sick.

Oddly enough, I remember having a handkerchief tied around my calf, but the markings on my thigh suggest otherwise.

How peculiar I find it, to choose only to describe physical scars, when emotional and psychological ones are much more profound and long lasting in their effect on the landscape that I am.

Porcine Landscapes

"There was something I meant to say, when on an earlier page, I spoke about going to the market with the pigs" (Saramago, p. 116).

Since as far as I can remember and until the 1980's, every year, in January, Azorean families would begin a new cycle of raising pigs. They would choose the breed based on the final use of the animal: black for lard, short snout red and white for meat... This was an important dietary staple and its tradition goes back to the time of the settlers in mid-1400.

And every year, my uncle, Tio Laudalino, would be called to all these homes to photograph the new litter or the purchased piglets. The owners would send these pictures to family members who had immigrated to Canada and the USA, as a means to display prosperity

and appease the worries of their immigrated loved ones, and, at times, as thank you for the money they received from overseas that guaranteed future meals.

Throughout the year, the animals were fed a mixture of water, corn flour and kitchen scraps. I also remember them eating kale, dried corn on the cob and, to fatten them up, two months before the slaughter, a hardy diet of sweet potato and pumpkin. They were confined to tiny pens, where they would spend most of the time sleeping or rolling, perhaps playing, in their own feces. I can still smell the warm wet earthy fecal stench that emanated from all the backyards in the village and would turn my stomach, and the loud snorting sound that didn't seem to bother anyone else.

In December, the first of the coldest months of the year, the cycle would come to an end. The piglets, now full grown, would be slaughtered to provide food for the family for the following year. They did this around Christmas, hence the name "*Natal do porco*" (A Pig's Christmas) and they did so on the one hand to guarantee bounty for the festive season, but more so because the cold weather secured the freshness of the meat, since they had no other means of refrigeration.

"It was a source of great pride to my family, both in the city and in the village, that I passed the fourth-year exam with distinction. The oral exam took place in a ground-floor room..."
(Saramago, p. 96).

I was about ten years old when, during my fourth grade Portuguese oral exam, I read a passage in the book *Anita na montanha* (Anita at the mountain) (Delahaye & Marlier, 1960/1974). There were three examiners present: Professora Teresinha, my teacher, Professor Daniel, a good friend of the family and a writer in his own right, and a female teacher from Lombinha da Maia, whose name escapes me. I was expected to do very well for I was the best student in the class. The examiners and students were paired on a rotational basis, but protocol was not followed when it came to me. Professor Daniel decided that he would do the examination. And so I read the passage that described Anita going to the mountain for her Christmas holidays.

“What does Christmas mean?” asked Prof. Daniel. “It means birth,” I replied, “and more concretely the birth of Baby Jesus.”

“You are correct,” he said. “Do you know the expression Natal de porco?” “I do, it is when the pigs get slaughtered at Christmas time,” I replied.

*“You are correct again,” and he continued “Do you think it is right to say Natal do porco, when one refers to a birth of the Saviour and the other to a killing of a pig?” “It doesn’t seem right from that angle,” I said. “So what would you call it?” he asked. He had hoped I would answer *matança de porco* the correct expression for pig slaughter. But that was not to be.*

“A Pig’s Easter!” I said with the confidence of a child that knew very well her Biblical references. Professora Teresinha was horrified as if she herself had failed the exam. Professor Daniel let out a belly laugh that he could not contain and ran out the door to tell my father who was outside waiting in anticipation for the results of my exam. And just as with her name, I have no memory of the reaction from the teacher of Lombinha da Maia.

Circadian Landscapes

Bright blue skies fill this cool September morning. Not quite cold enough to see one’s breath yet, just crisp enough to heighten the senses. A tapestry of gold, orange, brown and red carpet the backyard of autumn colors. I fall into my morning ritual, sipping my morning coffee, out on the back balcony, just contemplating the start of a new day. And, as I begin this day quietly, I am offered another of nature’s miracles, the migration of Canadian geese, a ritual in itself.

Every year, with the precision of Big Ben telling time, these beautiful creatures, symbol of our natural national treasure, take to the skies and travel thousands of kilometers to the south to spend the winter, only to make the trip back home the following spring.

A circadian rhythm as it is known. I look at my own migratory pattern: Canada (1964-1973), Portugal (1973-1983), Canada (1983-1996), Spain (1996-1997), Canada (1997-2007), Portugal (2007-2009) and back to Canada (2009-2017). I realize that for the most part, I, too, adhere to more or less a 10-year tidal pattern of movement. These days, I feel restlessness in my body that won't allow me to stay still. I feel the need for change in the landscape that surrounds me. Is this my circadian rhythm kicking into full gear?

The Canadian geese have long passed, their V-shaped formation barely noticeable in the sky. Will I be here to greet them next spring?

Onoric Landscapes

"I woke up in the dark and saw..." (Saramago, p. 48).

It is said that everyone dreams. I won't contest that. However, I have no proof of my own except for one dream I've remembered since childhood. I must have been 3 or 4 years old. It is one of my first and very own memories that I am certain of.

At the time, in the late 60's, my family and I were living in Hampstead House, a luxury apartment building, on Côte Saint-Luc Road. Not that we could afford it. My father was the superintendent and as such needed to be on the premise 24 hours, 7 days a week. So, the apartment came with the job.

The building was a state of the art design, with a half moon driveway, a black marble floor entrance with a doorman, Mr. Clark, a warm and kind old English gentleman who had all of the patience in the world for me, much alike a grandfather with his grandchild. The edifice lodged 68 families. The tenants were so elegant in their dress code and manners. There was an outdoor pool and a backyard where I would spend most of the time playing. I digress.

Our apartment was in a T-shape. My parents' room was at the far right wing (thank goodness that didn't reflect theirs or my political views!) and mine was just before it. To the left was the living room and kitchen/dining room. My room was a perfect square with

horizontal windows along one side. (I wonder if that is why I still privilege horizontal windows today?) My bed faced a wall and along it and the windows was my beautiful pink and white furniture. Above my headboard was a picture of a guardian angel that I still have today. I am not digressing again as describing the apartment and my bedroom's layout is important to the story.

One night, after having fallen into a comfortable deep sleep, I woke up in a panic. I sat up in my bed in total disbelief. On the wall facing me was the cartoon character The Mighty Hercules wearing a white sleeveless tunic, (in reality, he wore a blue one, I don't know why I remember it white?), black belt with a large capital H, and his magic power ring on his finger while branding his sword in the other hand. He was mounting his white winged stallion, Pegasus, and they were at the top of Mount Olympus. He looked so victorious, and I couldn't help but feel he was coming after me next. Even my guardian angel above my head was no match for Hercules.

I did the only thing I could do. I jumped out of bed and ran out of the room to seek safety with my parents. Surely, they could do something? But before reaching them, I turned and looked over my right shoulder, down the hallway, only to be faced with the cartoon characters The Three Little Pigs, big fat pink pigs, charging at me! I opened my parents' bedroom door and... That's it. The memory ends there.

Did I really leave my room or was that still the dream?

"Hercules, you are out. You have been named" (Pelias, 1999, p. 12).

Grammatical Landscapes

"Part of her role has been to defend his stylistic idiosyncrasies, insisting that they are part of his voice, not linguistic errors to be corrected and standardized" (Bateson, 1990, p. 83).

The apple was eaten by me.

Word Autocorrect keeps pointing out to me that my sentences are constructed in passive voice. I oblige and make the necessary corrections.

I ate the apple.

As far as I can remember, and in all the languages I master, my tendency has always been to take the action away from me and put the spotlight on the other. Is this just another expression of my suppressed voice? Is this, yet, another form of self-effacement? Or is it possible that “the(se) silences told (stories) as loudly as the narratives that were voiced” (Thompson, 2003, p. 40), if only someone would listen differently?

I am Eve in the Garden of Eden, not just tempted by the snake, vessel of Knowledge, but a willing participant to savor with all my senses the sweet juicy, slightly acidic, crispy crunch of a Green apple of Change.

I realize that for years, I have always put my father’s name before my mother’s. That was the tradition in the Portuguese language. Another reminder of the patriarchal society I grew up in. It didn’t matter that I always felt closer to my mother, albeit my struggle to claim my place, it simply was the way it was, no questions asked. I now realize how a seemingly inoffensive grammatical rule perpetuates gender power struggles.

Theoretical Landscapes

“I LOVE MONSTERS (aka. Smile Bitch) is a practice-based project that critically and creatively reworks representational modes and narrative structures used for signifying the mother-daughter dyad through a situated feminist research-creation approach. This project understands research-creation as a knowledge-making practice, which interweaves critical theoretical analysis with creative processes of representation. This mode of knowledge-making enables both the production of an original video work, and a critical analysis of documentary and autoethnographic films and videos as part of a written component. This project is inherently interdisciplinary, coming together at the intersection of documentary studies, feminist film theory, and feminist theories of experience. Working from the

interdisciplinary domain of communication and feminist media studies, and drawing from a history of feminist film theory and video making, this project engages with debates related to the writing and reading of gendered experience” (Meyer, 2017).

My brain is in overload. It swells and heats up. I read these words and freeze in motion, gasping for air. I do not know how to talk or write this language. It frightens me. Will this affect my academic work? How do I overcome this fear? What path do I take to meander through this vocabulary, dance to this music and ultimately compose my aria?

I smile. I still remember part of the definition of the word Hermeneutics: methodology of interpretation of sacred texts, later changed to mean interpretation of all texts, verbal and non-verbal. Thank you, Warren, for the link to Hermes, the Messenger (W. Linds, personal communication, 2017). I now have another gateway. I’m not very good with mythology but I’ll try to remember. And, I still don’t recall what Positivism means.

Ever-Being/Ever-Changing Landscapes

My narrative, my discourse is changing. I realize that I am paying more attention to the words I choose to describe my thoughts, my feelings, my fears, and my health condition. “Problem” is the word I used to describe my memory, particularly with regards to studying and learning but not exclusively, and the consequences on my academic performance. Just now, I found myself replacing the thought “*The problem I have...*” with “*What I perceive to be an issue...*” I immediately recognize the connection to the beginning of my MA when I was introduced to the field of qualitative studies...



Joy

Flashback to Friday, December 15, 2017

Bewilderment. Astonishment. Learning. Pain. Pleasure. Joy.

Is it the sleep deprivation that is letting my guard down and allowing these thoughts, sensations, emotions, embodiments dance through my body and surface in these words on this virtual sheet of paper? Or have these concepts finally gelled after a long period of simmering?

Images appear.

I am in awe when I live through a crisis of pain. How this body of mine, this living machine, can create such messages, can challenge my desire to live. I am in awe when my mind comforts my body, accepting its voice and tactically negotiates its survival and surrender.

I am in awe that when faced with adversity and problem-solving, I take pleasure in the step-by-step, trial and error path to finding harmony, to finding resolution.

There is beauty everywhere. There is joy in the process.



Fictionalize! Hmmm?

Flashback to Wednesday, January 17, 2018

A STORY I WROTE

(...)

THE END

The interviewee shares with me a story of racist overtones and redemption. She later retracts her consent. I give her my word. Oh! But how I ache to tell it, perform it!

“Use fiction,” Ted Little offers as a solution to my dilemma (E. Little, personal communication, October 3, 2016). And so I complied.

I turn to anonymity, fictional and composite characters to hide their identities (Ellis, 2007, p. 24; Sikes, 2012, p. 133) and define historical setting. I add “musings” (Zvan, 2016) to create dramatic intensity. I craft a fiction inspired by various truths. Does the fact that a lesson can be derived for the “greater good” (Ellis, pp. 10, 24) from “juicy stuff” (Saldaña, 1998, p. 181) give me the right to tell a story whose consent has been retracted? Does fictionalizing that interview relieve me of ethical concerns? Is this still oral history (Little & High, 2014, p. 245) ?

Sikes (p. 123) quotes:

“(N)arrativising, like all intentional behavior... is a site of moral responsibility’ Laurel Richardson (1990, p. 131)”.

How I wish there was a template I can follow, a list of criteria with boxes to check off! Choose affirmative answers to 75% of the questions and I’m off the ethical hook.

Saldaña (p. 183) complains of a lack of references while doing his first project *Maybe Someday, If I’m Famous....* Ellis (pp. 22–26) offers me a guideline based on her experience. Nowadays, ethical frameworks and protocols are in place from universities to research centers, such as ConRAD and IRB, to help protect interviewee, researcher and institution. But do they really help me?

Linds (2008, p. 3) quoting Boal (1979, xxi) suggests that I do “(a) rehearsal for reality” and ““try out” (my) actions,” to “move() *beyond* ethics to *ethical know-how*” (p. 2). He reminds me that ethics in a contained environment is not simply a set of principles (p. 2) that are right or wrong but rather a constant and ever shifting continuum set in space, time, event and group. Sikes (p. 123) reaffirms this by pointing out “every research situation is contextually and historically situated.”

This is my “space of containment” (Linds, p. 2), where I can explore my own ethical concerns through this conversation with myself ‘bodymind’ (p. 5) and you, Luis, my professor.

Through this process of research/creation and performative writing I bring to the surface of my skin these deep, sometimes silent, biases that color my work/world. I blow soap bubbles into the wind and watch them dance in the blue sky. They are of all shapes and sizes. I watch them burst and dissipate. And just like the bubbles, I hope to burst open these biases, or at the very least, be able to finally name them.

As I research, talk, write and perform this issue, I realize that it is not the fictionalization process that I have difficulty with. I simply cannot dissociate her voice, her actual physical sounding voice in my head and heart, and my word to her from the act of publishing this ‘new’ story I create.

Furthermore, I am concerned with offering a platform to people whose voices haven’t been heard. I confuse identifying someone’s voice in a literal sense, i.e. name of the person I interviewed, with the voice expressing an issue based on a real person. Thus, my question with regards to whether fictionalization can still be considered oral history. This is perhaps a residual marking of my verbatim theatre days.

Prendergast and Saxton (2015) argue that resorting to anonymity would protect the identity of the interviewee and permit the use of “real stories to create content in which ‘my’ story becomes ‘our’ story” (p. 282) through the power of conceptual blending (p. 281). This “lie that tells the truth”(p. 280) in turn allows the audience “to relate to what is happening now and to consider how we might think and behave in response” (p. 283). This is the reason why I want to tell the story in the first place.

This desire of mine to transform an “account() of oral history into a performative mode with a capacity to contribute to a culture of ‘never again’” (Little & High, p. 248) is what drives my quest. But is it enough?

Ellis (pp. 22, 24) asks me to consider the “greater good,” whether I can “justify the potential risk to others.” Would this “lead to positive change and make the world a better place” (p. 25) ? Perhaps. But then again, is it enough?

As I write these concepts, trying to find an opening where I can feel comfortable with anonymity and fictionalization in this particular case, a word surfaces: excuses. My body quivers, a clear indication of my uneasiness.

Through the exercise of writing this reflection, I realize that I have two sides competing to be “right” instead of simply complementing each other. I need to bathe in the knowledge and experience of other oral history performers to further understand, and hopefully, overcome the biases that limit my color palette or, at the very least, feel confident in my choice.

I can find refuge in the fact that the probability of the interviewee reading an academic paper or a published book (Ellis, p. 8), or watching a performance is close to nil. But in an era of social media and easy access, “I doubt that I would be able to achieve what Martin Tolich (2004) calls ‘internal confidentiality’, where the ‘internal’ refers to the network of relationships which allow insiders to know and identify who and what is being described” (Sikes, p. 132).

The research for this project was performed in a specific ethnic community across Canada (p. 135). It was mediatized within this community and the motherland. The 60 women, who have participated in it, have all been identified publicly. My gut tells me that I “cannot realistically offer anonymity” (p. 135), or, at the very least, cast doubt upon all of them.

Furthermore, in a community craving role models, any form I give to these interviews would most likely be once again broadcast throughout it, making it likely that the specific interviewee would hear of it.

And if she did hear about it, how would she feel? How would she feel about the eroticization, “the embellishments” (Prendergast & Saxton, p. 280) ? Would she recognize herself in the story (Ellis, p. 11)? Would she feel betrayed? Would I have caused her harm (p. 7)?

Little and High (p. 241) are concerned with ethical issues of story ownership. Is a story stripped of identity, i.e. name, a simple idea? Or in Varma’s (2012) words, a “truth” that “overcomes the limitations of personal accounts (as cited in Little & High, p. 250)?”

I will never know if I would have had the idea to create this performance if I had not heard this story. And, while ideas are universal, this particular one I know its origin.

The issue of publishing or performing a non-consensual piece also reflects back on me as researcher/artist. Do I want to be known as a professional who cannot be trusted? Is my need to address my academic and artistic communities more important than (Ellis, pp. 10–11) the trust bestowed on me by the interviewee, the person who introduced me to the interviewee (p. 9) and to that specific community?

These voices inside my head shout rational arguments for the pro camp in a dizzying dance of seduction. But it is to my body that I turn to for solace and resolution. The pit in my stomach, the contraction in my throat, the weight on my chest and the sadness in my heart remind me of Ellis’ words: I must be able to justify my choice and bare the consequences (p. 3).

In the end, I realize that my wish for an external ethical template to guide me comes from my fear of getting it wrong. But no one can tell me what my own ethical views are regardless of the permission I may receive from others. Ellis asks me if I am making “ethical decisions in research the way [I make] them in [my] personal [life] (p. 23)? My word, my voice, is perhaps all I really need to hear.

I gave her my word.

Forgive me, sweet interviewee, for not respecting your wishes and breaking the trust you bestowed on me.

Forgive me, Luis, for having burdened you with this secret and attributing to you the role of witness of this process to finding my answer (Allen, 1995, pp. 109–110; Linds, p. 11).

Forgive me, myself, for having given form and word and life to this story that I promised I would not tell.

And, thank you, sweet interviewee, for having shared such intimacy with me.

Thank you, Luis, for having facilitated this journey for me.

Thank you, myself, for having had the courage to go through this process and create this text and performance just for me, as a way to purge my suffering and sew the seeds of ethics in my personal garden (Ellis, p. 2; L. Sotelo-Castro, personal communication, 2016).

THE PERFORMANCE I CREATED

(...)

THE END

“Sometimes it may be appropriate to write (or embody) and not publish (nor perform)” (L. Sotelo-Castro, personal communication, 2016).



The Power of Performative Social Sciences

Flashback to Thursday October 11, 2018

It is early morning, day two of the OHA symposium. In a hidden away room of the sub-basement of the Molson Building, Zeina Ismail-Allouche prepares for her performance of ***A Draft Story of Invisibility “2.”*** She seems anxious. I believe it’s because there are very few people present. I know that feeling, I’ve been there before.

On the screen in front of me is projected:

“(...) I have 2 languages.

I forget which of them I dream in” (Darwish, 2011).

I tear up. These simple verses made me think of how I used to write in Portuguese and now I can't find the words. It is in English that I have found the lyrics in which I have come to embody emotions, thoughts and movements.

Zeina explains the work in progress concept of her performance and what she expects from the audience, *“You will choose an item that speaks to you. When it's your turn, you will explain why you chose this item. The deeper the reason for your choice, the deeper my story.”* Her voice is haunting and mysterious.

On the floor are the various items for us to choose from. An apple, a lemon, a pair of sun glasses, a basket with beads and flower petals, a basket with chocolates, a cut out paper doll, a picture of a man on a wheelchair, whom we later learn is her brother, a roll of toilet paper, a pair of flip-flops wrapped in blue paper, and a few more items that I can no longer recall.

Blue paper?

My eyes wander looking for an object to connect with. *“The deeper the reason for your choice (...).”* But nothing calls out to me other than the blue paper.

Through the agency of objects, Zeina helps us *“unfold() their narratives of belongings.”*

She continues, *“Ashamed of my voice, asking help from friends to lend me their voice.” “Oh, Zeina, you took the words right out of my mouth! Perhaps, you and I, we can work together someday.”*

I choose the blue paper that wrapped the flip-flop grey sandals encrusted with glittery decorative stones. I struggle with my choice, (*“Position yourself, Nisa!”*), not because of the object of my desire per se, but because I can sense that Zeina was referring to the shoes as the prime object that happened to be wrapped in blue paper.

Blue paper.

Back home in the Azores, (*“Why did I say “back home” when I don’t consider the Azores home?”*), we use the same blue paper to wrap delicate white linens, embroideries, lace and clothing articles to keep them from turning yellow. It has something to do with climate.

I have, wrapped in blue paper, my paternal grandmother’s light cotton, seamless, pleated, white “house jacket” decorated with fine lace and mother of pearl buttons. Her name was Maria das Mercês. She made this clothing item herself and wore it over her nightgown when the doctor came to check on her pregnancies. This house jacket protected her feminine honor from the exposure to a male presence.

I have, wrapped in blue paper, my maternal grandmother’s long candlelight orange skirt with soft eggshell lace ornaments and whalebone waistband strips. Her name was Fernanda Ancília. I get to wear this skirt on ethnographic parades. I remember a *petite*, delicate and elegant lady, somewhere in her nineties, crying and asking me for permission to touch the fabric. What stories were those tears manifesting? What memories were being conjured up by the tactile experience of feeling the fabric?

So, too, do I have, wrapped in blue paper, my parents’ nuptial bedcover, made of delicate off-white satin and decorated in floral and geometric bas-relief motifs. My mother’s name is Maria Luisa and my father’s was Dionísio. I struggle with using the past tense when referring to my father. He passed away in March, 2015. I struggle not because of this fact, but rather that both affirmations, i.e., he being my father and his name being Dionísio, are still true.

These days, I use this bedcover in a performance about issues of courtship, desire and marriage. I wonder what stories the audience members conjure up when they handle an object that has been touched and used at such an intimate moment of a couple's life. Or do they even realize it?

I fold and unfold the blue paper in my hands as if I'm revealing these items.

As I begin to tell these stories, I cry, uncontrollably, and apologize for bearing my emotions and burdening the public with them. Emotions that I did not know I harbored until Zeina's blue paper unlocked them.

"Perhaps if the paper was white or another color, it would not have awakened in me these memories and emotions. Thank you, Zeina, for letting me experience the familiar feeling of the texture of the paper, for the safety of its blue, for the comforting crackling sound of it wrinkling between my hands, for the smell of it. Thank you, for connecting me to my past, to my family, to my ancestry especially since I am physically so far away from it all. Thank you, Zeina, for not making me feel so alone."

The room fell silent.

"The deeper the reason for your choice, the deeper my story."

Zeina acknowledges that her story was about the shoes and chooses not to tell it. Instead, she leaves the space for me to deal with what my voice has unveiled and gives the audience the time to negotiate their own feelings. It is a moment of reprieve for all present.

She then points out that unexpected emotions and thoughts can surface in this kind of performance and that she has to be prepared to accommodate them and redirect her response.

I inquire about the blue paper. She tells us that all her belongings came wrapped in blue paper when she left Lebanon to come to Montreal.

I'm reminded of Hourig Attarian's "*storying the story*," words she professed during the OHA 2018 symposium at the Roundtable on Oral History as Creative Practice. This is what we, Zeina and I, were doing together at that moment. We were "*storying the moment*."

"*Who is the performer?*" she asks. We both are.

I can't help but see the similarities between this event and that of the oral history interviewing of storytellers. It is a moment of co-creation where the need for trust, safety, deep listening and respect, even though we did not speak directly about these issues beforehand, is paramount and it was understood to be so.

The one big difference, however, is the risk of the spontaneity of the here and now, with no possibility to recant. Once the moment is co-created it is out there for all those present to witness, no matter how ephemeral that moment may be.

At the end of Zeina's performance and before the public left, her son, Jad Chami, who was also a performer, invites everyone to do a circle and look one another in the eyes, if we can, as a sign of support and solidarity to those of us whom needed a safe place. He is obviously speaking about me. I am grateful for the suggestion. I wonder if he read the manual about security and services offered to the participants of the MTL Life Stories (High, 2014).

In that one and a half hour performance, Zeina addressed so many of my own fears. While she was specifically referring to her work on Indigenous issues, I, myself, ask the same questions with regards to the work I have done so far and the prospect of future works. "*How do I mitigate harm? How do I honor the stories? How do I honor the storyteller? Do I have it right? Do I have the right? Am I an advocate? Do I have to be mute? Who am I?*"

And while I worry about the primary sources, both story and person, I can't help but question also what is it that I want to do with this work? How do I want to present it? As I celebrate the narrator's subjectivity, what happens to my own interpretative subjectivity? I am not talking here about my biases of being a Western white middle-class female, but that of my artistic practice.



Undesired Goods

Flashback to Monday, January 7, 2019

It's garbage day. Black bags pile up across the street waiting to be taken away to the dumpster. Large, thick, strong, opaque black bags keeping secret from the passing walker, or the curious coffee sipper, the *déchets* of their owners.

I wish I could ~~fill~~ have a big black bag to fill with my undesired goods: anxiety, fear, stillness, doubt. Stuff the big black bag to its rim, tying it tightly to make sure nothing spills out. Send it all to the dumpsite. Set myself free.

But then I see that the big black bag is made of a dark dense plastic and I think of the years it will take to decompose, how it will poison the environment and anxiety sets in once again.

I accept my "*sort*" and learn to live with my undesired goods.

Flash-forward to Thursday, July 11, 2019

I now realize that my undesired goods (anxiety, fear, stillness and doubt) are invitations for me to question my present moment and begin to swim in the Blue of Bayou.



Second Time Around: An Edited Conversation

Flashback to Saturday, November 9, 2018

"I first remember hearing the phrase "performance is a way of knowing" in graduate school. It was repeated so frequently and with such assurance that its methodological status stood without question or suspicion. We just knew it was true. We knew it in our bodies, from the daily work of performance. We knew it as we talked with one another about our performance experiences. We knew it personally when we discovered that some performances would live with us, like old friends or enemies, inscribing their images and spirits on our psyche. In other words, we knew it as sensuous beings, somatically engaged in performative events. Such knowledge resides in the ontological and is perhaps best expressed in the poetic" (Pelias, 1999, p. ix).

An email from one of my supervisors arrives at my Inbox at 2:30pm. I wonder what it's about since I am not expecting any correspondence.

"Hi Nisa,

I am planning my oral history performance course for next term. I think it would be great if you could perform for the students the project that you performed in my first class in 2016. It could be on Friday 11 January between 1:30 – 5:30pm. This would be the very first week of teaching. You could present it and then describe to them the entire creation process: from concept development to interviewing, transcribing (?), selecting, devising, etc. I can arrange for you to be paid a fee. Does that interest you?

Best

Luis C Sotelo Castro

Associate Professor, Department of Theatre

Canada Research Chair in Oral History Performance"

I gasp for what feels like an eternity.

I don't let these feelings of inadequacy and fear take charge. Instead, I summon the courage and embrace whole-heartedly the challenge.

2:35pm

“Absolutely! It would be my pleasure.

Thanks for thinking of me.

Have a nice weekend.

Nisa”

Only five minutes from the moment I receive the email to the instance I sent out my response. Odd, how fear plays with my sense of time.

Flashback to Friday, January 18, 2019

Luis: ““You have this sweet taste in your mouth. I want to ask for your attention, just a couple of minutes. (...) I have this microphone, which doesn't amplify my voice but it records and it's so that we record the conversation again for purposes of investigation and documentation. (...) Remember in class I said there is a method for giving feedback, which is called a critical response process, which is basically the idea that there is someone who is a facilitator, there is an artist (...) and then there are the respondents who are the participants or spectators who ask questions or make comments. (...) And, basically, the idea now is that there are certain rules. So (...) one rule is that (...) we will start with (...) what was memorable or something that is really striking about what you just experienced and (...) because this is the oral history performance course, if you think of any question (...) or anything that is memorable in terms of the stories (...) that you heard. (...) The second thing is you are asking questions to her, (...) not comments, but questions about the artistic decisions that she took. (...) One of the problems with feedback or comments is (...)

sometimes people want to (...) tell the artist what to do. *"You should have done this or why didn't you that or..."* Instead we are asking question like for instance *"What was your intention by inviting someone from the audience to come and join you?"* Or something that helps her articulate her intentions and perhaps we become aware that she could have done something differently (...) and we can discuss that (...) You can also decide to say, *"Well, actually, I don't want to answer that question."*

(...)

And at the end, then you, we, both will reprocess and at the end you ask her for permission if you want to make any other comment or suggestion in, but you frame the area, so *"Can I make a suggestion about in relation to the drinks?"* for instance. And then she will know, (that) you will be talking about these things, *"Ok, go ahead or no thank you."* You decide. (...) So who wants to start by sharing anything that was memorable or striking?"

Person #3: *" (...) What struck me the most about the performance was (...) your soft tone and pacing throughout. The way (...) you told the story, it felt like a tumbling affect with your words. It was very soft and poetic and (...) it just really. (...) I sort of got lost in (...) the sort of time and in the passage of it, (...) remembering it, how it just (...) flows through your mind and out through you. It was just (...) very soft, very (...) warm tone that you had in the performance I found (...)."*

Nisa: *"That was a choice. (...) It's also a style of mine. I tend to like to link stories in a way that I go so low that I oblige you to come in and pay more attention. And when you are paying attention like that, you are not only paying attention with your ears, you're paying attention with your whole body because it is almost as if you are creating like some kind of, you know, those satellite dishes that to hone in, and I feel that. And (...) I feed off of that. I feed off of, for example, the lady in front of me when she does this. It (...) tells me you're attentive. It tells me you're interested. It tells me to keep going. (...) And I like the intimacy of it. And that's why, for example, I don't like performing in big groups, I like performing in (...) small rooms where I can look at each person in their eyes. (...) So those are choices. (...) It was also (...) because these stories were about things that were forbidden for my women*

to speak of, (...) it was almost as if they were reflecting, more than just bolstering it out (...) there. And this is my voice. This is what I think. (...) When they spoke to me, they spoke in that way, they would reflect, they would take the time, they would stop, they would continue, and then all of a sudden they would laugh. They'd laugh because they would realize, perhaps, how non-sensical all this was, it had been. Now, they had the distance, they had 50 years of distance to look (...) back at it and *"Oh, my goodness, that's how we lived."* So, that's why I chose to do it that way."

Person #4: "I like in the first story the leitmotif that you (...) use (...) to finish (...) the chapters, (...) *"This is how it was."* Like creating (...) punctuation, a nice dynamic for the public to (...) settle down, take that information, and go further. And then, (...) it was (...) a nice circle within that this is how it was. I like that.

Nisa: "I did try. There's a reason why I chose these two stories, because (...) I did interview something like 60 women. (...) I chose these two stories because (...) Noémia met her husband when she was sixteen. (...) Marianna (Noémia, actually) got married when she was sixteen. Noémia met her husband, her husband spoke of wanting to date her at the end of a wall, Marianna saw (...) her love at the end of a wall that looked like a balcony. (...) Noémia wrote letters to her husband to not forget her, who wasn't her husband at the time. Marianna wrote letters. So it seemed to me that there was also a pattern there that allowed me to mark it (...) and to interweave both stories without having to have said first Marianna said, (...) second (...) I told the whole story of one and then I told the whole story of the other but it punctuated that way. The reason why I kept saying (...) "It was like that back then" was precisely to situate past and present, to give the audience also, the guests, (...) the time to realize, "Wow, maybe my grandmother was like this? Maybe my mother was like this? (...) And today, how do I do it? (...) Do I follow the same pattern? Do I rush into things? Do I go on some dating app? Do I speak to someone at the corner of the street with no problems?" (...) So, that's also a reason why, it was to play with time because sometimes (...) I would speak in the present but I would refer to the past. So, it was a way of bringing the past into the present and the present into the past."

(...)

Person #5: ““I just wanted to thank you for incorporating the sensory component of taste and smell and touch. It was awesome. That's all.””

Nisa: ““(...) I have my own personal love affair with embodied experiences. (...) That's where I get my information from. That's my beacon. That's how I understand the world. More than abstract thought. (...) So, I need these touches, I need these... Just a quick show of hands, who has been to a wedding reception, a traditional wedding reception? Okay, so there are people here who haven't been. So, some people don't even know what the experience is of being in a wedding reception. (...) And, so these rituals that sometimes we're losing, this is a way of bringing that back, of seeing the richness of it, of seeing the tradition, of seeing the care and how all of this elicits in us memories, and how all of this elicits in us experiences. So, in oral history frequently when you interview somebody, we tend to put a microphone, the person's there, I'm filming the person and that's it (...). And, sometimes only from the chest up. (...) What's their body language? What's (...) the context around me? How did these stories come about in this particular time, place, space (...)? So, that's why I like this kind of performance where I get (...) the audience to not be an audience. I get the audience to be living an experience that has to do with the topic that I am speaking of (...). Because the white tablecloth was because of purity, the red roses were passion, (...) my parent's nuptial (...) cover, all of these things they're all interrelated into what were the expectations, what are the present expectations (...). So, these are all different. Using the senses for me is different gateways to get to (...) information, an experience, a story, and not just sit here and say a story (...). That to me is important.

Person #6: ““ (...) Thank you first of all and I really enjoyed it. (...) If (...) I'm jumping off that platform of sensory that was a really strong memory of the performance and a really amazing part. One part I remember being very struck by is when you talks about (...) in the first story how (...) the couples hands just like glided past each other and you made this movement just so (...) wonderfully subtle but really like another just moving moment, I think. That was another sort of (...) kinestics with (unrecognizable) I suppose. (...) Talking

about the sensory images and the table and everything, I just wondered (...) what was your intention for your audience when they enter, 'cause I remember Luis, you saying about invitation like a wedding reception, I wondered what (...) your intentions was for the audience when they entered the space?'"

Nisa: "'Well, actually, we had a little bit of a technical difficulty, I guess you can say. I had sent (...) Luis (...) a pdf, which was exactly a wedding invitation (...). (...) I can actually read it to you. (...) I had done it in gold font, handwritten style. (...) (I read the invitation). (...) For example, the date, 2019 was written out two thousand and nineteen, the respond by the 17th, it wasn't 17, it was seventeenth to bring that allure of writing in the seventeenth century where everything was handwritten. (...) Those who did go to weddings and received an invitation, I'm sure you received something similar to this. (...) Sometimes it even goes further, and it says the parents of the groom and the parents of the bride with their names (...) are honored to invite you to the ... (...) My idea was to immerse you right from the get go that you were going to be at a wedding. It wasn't that you show up here and all of a sudden there are these tables with this. (...) You knew that you were going to be a guest. Now, I didn't want to trouble you and ask (...) to bring proper attire. (...) I could have gone that far so that you could really have that embodiment of the experience, of you (...) already taking care of yourselves. (...) In that sense, we all doll ourselves up and we want to look good, we want to look good for the others. (...) So to answer your question, you wouldn't have got here, like parachuted in, you would have already been prepared mentally to be to be part of this experience. (...) It was important to me that you were part of that experience and that you can take the time to compare it to previous experiences because frequently what happens is whether it's through a story or through a touch or a scent, we're catapulted to an experience that happened twenty years ago, or five years ago or whatever (...), so if you happen to have been at an Italian dinner where somebody served you Tiramisu, maybe that would have triggered the memory from that dinner (...). That to me is the richness of oral history, that's to me the richness of trying to wake up the senses. Is how you can suddenly remember something that you forgot (...) or you no longer gave much importance to. And then it just (...) comes up (...).'"

Luis: ““Let me just ask you something because you are saying that's the richness of oral history...””

Nisa: ““That's one of the richnesses.””

Luis: ““(...) Would you make a difference there? Is (it) richness of oral history or oral history performance?””

Nisa: ““(...) I struggle a lot with oral history and oral history performance. I sometimes say that I'm serving two Gods and I find that they are in conflict. Most of the time for ethical reasons, I mean don't get me wrong, oral history performance you have to be an ethical performer that's not what I am pointing at. (...) What I find is at times, we have a little bit more freedom to, as Luis says, position ourselves and what is my reaction to what is being told to me (...) versus if I'm doing strictly oral history. I have to consider something we call shared authority, where the person that you interviewed and yourself you work together to get the message across. And when I look at myself as a performer, I don't disrespect the person I interviewed, I don't do anything that could harm them and I don't do anything that they wouldn't necessarily want me to but I give myself the freedom of finding ways to tell the story. So, for example, (...) in the case of Noémia, (...) there were parts of that story that I added like the games that they played. (...) That is historically accurate, that's how they did it back then. She didn't tell me that story. (...) I took the freedom to add that in. (...) The story about them (...) with the mother, that was practically verbatim. (...) I find myself with these waves where I allow myself a little bit of liberty but I'm taking the responsibility on it. And I would never do something that would offend the person who gave me the story. (...) I don't know how Noémia would feel to have her story paralleled with the nun. The reason I chose to do that (...) was because in the 1930's, 40's, 50's even 60's, (...) Portuguese culture was very puritanical. And the Church had a huge power over the culture. (...) You weren't allowed certain types of behavior. (...) If I take Marianna's story, who was in 1640 something and she's having a torrid affair inside a monastery (...) run by Catholics, I mean to me it just sounded so (...) ironic and polar (...) and I found the tension there was perfect because (...) the women I interviewed weren't allowing themselves the most natural

feelings because of the Catholic Church. And here I have someone who promised their life, body and soul to the Catholic Church and is allowing all of these feelings to come up (...). Like one's repressing and has all the freedom to do it, she's in the outside world and the one who professed isn't doing it (...). I thought that was interesting that combination. How would Noémia feel about that? I don't know. I really don't know. (...) Actually she may be insulted or she may feel a sense of relief (...). Please don't get me wrong (...) I do think as an oral history performer I have duties towards (...) the people that I interviewed, but I am also a performer and in that performance, whether I take these stories and stop using their names and create quasi-fictional stories, so I go into (...) anonymity (...), I think I have leeway there, (...) so it's based on life stories but it's not this person and I would never say this person was (...) for example Noémia was born in those dates, but if I said something that I felt would offend her, I would never say where she was born, what was her date of birth, when she came to Canada, who was her husband, what city she lived in Canada, I would turn it, I would really flip into a fiction. So that at least I'm being inspired by a life story but I'm not telling a life story.”

(...)

Person #7: ““Did she watch the performance that you did? Did she want to?””

(...)

Nisa: ““No, she's in Kitimat, (I made a mistake, Noémia lives in Victoria) so I've never performed this outside of Concordia University. And that is something that is also a question in oral history. (...) Who's your audience? (...) I can technically say that this is research in an academic setting and nobody will ever see me and therefore, (...) I'm not hurting anybody. I don't agree with that. (...)”

I'm going to contradict myself here, but you'll understand me. I am doing this as a performance that (...) I'm working on to figure out where I stand in this performance and once I figure that out, I will talk to her. But until then, I'm just still figuring it out for myself.

Where are all my personal questions in relation to it. (...) There was a question of also me just (...) videotaping it and sending it to her (...) to ask for her permission. (...) This is the first time I actually have a clip (...). (...) I would like to send it to her. (...) What I would really love to do is, if I had the funds, to go and see all the women I interviewed again and tell them what I want to do with their work and the artistic twist that I want to give to things and get their feedback. Maybe even perform in their county.

(...) Aside from that, like this artistic residency, again it's still I'm trying to figure things out, so the performance isn't complete, but (...) I would like their feedback. (...) Up until now, I have put some of their work in museums exhibitions but they are (...) literal transcriptions of what they do. I'm not interpreting what they say. I've done conferences where again I'm doing verbatim. I am saying word for word what they say, so I know they are comfortable with that (...). But as soon as I start giving it an interpretation that is mine, that is my voice, because this is what my thesis is about, my voice amongst the voices, I feel that I owe it to them (...) to get their feedback.

Luis: ““The thing that Nisa is (???) I just want to point out that it illustrates well why, and for this course, and I'm asking you in the end of the course for a prototype. So basically this is a prototype, in the sense that you don't necessarily feel like it is the finished piece. It is still working things out but it's going somewhere.

Person #8: ““You said that you interviewed close to sixty women, around Canada. (...) But you picked just (...) one story. Do you feel like this story is infused with these fifty-nine other women and that's why you want to perform it to them?

Nisa: ““(…) That's a great question. (...) The performance in and of itself may end up being (...) a few sketches and so I would get pieces of each one. What happens in this situation is that, (...) I was born in Canada. My father was one of the first Portuguese immigrants here in Canada in the 1950's, when there was this huge wave of immigration. The Portuguese have been here even before the French, (...) but the big wave that created the Portuguese communities as we know them now, my father was in it. My father went back to Portugal,

met my mother, married. She came here. I was born here. (...) I am a product of this generation. (...)I lived here ten years, and my parents decided to move back to Portugal, just on the cusp of the Revolution in Portugal. (...) I got to live a lot of these traditions that you might not have anymore, that are being lost. (...) I also have a first experience account, (...) of all of this., (...) making the bed for my cousins, falling because of the board underneath breaking, it wasn't part of the sketch but there you go (...), made it more authentic. (...) What I tend to do is, because I know the culture so well, I create a lot of historical context around the words that my ladies tell me. (...) I can create a full story from bits and pieces of different pieces of women and create the composite person or if I really want to (...) honor them, pay them homage, I will do like I did, "I'm Noémia," "I'm so and so." So that you can know that each piece was part of someone in specific and then the in between, I fill in with my knowledge of the culture. (...)"

(...)

Person #9: ""(...) My question is on the choice of performing against verbatim or not? (...) I went to see Kanata by Robert Lepage. (...) He included this big question of (...) who gets' to talk on behalf of who. And at the last part there's (...) a French painter who says that she is going to go (...) to the streets and inject heroin so that she can feel the violence that the Indigenous women were feeling. (??) So that she can paint them. And it seems like (...) there is this idea of (...) emotions that where you can have compassion and emotions that you just cannot touch and it seems that always the suffering and (...) the violence that you cannot, I guess, (...) have compassion for if you did not live them. And going to my question, I actually, if I didn't hear the beginning I would think that these were your stories. And I did, I did not have any issues with that. But at the same time, as you said, there is this idea of should you have the headphone on, should you perform it verbatim, but that being said, I really ask the question again, why did you perform it that way, would you have performed it verbatim if it was in front of someone else, another audience or is the academic (...) context helping you explore, and (...) do you think that you have to live the difficult parts of their life or similar parts and talk on behalf of them?""

Nisa: ““(…) What happened to Noémia didn't happen to me (…) although I know that it was like that. (…) Some of my cousins were much similar to what Noémia lived than I did. (…) I certainly had more freedom. (…) I didn't need to (…) get married to leave the house. Actually, I'm (…) kind of (…) an exception. (…) I'm a single child and at the age of eighteen, I left my parents home and moved back to Canada, by myself. (…) And that was unheard of (…). Portuguese families, their only daughter taking off to (…) a different (…) land? It was okay if I had gone to Lisbon, studied Medicine, came back, got a boyfriend, got married, that would have been ok, but the way I did it, I just took off and (…) I'm leaving, I'm going to go study at Concordia and I don't know when I'm coming back. That was frowned upon by everybody else but my parents. So, I was already an exception in that sense. (…) It's tough this idea of do you have to live an experience, do I have to go out and inject myself with heroin? Did I have to be a virgin, well I would still be a virgin (…). (…) That's basically (…) what it would come down to because I didn't get married (…). (…) We all have a point of view on things regardless of, whether we lived them or not, regardless of whether (…) we're of that group or not. It may be biased, for sure their biased, but we do. We all pass judgment (…) of anything and everything (…). I don't like the color burgundy, that's a judgment. It's not going to hurt anybody, but it's a judgment. (…) We're always so worried about "Am I passing judgment or not?" Anything we think is a judgment in reference to our own personal experience, in reference to our own personal values, in reference to our own cultural references and the things that we learn from other cultures. Now, that said, we should also have the ability to recognize that, to recognize our biases and to recognize that this is my thought process based on what I know. Is there anything else out there that can challenge me, that can make me become more inclusive, that can make me question what I think. I think that's valid. I don't think we can progress in any shape or form if we don't do that because we'd always be in the same place, we would only know our world (…). The difference I think, and I think that's one way I interpret your position is that if I'm going to talk about another culture or another experience, I'm talking about how I position myself in relation to that and not speaking for them (…). (…) When (…) I started this off many, many moons ago, I didn't even know what oral history was. (…) The way this whole project started was I was sipping on coffee with a friend of mine who's a journalist by the seaside in the Azores and she turns to me and says, "You know (…) that next year is the fiftieth

anniversary of that big huge Portuguese immigration wave to Canada?" I said, "Yeah, absolutely." She goes, "Everything they're doing both in Canada and in Portugal is about the men." (...) In fact the men were the first to come. But it's not that the men were the first to come that the women didn't experience anything. (...) So, she says, "How about we do something about that, like a documentary or something? (...) You work in film, (...) let's go do something like that." So "Sure." (...) We started like that. And, we ended up not working together because we had different views on the subject, but when I started looking for these women, I had this thing about giving them a voice(...). Nobody knew (...) what they thought. And then, the more I said those words, the more I was troubled by it. "I'm not giving anybody a voice, at best I'm giving them a platform. They have their own voice. It might be hushed. Certainly, nobody's ever-bothered going, "And what do you think?" Fine, I agree, but I didn't give them a voice (...). And, so that started changing the way I even looked at my own performances (...). Is that I'm not really giving them a voice. I'm using their words to make it known to more people, I'm using their experiences to make people reflect on their own, (...) but I'm not giving them a voice. I'm not empowering them. The women that I interviewed in no shape, way or form did they ever show to me that they were powerless. They may not wanted to immigrate but their dream was to make a better life for their children and they knew they had to do it here. So that's already a choice and when you have a choice, you're not powerless (...). And that's how I see these women. I went out looking for them, I tried to break stereotypes because (...) every time you hear of a Portuguese immigrant woman she's all dressed in black with her little golden earrings, (...) with the little veil on top and she's this fragile little thing and (...) I didn't meet anybody like that. (...) Out of sixty, I met two women dressed in black with earrings and I'll tell you something, they would wrestle you to the floor (...). They were these really strong women, (...) funny, (...), able to make fun of themselves because again they were reflecting on fifty years (...). (...) They had that distance and it was great. (...) I don't think I'm speaking for them. (...) I think they can speak for themselves really well. I'm just making their thoughts and emotions and experiences known to more people than (...) in their own circle. And, by doing that I'm hoping that other people can understand their positioning and their biases versus their interpretation of who these women are. (...)"

Luis: ““Great, (...) I think this is a very good answer. And that it goes back to something that you were discussing that just yesterday about the relationship between the present and the past. (...)””

Person #10: ““(...) I was just wondering what was the difference for you between interpreting, performing, whatever the word, the stories of say someone who immigrated here in the forties or fifties and the story you brought back from the seventeenth century. (...) I feel like what we're talking about the time difference would maybe allow you or I'm thinking maybe something that happened multiple hundred years ago (...) as an exterior person (...) performing those suffering is maybe less of an issue than if it's recent, how time affects that relationship?”

Nisa: ““(...) When it comes to performing, in this particular case, I didn't really (...) think that option of (I) was doing Marianna Alcoforada (of) four hundred years ago versus Noémia. I just felt two women. Two women who had their sexuality denied and who were coming to grips with it and discovered it (...) through this meeting with men, (...) with their lover. (...) I didn't approach it as being two different types of performances. (...) I just took them as women who had testified, (...) who told a story (...). On the other hand, I think what would be more important to me is not so much how long ago was it, is whether the woman is still alive. (...) But (...) my question for that is "Am I less responsible because the woman died?" (...) I have women that I interviewed that have passed away. I have their consent form. (...) I could always go and ask a family member what they think of what I'm doing about their mother, about their wife... but then, that's their point-of-view. (...) And I have trouble with that, I do. (...) I honestly do have trouble with going to see for example (...) Angelina's husband who is still alive to ask if I can use some of the things she consented to in a performance. (...) It's funny because in this particular interview, the husband was present. Most of the interviews I did the husbands weren't present. But this particular interview the husband was present and he was always cutting in. And at one point, she was so funny, she turns to him and says, "Be quiet. She is interested in what I have to say." She turns to me and continues (...). She doesn't want to know and she does that three or four times throughout the whole interview (...). (...) But if she wanted to ask his opinion on

something, that was okay, (...) “Was it that car, was it that year, was it?” (...) She was (...) confirming something that she thought. But if he started talking it would be like, “No, no, no, no, hush.” (...) Now Angelina passed away, what do I do? I (...) ask her husband whom she hushed all the way through the interview? (...) And, then, I can ask the children? Well, think of yourselves, me asking you permission to talk about your mother. Ah, there are some things I’m sure you don’t want to know about your mother, what she did or didn’t do on the night that the (...) Maybe you’re comfortable with it, I don’t know, but some of us aren’t, (...) so you see, it puts you in the spot. (...)”

Luis: ““(…) I think (...) you have summarized many of the key (...) questions, problems that you all will face in many of your projects so that was (...) fantastic and that was the idea of inviting you as well. So thank you very much. I think I want to end by asking you, the listeners, to just do a little exercise and that is (...) to (...) ask a question that she might have asked the ladies. (...) You see how she constructed it out of questions. Asked sixty ladies a number of questions. (...) Simple questions (...)”

“How did you meet your husband?”

“What was your experience through the courtship?”

“How involved was your family in the relationship that you had with your husband?”

“How did your upbringing affect the way that you relate to your body, touch, intimacy, etc.?”

“Tell me about your childhood?”

“Who was your mother?”

“Because it seems you have so many details about the sexual setups, you be so blunt to ask directly like “How was the sex?”

“Was there ever any doubt in your courtship or relationship, especially whenever you went far and away from each other? And how did you navigate that?”

“In the case where they are not able to give permission, who should you ask permission to?”

“How does it feel to think back over these past fifty years?”

Nisa: ““(…) I went to meet these women about this fifty year anniversary. (…) I wanted them to reflect on these fifty years. And I started with childhood and I did it chronologically. All the big events that could have happened throughout these fifty years and not just in terms of their relationship to their husbands but also (…) did they learn the language, did they get a job. (…) I was comparing the same event to see if there were differences. (…) For example, most women at the time in Portugal would have not had a job outside the home. (…) I wanted to see how many of them here actually worked outside of the house. (…) I constructed my questions as a typical Western style story chronology from birth to (…) all the different stages (...). And that to them seemed to work really well, one thing fed into another. Now, depending on what culture you're from that may not work. People may tell you stories episodically, people may talk first about the community and then themselves, people may never talk about themselves and only talk (...) in the "we." (...) There are all of these things that (...) you have to prepare yourself ahead of time. Now, to answer the group of questions that had to do with the actual sexual prowess for lack of a better a expression as way of saying it, (...) There's this whole (...) theoretical side in oral history where people say that people want to confess. I have difficulty with that, (...) I don't know if it's because of my Catholic upbringing and when you confess it's because you've done something wrong and your going to pay penance. (...) I don't see it as wanting to pay testimony (...). (...) The reason I'm bringing this up is that I found that women in a group alone, oh my! And the funny thing is, but the ironic thing in all of this is as such. You're a daughter. You are growing up. They don't tell you anything. You learn everything on your own (...). And then, you're an adult. You've had kids of your own. And you're sitting around the table having cake and everybody is (...), I wouldn't go as far as comparing notes, but everybody tells their own story. (...) I'm of Portuguese descent. I'm interviewing woman of Portuguese descent. It was tough because they were my mom's age and it was like in my mind *"Am I being disrespectful?"* (...) I could have, sorry, I forgot who said *"How was the sex?"* I wouldn't (...) just go straight up to the woman and go *"So, how was it?"* (...) I wouldn't feel comfortable. (...) So you have to go in by the back door (...) and the way you do that is by starting by the culture, the very large context. Not the individual, the very large context (...), about what was allowed, what wasn't allowed and chaperoned, who didn't and what was it like and suddenly they'll tell you little story about wanting to touch

and not being able to and then they'll talk about the bicycle and then from the bicycle they'll start (...) and then there's a moment where you feel the trust. There is a moment. If I had gone in right away and said *"So tell me about your first night with your husband in bed?"* (...) *"Did you do anything before you got married?"* They're like *"No, no."* That would be literally disrespectful, I know you from nowhere, I am your daughter's age, so there's all these cultural (...) prerequisites (...) in place before you can go in. (...) And of course the interview is not a clinical interview, you know it's not question straight answer (...). *"Can you grade from one to ten how was that evening?"* (...) No, these are people who are opening up to you. (...) With some of these women, I did not have a lot of time with them, (...) I saw them once for an interview of an hour or two. (...) Some people (...) will say that they don't consider that oral history because there was not enough time to build trust. (...), I, myself, question that because I've had moments of intimacy with people in five minutes that I haven't had with people I've known my lifetime. So, was I safe, (...) was it trust that somehow came out? Was there a vulnerability that was no longer vulnerability it was strength through that vulnerability? I don't know if you get my drift? Um, It's like (...) when you're performing and you got fear and you use that fear as fire to just keep going. (...) You can also be strong in your vulnerability. So when you have those moments, they open up, (...) they laugh, they laugh at each other, they laugh at themselves, and (...) it becomes quite interesting. And (...) then you also have a segue way there after to talk about what's happening today (...). Well, now we have marriages between people of the same sex. Now, we have apps that (...) There's a world out there that they didn't live and that they had to: a) adjust because of the children and the grandchildren, (...) because the first generation of Portuguese women that came here and gentlemen, it was very hard for them to see their daughters marry somebody who was not Portuguese. Oh, no, no you keep it within the community, you know. So, there are all of these things that (...) you get to them that way, not directly.""

Luis: ""(...) Nisa, that was fantastic. Thank you.

Flash-forward to Saturday, December 14, 2019

How do I let the audience know that the character Noémia is a composite? It wasn't so much that her story was a composite as much as my acting made her a composite.

The sun shines through the wall-to-wall windows of the MB 9th conference room. I approach Jonathan Fox, co-founder of Playback Theatre, and ask, *"You perform other people's stories as closely as possible to their original words, movements and emotions. What do you bring as an artist to that performance? What about the art and your need to express your artistry?"*

Jonathan looks at me perplexed. *"I have to think about that. Give me a second, I will be right back,"* and with that he leaves the room.

I stay leaning on the window basking in the warmth, looking out to the Montreal South Shore and beyond into the Eastern Townships. I barely see the Saint-Lawrence River now, with all the new buildings that have populated the view. I realize that I do not recognize this landscape. I realize that this no longer feels like home.

As I wait for Jonathan's return, I am inhabited by the scared little girl in me, who thinks my chance at speaking with him will never come, that we will be swept away back into the hustle of the day's working schedule.

But there he is. A bright, wide and friendly smile, arched eyebrows as if still trying to figure it out.

"That required some thinking. I've never been asked that before. The way I see it, at a first level, I am telling the individual's story. At a second level, the aesthetics that I bring to it is to go beyond the surface into the deep truth that may even surprise the teller" (J. Fox, personal communication, November 6, 2019).

Wasn't that what I was doing with my performance of Noémia's story? Performing Noémia the way I did led me to my deeper truth. It also offered itself to a story that represented more people than just the narrator and me. So, if that is the case, then, do I still need permission from the storyteller to perform my voice?

Flash-forward to Tuesday, December 24, 2019 through to Friday, January 3, 2020

The masters summon me. It is Judgment Day.

Portelli lowers and shakes his head in disbelief. *"What have you done, Nisa? Your speech is flattened, it feels like a written piece, not a spoken one (1990, p. 48)!"*

High asks, *"Where is 'the array of emotions and bodily expressions that emanate from and feed our words, our stories' (2015, p. 152)?"*

"There is not one moment of laughter in your interview. Did that really happen? Why didn't you add them in?" Jefferson questions me (Jefferson, 1985).

Bhagwati is intrigued, *"How did your gestural repertoire change in this new social role (2013, p. 51) that you embodied, as the one who is being asked the questions? There is no mention of that."*

Portelli picks up again, *"Emotions have a narrative function, 'they reveal the narrator's (...) participation in the story and the way the story affected them (p. 48).'"* *"How did this conversation affect you? And the attendees?"*

"I did it for the sake of readability and clarity," I plea with the masters.

Frisch, once my ally on a previous paper, now turns on me and voices his disappointment:

“There are worlds of meaning that lie beyond words, and nobody pretends for a moment that the transcript is in any real sense a better representation of an interview than the voice itself. Meaning is carried and expressed in context and setting, in gesture, in tone, in body language, in pauses, in performed skills and movements. To the extent we are restricted to text and transcription, we will never locate such moments and meaning, much less have the chance to study, reflect on, learn from, and share them” (2008, p. 6). I feel cheated.”

“Forgive me masters, for I have sinned,” is all I can say.



Gratitude

Flashback to Wednesday, January 30, 2019

I am grateful for...

... my cold toes that warn me of the lack of sufficient blood flow through my body.

... my physical imbalance which reminds me how much I love dancing.

... the pains in my lower back and legs that cry out to me for movement.

... my fear of not being good enough because it challenges me to be better.

... the fear of not saying the right things because it deepens my listening.

... my financial woes, because, even from my Western middle-class privileged position, I can live a frugal and fulfilling life.

... for all those years I hated living in the Azores, because I learnt to be respectful of and found my place in nature.

...



A List

Flashback to Thursday, April 4, 2019

“How we talk about the work is the work: Creative approaches to critical art writing” a workshop by Theron Schmidt.

An exercise on constraints – limits – lists.

Square. The box that I am in.

Round (Circle). Round and around I go.

Flat. The lack of depth I feel.

2-sides. The polar opposites that limit me.

Multiple. The options that I create.

Words. The voice I scream.

Quotes. The guidance I need.

Blank. The endless opportunities available to me.

Green. The change I seek.

Gift given. The little bit of me I share.

Gift received. The person I discover.

Thank you.



Sewing The Patches Together

Flashback to Thursday, November 7, 2019

We are coming to the end of the 4–day Performance And Conflict II Listening Performance And Conflict: A Practice-Based Research Symposium. Leading this workshop is Rajni, a soft-spoken woman with an inner force of a volcano. She gives the participants their final directives, *“Take the time to reflect on your experiences, on what you have learned about yourself and about listening. Write them down. Write down a memorable moment. Afterwards, you will share this memorable moment with someone in the room, if you wish.”*

I am relieved that I am not obliged to participate. I am not ready to do so. I am not even ready to find the words, much less write them down and share them. I sit still on a chair with my back against the black wall and watch the other participants.

He is across the room making his way towards the empty chair beside me. I watch his movement, how his beautifully coiffed wild wavy brown hair reminds me of a Andalusian horse's mane, carefree, authentic, bouncing, prancing, dancing. How would he feel about evoking in me the image of a Conquistador horse, him being Colombian?

I wonder how his hair feels to the touch. I do not dare ask. I let the thought evaporate and leave my mind, my body.

"You know, I still can't believe that the Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage performance I did had such a lasting affect on you," I say to him, remembering a conversation from earlier in the year.

"Really!" Julian replies in astonishment. He is generous with his body language, with his reassuring smile, his soft yet inquisitive eyes, his body turning towards me like a satellite dish aiming its focus.

"What made it so memorable for you?" I inquire.

"The sensuous and sexual nature of your performance. You used your senses and words to send out an invitation. It was vicarious... I felt that engagement of me with that sin. I felt you were relishing the heat of that. It felt like a transgression" (J. Duarte, personal communication, November 7, 2019).

"I did allow myself to be coquette," I reply. *"Yes, yes, you did!"* he confirms.

His whole body is engaged in this conversation, his arms gesturing tender moments with soft curled-in movements towards his chest as if hiding and enjoying a forbidden feeling, his upper body moving in towards me as if to whisper a confession, his smile and squinting eyes acknowledging the sinfulness and playfulness of it all.

And I continue to wonder what his beautifully coiffed wild wavy brown hair feels like to the touch. A transgression of my own.

Flash-forward to Saturday, November 9, 2019

The conversation with Julian is ever present in my head, an invitation for me to go deeper in my reflection. *“Unpack it,”* Warren would say (W. Linds, personal communication, 2016-2020).

“You came through the performance.”

I had turned to using the senses and food as a gateway for the audience to evoke their own relationship to the themes of sexual politics and not to necessarily live empathetically the experience of Noémia and Marianna. I know that already.

Suddenly, I make another connection. *“It was very, very restrict, it was too much and this also affected sexually the girl...”* Noémia had said. I realize there and then that Noémia’s words became my words to express unapologetically my own relationship to my Judo-Christian upbringing. *“I felt that engagement of me with that sin,”* Julian had said. I realize there and then that my embodiment of Noémia’s words was my shameless embodied response to them and the mores I was raised in. It was my performative-I in full expression. I was questioning my own sexuality, my relationship to my (are they really mine?) Judo-Christian values through my body. I was expressing my own sensuality. I was no longer portraying Noémia.

And yes, my body knew and voiced all of this, long before my mind could find words to express it.

Thank you, Julian, for helping me to unveil this hidden secret.

Flash-forward to Tuesday, February 25, 2020

*“Era muito, muito **restrict, restrict**, era muito demais,” Noémia said. “It was very, very restrict, restrict, it was too much...” Noémia said.*

Why did she choose the English word “restrict” to describe the situation while speaking to me in Portuguese? Did she associate the concept of sexual freedom with English culture? Was it a way of embracing a new set of values that she learned in the new homeland?

Azorean immigrants frequently use words from the new language for concepts and things that they didn’t have access to in their native land. These can range from simple items such as gum/gama instead of “pastilha elastica”, snow/sinó instead of “neve” to concepts such as retirement (Eng.)/retirement or retraite (Fr.)/ retrete (which by the way means outhouse in Portuguese) instead of “reforma.”

I didn’t inquire at the time of the interview why she made this choice. I wonder if even she picked up on it.



The Letter

Flash-forward to Sunday, March 8, 2020

Dear Noémia,

I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones well. I am moving right along, edging ever so closely to the completion of my Masters.

*Just last month, I performed for the third time *Stories of Courtship, Desire and Marriage*, a performance that stems from fragments of your interview and excerpts from a book entitled *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*. I created a wedding reception where the audience members are the guests.*

With each new performance I change, add and remove segments from it. I let the words, movements and emotions emerge on their own, sometimes guided by the memory of you, other times by the reading I get from the participants, and still others just because it feels right to me in the moment.

I can still hear you telling me the story about your courtship inside the house, you sitting on one chair, your boyfriend on another, and your mother sitting in front of both of you, watching you, while desperately holding off falling asleep.

I see your hand pointing to the virtual chairs, showing me the spatial layout of the scene. I can still feel your mother fighting off the urge to sleep as you hold your arms crossed in front of your chest, while bopping your head. This is a moment I replicate verbatim in the performance.

Then there are scenes inspired by things you said or my personal knowledge of the culture. I remember how you used to come up with excuses to go to your married sister's home to meet with your boyfriend just to get a fleeting kiss.

One day, as I was telling this part of your story, I suddenly found myself adding, ““(we) (c)ross through the corridor and just slide our hand against each other,”” as I ever so subtly sway my hand as if to touch someone else’s passing by me in the opposite direction.

I see these words, vocal tones, rhythms and pitches, movements, emotions, thoughts, and embodied knowledge all parts of our individual voices, imbued in our sociocultural historical references. I don’t give you voice. You don’t give me voice. We each have our own.

I used to fear that by choreographing a performance I was somehow taking away from your voice, superimposing mine on yours. Thus, the reason I would simply do storytelling, but then, it was my creative voice I was silencing. Now, I see a dance born of the sum of our individual experiences. I hear a dialogue between you, the teller, and me, the performer, as a way to grant audience to the stories, both yours and mine. In this way, neither of us is silenced.

I am frequently asked if I have your permission to perform your stories in this way. Your permission was not for this particular artistic piece. It was open-ended. But I wonder how would your consent cover my emergent gliding hand?

I wish you could see it, not so much as a way to get your approval on my artistic spin, but as a gift to you, a way to show you my deep gratitude for the time and stories you generously shared with me. I’ve toyed with the notion of sending you a video, but, alas, it wouldn’t be the same. I wouldn’t be present to once again share our voices, our experiences, our embodiments. Maybe, someday, I will visit you in Victoria, B.C., and over that cup of coffee we promised each other, watch the video together or maybe I would even perform for you.

Had you seen it, you would observe that I relied on the senses to evoke memories in the participants. I drew particular attention to touch, that same sense you were forbidden to use. My intent was to let the audience reconnect with their experiences all the while listening to yours and mine. I wanted them to create their own dialogue with your stories and mine. This was not about empathy, but self-positioning as a gateway to a conversation.

Do you remember the game “Eu Suspiro?” It was played in the Azores during the Holy Ghost festivities. And how about the making of the nuptial bed? We didn’t talk about these things, but I incorporated them into the performance. Alongside the staging of the wedding reception, it was my way to historically contextualize our stories, bring the past into the present.

I speak in the first person, so I say, “I am Noémia.” I find it to be more powerful than saying, “Noémia said.” People listen more closely when I do that. Sometimes, if the participant isn’t used to the employment of this technique, I can see them struggle for a while, but when they are ready to let go of what their eyes and ears perceive, they too dive into a deep listening.

Throughout the performance, I move through, I am aware of, and am in constant dialogue with your story and my present self. It is not important to me whether the audience understands this. I have been told that my delivery of the stories is believable to the point that it could have been my own experience, all the while using your words. That’s fine, too, as long as I can acknowledge publicly your contribution to the performance.

This constant dialogue is also present in my writings about the performance from the moment I begin to create it to the time I wrap-up. And it is in these moments that I can also reflect on what it is that I bring or brought to the story. What biases inhabit me that color my interpretation of your story? What performative action can I take to render the story service? How do I engage the members of the audience in a participatory performance?

I realize that this journey through the Masters has transformed me as, or more accurately into, an oral history performer. And this performance was pivotal in this transformation. Through it, I learned to give myself permission to explore, perform and listen to my own voice amongst the voices I speak, such as your own. I found the courage to take risks. I became part of a community of oral history performers with whom I can share my fears and work through them, a community with whom I can share successes as well.

Little did you know that those few hours we spent together would have such an affect on me? Little did I know, as well? And I am deeply grateful.

One last story before I go. People refer to the performance as “My Wedding.” I find it strange, even funny, since I never married. I find it stranger because it was a choice I made to never do so.

With fond memories,

Nisa



My Community

Tuesday, March 17, 2020

“It takes a village to raise a child,” so goes the African proverb. *“It takes a community to shape a collector and disseminator of life stories into a self-reflexive oral history performer,”* I put forth.

As I think about my supervisors, Warren Linds, Luis Sotelo-Castro and Steven High, tears of gratitude role down my cheeks. I began this quest opening up the treasure of the worlds that are Oral History, Oral History Performance and Performative Social Sciences and ended up reconnecting with the treasure within me. Thank you for being my guiding lights and giving me this gift.

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To my belated father, Dionisio da Ponte Remigio, who always had a book between his hands and instilled in me the desire to learn.

"Write from a place of forgiveness," Warren says to me. I offer myself compassion and gratitude for having had the courage to embark on, persevere and rejoice in this journey.

"Position yourself," Luis said. Gladly, yet frightfully, I do.

I am a self-reflexive oral history performer. I am a beautiful Thoroughbred horse galloping freely on green plains surrounded by blue skies. Thanks to all of us.



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