

SEEKING SELF IN PLACE: PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY INTO IDENTITY, PLACE, PEDAGOGY IN ART EDUCATION

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Abstract

Performative inquiry is a method of inquiry which attends to the individual moments emerging from performative encounters, calling our attention through reflection to what matters (Fels, 2010, 2012, 2014). In this paper, I engage in performative inquiry to explore my identities through experiencing different places in Canada and by practicing visual art. Three key moments occur during the performative explorations, which embody possible new ways of understanding my struggles with my pedagogical identity as a Chinese studying and teaching art at Canadian postsecondary institutions, and opening up a new space to envision the future of art education.

Keywords: self-seeking, performative inquiry, identity, place, pedagogy, art education

Introduction: Two moments of self-searching

Moment one

Walking into the classroom to deliver my first Ph.D. lecture, I feel somewhat different, almost like an outsider: I look completely different from my other colleagues; I speak a language that is in no way similar to the official language—English used in the classroom. The discussion is heated, but I am not able to get a word in edgeways and remain silent during the whole class. On the very first day of my overseas study journey, a sense of insecurity and vulnerability fills my mind and body. At this moment I stop and wonder: “Why do I feel insecure in this place? Where, indeed, is my place?”

Moment two

In the multicultural classroom, I am having a conversation with another student about her assignment. “I think you may want to punch the color of the other shape so that you can lend additional emphasis and create a more vibrant visual experience for your audience. What do you think?” I ask the student, modestly.

Her brows knit at my suggestion, and she says, quite emphatically: “No! I think it is beautiful. I wouldn’t want to change anything.”

I am stunned and speechless, even though this is certainly not the first time I have felt intimidated by a student’s self-assertive response. At this moment, I stop and wonder: “Why are my implicit and modest expressions not received well by students as ways of engagement in the classroom here, but are accepted in China? As an experienced art and design teacher, do I have to claim my place and be more assertive while offering students suggestions in the multicultural classroom?”

Two moments of arrival “tug on the sleeve” (Fels, 2012) and unfold the fact of how I have struggled with studying and teaching in the multicultural classroom in Canada, where different values, practices and identities have constantly challenged my way of engaging in the relationship, in the context of space and relationships with others. These struggles nudge me to “stop” (Appelbaum, 1995) and ask ontological questions about the relationship between the self and place: “Who am I in this place? What is this place to me?”

To answer these questions, I adopt performative inquiry as the method of investigating the relationship between my identities and the place, and how the complexity of this relationship impacts my art learning and teaching as a result. According to Fels (2010, 2012, 2014), performative inquiry offers researchers and educators a way of inquiring into the individual moments emerging from creative activities or processes, calling for mindful attention and reflection on the pedagogical significance of these moments. In my performative inquiry, I anchor myself in the embodiment of self-seeking in the foreign land, accompanied by reflective visual journals as creative explorations. As Tuan (1977, p. 3) states, when we pause in a space for a while, that space become a place. In experiencing, we endow a space with positive meanings whereby we can choose a place to dwell. Therefore, to have a sense of self is to have a

sense of place; to have a sense of place is to experience. In this sense, experiencing a place consists of feelings and thoughts that are helpful for me to recognize the relationship between the self and the place. Through bodily engaging with different places, the interpretation of the place and self does not only depend on the sensory information accumulated, but also on the moments where I stop and respond. During the process of inquiry, three unexpected moments occur and invite me to pause for reflection and imagination. A new formation of myself is revealed through dwelling on these moments “as embodied data” (Fels, 2012), which opens up my vision for art education.

In the following sections, I will share the three pivotal moments that occurred unexpectedly during my performative exploration of different places in Canada, which has become an evolving process of unfolding images of myself in relation to place. First, I attend to the moment of my first hiking trip to Grouse Mountain, in which a sense of vulnerability and resistance comes into being and invites me to investigate the hidden reasons behind this. In the second moment, I explore a time of awakening, when I took a walk in a park while recognizing the complex cultural reasons for my vulnerability and resistance. The third moment involves an experience of wandering on a road covered by cherry flower blossoms, which resonates with the indigenous philosophy and urges me to open up a new space for art education. The three moments enable me to be wide awake and realize that I am fed by this foreign land, while at the same time being nurtured by my Chinese homeland. Such hybrid identities are situated on the margin between two different worlds, calling for pedagogies in a “third space” (Bhabha, 1990) in the art classroom.

Journal one: March 18th—Grouse Mountain hiking trip: Vulnerability revealed

The first moment arrived during my hiking trip to Grouse Mountain, calling for recognition and confrontation of my vulnerability and resistance to studying and teaching in this foreign land. The scene begins like this...

My friend Natacha invites me to go hiking on Grouse Mountain with her before the snow starts to melt. I happily accept her invitation, setting out ambitiously to seek myself through exploring this foreign land. When we reach the plateau early afternoon, I am astonished by the magnificent scenery confronting my eyes: the sun spreads its shimmering cloak on the pine tree forest on the snowy mountains, golden rays touching the silver ice and darkish green trees. The sunlight sweeps across the mountains, crosses the peaceful lake, and casts shadows on the city below.

“Do you like it?” Natacha asks me.

“Of course, I love it!” I breathe deeply of the air and continue: “but I don’t know why the vastness, the purity, and the perfect combination of nature and the city make me feel a sense of distance from them. I think they remind me that this is not home.”



Figure 1. A page from visual journal one.

This moment arrests me for reflection. “Place is security, space is freedom” (Tuan, 1977, p. 3). Indeed, this great foreign space had been continuously simulating my imagination to act on things I have never done before: I have sung and danced in my Ph.D. classroom; I have improvised and acted out a small play in front of my mature and intelligent colleagues; I have tried to voice my own opinions recklessly in spite of my imprecise and incorrect English expression. In such a space, it is the freedom that encourages me to pursue my individuality regardless of other people’s opinions. I absolutely love this land. However, when I see the forests, mountains and the ocean, when I hear birds chirping, rivers running, and snow blowing, when I smell the fragrant flowers, grass, and trees, the surroundings in my experience of sensing the place become a biological-like alarm clock that constantly reminds me of the time when I was home. I wonder, “Why do I feel a sense of resistance? Why do I feel nostalgic despite the fact that I am biologically and mentally satisfied in this foreign place? What is the relationship among place, self, and the past?”



Figure 2. A page from visual journal one.

Renowned Belgian writer George Poulet (as cited in Malpas, 1999, p. 176) states the following: “Without places, beings would be only abstraction. It is places that make their image precise and that give them the necessary support thanks to which we can assign them a place in our mental space, dream of them, and remember them.” This connection between person, place, and memory implies that my action of self-seeking in a foreign place can be seen as finding myself within space and time. Myself, as a being, interacts with the surroundings and objects in this spatial-temporal space through various poses and moods, which provokes my senses that are intertwined with the feelings and thoughts. Consciously and subconsciously, I feel insecure and lost in the unfamiliar present; but at the same time, I develop emotional and sentimental connections with my past where I was nurtured by the place, home. In this moment, my vulnerability and resistance have been revealed and learned, with the materiality of the space becoming visible and inextricable in every aspect of my life encounters and experiences. However, we are all mortal beings living in a space where time is enfolded in the scattered conditions of the past, present, and future. When we look upon the universe, we see how the events that sail past us never vanish. Instead, they spread out in the different parts of space-time. In this moment, I come to understand that despite all the odds and difficulties, I am going to discover the root cause of my vulnerability and resistance. This root indeed constantly pulls me back to my past, but it can also be the inspiration and strength that encourage me to explore the adventurous present and a future full of risks and opportunities.

Journal two: March 20th --- Kensington Park walking: An awakening moment

The second stop emerges from the time when I took a walk in Kensington Park while I was trying to cope with my struggle over writing an English course paper. An awakening moment of arrival reminds me of how much I am nurtured by my own Chinese culture, no matter how many times I was reluctant to accept it.

“I so despise myself. How could it be so hard to write an English paper?” Even my internal monologue reflects my frustration. I turn off the computer and decide to take a walk in Kensington Park near my place.

Standing in the vast, empty park and looking up at the sky, I feel touched. The late afternoon sun nestles behind the thick and fractal shapes of clouds; the long slants of light dazzle on the tract of grassland and a few, scattered cherry trees. When the early spring breeze blows into this tranquil and serene land, the leaves, wild flowers, grass, and even the bench start to dance and smile at me. My sensory organs are challenged again, not only by the structuring of the space, but also by the mysterious energy of the universe, arising with feelings and thoughts. I can almost feel I am beginning to dissolve in this space and becoming a part of the surroundings. This moment freezes, with an old Chinese saying about death slipping into my mind: Being buried in earth is the real peace (入土为安). In this particular moment, I feel relaxed and experience the Qi (气) of the surrounding nature. More importantly, I feel resonant with the Confucian view on the unity of human being and nature: I, as relational, belong to the universe.



Figure 3. A page from visual journal two.

This moment offers me pause for reflection, calling for mindful awareness of the fact that I am deeply rooted in the fundamental Chinese philosophy of Confucianism. Admittedly, it is a philosophy that believes in “the commonality of humanity than to its differences” and “the educated and passive role of the elitists” (Wang, 2004, p. 64). This can be considered one of the primary reasons that leads to the suppression of individuality, in contrast to the active and participatory role of intellectuals in the Western view. In addition, another Confucian thought, “think twice before you do” (三思而后行) has also been deeply embedded in Chinese culture for many centuries. Although contemporary Chinese education has attached importance to bringing out the individuality of students, a moment of contemplation before speaking is always appreciated by teachers, students, and society at large. Consequently, as a student, I often miss my chance to speak in Canada’s active and participatory learning environment. As an art educator, my tacit and modest expressions are not well received by students with strong opinions who also are unwilling to enter into what they do not know about others. Such an educational dilemma between implicit and explicit self-esteem not only questions my pedagogical practices but also powerfully drives home the reality that the socially constructed nature of the individual is hard to get through.

My cultural root is a given that cannot be either neglected or killed. It constitutes who I am as a Chinese. If Confucian thought arouses the tendency of passivity and commonality, it is also worth noting that the ultimate concern of Confucianism is about how to bring out the most authentic man through education and self-effort. According to the scholar of Confucian studies, Weiming (1979, pp. 85–99), the concept of authenticity implies a human willingness to continuously participate in the transforming and nourishing process of the cosmos until a true human nature can be found. It is an interactive process of universal communion rather than individuation. In this sense, even though the missing concept of individuality in Chinese philosophy may jeopardize my educational practices in the western classroom, the idea of authenticity calls for a mutual understanding and an empathetic relationship between teachers and students to achieve personal transformation. In the Chinese traditional thinking, the western

dualistic view of the world as either other-than-self or not self is rejected (Bai & Cohen, 2008, p. 37). Instead, it sees subject/object, self/society, and man/nature as interrelated and transformable. The true subjectivity is held by the authentic human being, for whom being compassionate and empathetic are a means to imaginatively enter into another person's feelings and achieve fruitful communication with others (Weiming, 1985, p. 93). In this moment of reflection, I ask myself: "Can I refuse to claim my authoritative place as an institutional teacher but still help my students learn how to travel into what they do not know? Can I neglect the systematic analysis of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in the multicultural classroom and still assist my students to become more empathetic and sensitive when encountering different others? How can I fulfill my educational responsibility to bring out the goodness of both myself and students through transformative and nourishing processes?"

Journal three: March 26th --- New face, new understanding: It is just a start

The third moment of arrival was recognized while I was wandering on a cherry blossom-lined street. The scattered petals on the concrete road caught my attention.

Spring in Vancouver is very different from my hometown, chilly with light rain falling here and there. After finishing school, I walk back home along Inlet Drive as usual. All of a sudden, the sky turns gray and gloomy. A few minutes later it starts to drizzle. Because the blooming cherry trees have transformed the street with various shades of pink and white, the darkness of the sky seems to just balance everything out, which I find more appealing than a bright sunny day. When a gentle gust of wind flings the soft mist into my face, I notice that hundreds of petals are drifting down lightly like feathers and scattering on the sidewalk. The image is so beautiful and vivid that I cannot help but take out my camera to document this fleeting moment. While leaning over to take a picture, I am amazed at how these fragile and delicate petals continuously paint the concrete with new faces upon the old layers, piece by piece, little by little, energizing the coldness with vibrancy and vitality.

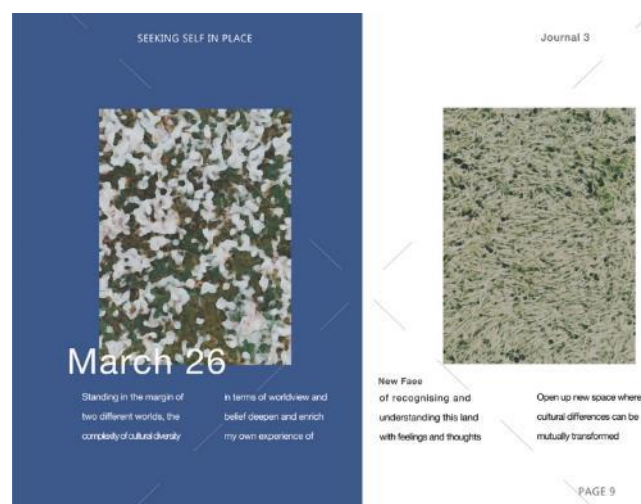


Figure 4. A page from visual journal three.

This moment offers me a pause for reflection. When I come to seek myself through experiencing the foreign land, I am present and wide awake for the unexpected and the interrupted that may be missed or ignored otherwise (Fels, 2012). Noticing the beauty of the flowering street is a small incident that emerges from the unplanned and unanticipated everyday living. However, such an “insignificant” event can become inspirational and provoking, arresting us for a moment of attention and questions. The ever-changing new layers of the concrete road make me feel resonant with the Native-American culture about selfhood in terms of “the building process of pyramidal structure” and “building on the realities of past generations and expressing new realities” (Cajete, 1994, p. 29). The structures are continuously enlarged, but their basic principle remains. This Native-American epistemology is as vibrant as the Confucian view of self; that is, lifelong cultivation is a continuous path of reverence for and rejuvenation of the old civilization. Only if constant self-renovation is performed can humanity be achieved at the end of life.

As I continue to write, my vision has become clearer than ever. Standing on the margin between two different worlds, the complexities of different identities, values, thoughts, and practices challenge my pedagogical ways of encountering and engaging relationally with others. I have been disrupted by the differences and confused about where I belong. However, my resonance with the Native-American culture in terms of the continuous process of life-building enables me to recognize this foreign land culturally and opens up a new question about the concept of “becoming” (Hall, 2014). As a Chinese studying and teaching art in Canadian academic institutions, I long for a space where one’s own culture and new layers of self could, with encouragement, permanently contest and transform the intellectually and culturally different multiple. Within such a space, the basic structures will be continuously reinforced and expanded, begetting mutual respect, openness, and curiosity that invite everyone to the way of becoming.

A third space coming to presence

Educational philosopher Greene (1995, p. 28) states that “the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinary unseen, unheard, and unexpected.” Through performatively exploring this foreign land, the unceasing new source of the place has nurtured and enriched my experiences with feelings and thoughts, opening up alternative ways to see, hear and speak the fleeting but critical moments that we might take for granted.

Let us return to the two stop moments when I was struggling with my pedagogical identities both as an international student and teacher in the multicultural art education classrooms. Writing through each performative exploration of the foreign land has further reminded me to be wide awake and recognize the two stops that are in the moments of encountering my colleagues and students’ presence. In exploring the land, my feelings of being vulnerable and resistant have been transformed into a source of power that encourages me to reach out to others to discover and reconstruct myself. Each encounter embraces a moment of possibilities that helps me to learn who I am and how I engage in the presence of others and in

multicultural art classrooms. This self transits through temporal moments of experience and keeps making new meanings each time. It is only now, in turning around, that I come to understand how I arrive at the moment of encounter with the petals, landscapes, sidewalks, new languages, colleagues, students, insecurities, time, place, and space. As Tuan and Mercure (2004, p. 4) state, “we ‘feed’ on places, and that, so fed, we grow.” My identities simultaneously shift and grow when the immigration status changes my sense of location. Such place consciousness invites me to see my struggles with fresh, new eyes and imagine an educational space of in-between.

This space has been theorized as a “third space” by Bhabha (1990), which has become a broad interest for educators and researchers. In third-space learning, transparent norms and histories can be transformed into “*musée imaginaire*”, celebrating “alterity” and “otherness” (p. 208). Within art education, I would argue that the pedagogies in a third space are both relational and individual, different and communal, problematic and reflective, ambiguous and unequivocal, and tacit and expressional. Students’ diverse issues will be addressed through dialogues that are open and unthreatening, yet allow them to be criticized and questioned. Learning will be inclusive and embrace ambiguity, while allowing teachers to interact with students in the creation of visual cultural products.

My own position as an outsider working with insiders presents a particular issue that has become increasingly controversial in Canadian multicultural educational settings. That is, when an educator from a subordinate culture teaches students who are mainly from the dominant culture, social tensions may occur in the ways of engagement and interactions between teacher and students, as well as the relationship among students from different cultural backgrounds. This is especially relevant in the art classroom in terms of conflicting ideas, values, attitudes, and practices that surround learning and making visual cultural products. Therefore, as a Chinese woman who teaches in a Canadian educational setting, my ambiguous professional status as an outsider invites me to perceive and create a new space where students from both dominant and subordinate cultures could, with the encouragement and support of teachers, affirm themselves through public and free conversations about their own visual cultural products as meaning-making processes.

However, the cultural and pedagogical differences hidden underneath the surface of Western multicultural classrooms sometimes can distance teachers from students as a result of the disturbance in the construction of identity. Therefore, it is necessary for art educators to carefully foster a third space as a learning environment, in which conflicts and tensions are not overcome to reach consensus, but more creative and meaningful ideas and actions are generated through free dialogue and dissent. This shifting third-space learning implies that the tensions and conflicts emerging from standing on the margins of multiple worlds can be pedagogically productive in the art classroom; it challenges students to rethink who they are and how they might be when encountering others, while at the same time allowing them to travel into and inhabit new art worlds of hybridity and possibilities.

Writing through stop moments and performative explorations has helped to unmask myself, as standing in a third-space with a willingness to be wide awake and imagine something new and different. Seeking to cultivate such a space in art education as my pedagogical goal is generated from my ambiguous and unsettling position as an art educator wandering in two landscapes that are open to creativity and imagination. Through documenting my pedagogical moments in the multicultural art classroom, I believe that the construction of a third space will certainly be troubling, but also stimulating. However, being able to engage in creative exploration to investigate who I am reminded me of why I have been drawn to art and design all my life. Such a powerful experience recognizes what matters and encourages me to move forward through the endless path of cultivating a third space in art education.



Figure 5. A page from visual journal four.

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