

PERFORMANCE

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PERFORMANCE

An Alphabet of Performative Writing

Ronald J. Pelias



Walnut Creek, California



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Beginnings

1

A Familiar Framing

Performance: An Alphabet of Performative Writing explores performance in everyday life and aesthetic contexts through the use of performative writing. Using the alphabet as an organizational device, the book is composed of a series of short pieces that approach performance from multiple perspectives and rely upon various compositional strategies. It reaches toward the poetic, rhetorical, and relational in the desire to create dialogue. Some of the pieces are in keeping with a typical essay, others call upon literary forms and figures, others appear as personal narratives, and others come forward as quick speculations, experiments, or remarks. Together, they might best be read as rhizomatic thought trajectories where each piece “connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 21). The entries present complementary and oppositional logics, resisting a coherent theory of performance, although they are likely to point to the author’s tendencies and biases.

The book moves playfully. It plays on the page in this performative act of writing about performance. While playing, it wants its language to remember its limits and its possibilities, to know how each word carries an ideological kick and how each word is marked by its representational failure, to sense how the body languages meaning and meaning languages the body, to turn back on itself to consider its own investments and their material consequences, and to evoke through sense and sensibility everyday and aesthetic performance. In short, the book acknowledges its location in the

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partial and partisan, strives for the evocative, reflexive, and embodied, and assumes material consequences.

The book might be read as a series of pieces designed as conversational starters. As such, they serve as beginning places, openings inviting dialogue. Or, the entries might be taken as performance nibbles, available as a snack whenever one wishes. The pieces can also be grouped together under central themes (see Appendix) to offer more extended commentary on a given subject. This may be helpful for those who wish to focus on a particular topic or to use the book as a complementary resource for class discussion. Despite the use of the alphabet, the book is not, however, an exhaustive dictionary or encyclopedia account. It includes subjects that are of interest to the author; it claims no more than that.

There are multiple audiences for this book; it is especially relevant, however, to those who are interested in theatre and performance studies. It approaches familiar topics often addressed by scholars in those fields, but it does so through the use of performative writing. Such a methodological move provides, I believe, a fresh slant on a number of well-known subjects. The book should also be of use to those who are interested in performative writing as a method. While the book takes as its subject performance, performative writing can be employed as a method for exploring any topic. The reader will see a variety of compositional strategies at play, strategies that provide a range of possibilities for using performative writing. The section below entitled "Performative Writing" (p. 11) is written to show in general how performative writing serves as a method for evoking human experiences. The section locates itself primarily in the work of scholars across the liberal and fine arts who embrace qualitative inquiry.

2

Going Places Together

Thank you for your generosity so far. I appreciate your willingness to pick up this book, to buy it, to take it home. And, how good of you to be reading, particularly given all the choices that you have. I appreciate your time and consideration. I know by now you've already made judgments. As we go on, you will have many more chances to

decide whether you feel you are spending your time well. Even now, you may be thinking that this seems too contrived for your taste. As you know, you are always free to stop. I'll never know if you do. And if you are reading this because it was assigned for a class and you have decided that you've already had enough, here are a few things you can say that will give the impression that you read the whole book:

"I like how the book gives all these different takes on performance."

"Most of the pieces are too brief. I often feel the arguments would benefit from more sustained discussion."

"The book positions me differently in regard to performance. It invites me to be both the person who does performance and the person who responds to it."

"I agree that we must find alternative forms for writing about performance, forms that try to enter into the spirit of the subject. And these forms should do no harm to others as we go about our critical lives. Criticism, more than anything else, should be about the explanation and negotiation of feelings."

You may want to adapt these lines to fit in with the flow of the classroom conversation. After all, you probably don't want to argue for one of these claims if no one else is standing beside you.

As you probably know by now, this book uses the alphabet for its organizational structure. As you read the various entries, I hope there are times when you can stand with me in agreement. If you can't, I hope you will read against me, establishing a place where we might engage in dialogue. I must admit that I find I am not as comfortable as I would like with the stance of some of the pieces. I enjoy arguing against myself or being a devil's advocate. In general, though, the entries are about writing, about the aesthetic, about trying to get at what matters, about trying to get down why we are pulled to staged and everyday performances. As you read, I hope you feel that you are in art's presence or, at least, are persuaded that you should be.

If nothing more, I hope you would be willing to sample at least one or two pieces from the collection. You might consider going to the table of contents and seeing if any titles are tempting. If your primary interest is performance criticism, you might, for example,

turn to “Appreciation” or “Insufficiency.” If you like performing, you might, for instance, find “Becoming” or “Rehearsal” of interest. Or, if you love the performance of personal narratives as much as I do, you might, perhaps, want to look at “Confessions” or “Pledge.” It doesn’t matter in what order you might read the essays, and none should take you too long to get through—they are all easy reads. Or, if you like, just turn to “A” and begin. You are the judge every step of the way. It is, after all, your critical response that matters. While you are considering your options, I’ll take a moment to thank those who have helped me put this book together.

I start with the wonderful colleagues in performance studies I’ve worked with at Southern Illinois University. I owe them considerable gratitude for their daily teachings about performance. To Lee Jenkins (San Francisco State University), Tami Spry (St. Cloud State University), and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer (Louisiana State University) I can only say that I keep each of you as a constant audience member in my head as I write. I owe considerable gratitude to Lesa Lockford (Bowling Green State University) and Nathan Stucky (Southern Illinois University) for their insightful conversations and work on the book. Mary Hinchcliff-Pelias (Southern Illinois University), my partner and first editor, allows me to rattle on about my projects and makes my writing much better than it would be without her keen critical eye. Mitch Allen and his staff at Left Coast Press continue to be the best team any author might hope to find. I also want to acknowledge the following publishers for their permission to reproduce in revised form the following essays: Sage, section 3 from “Beginnings” was published under the title, “Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, An Argument, An Anecdote,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 5 (2005): 415–424; University California Press, entries entitled “Pledge” and “Opening” were published under the titles “Pledging Personal Allegiance to Qualitative Inquiry,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 2 (2009): 351–356, and “Performance Is an Opening,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 3 (2010): 173–174.

Performative Writing

In the desire to establish some definitional ground, I want to make six claims for performative writing, claims that point toward what I believe I am trying to do. First, performative writing expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge. For some, that is just the problem. As Gingrich-Philbrook (1998) points out in his discussion of masculinity, fear of losing disciplinary control over sanctioned forms and content triggers a talk of legitimacy. Those who have been designated to legislate what counts had better stay ever vigilant, or the very foundation of the academic enterprise might crack, letting in all sorts of pollutants. This, it seems clear, is the sentiment behind Parks's (1998) fearful claim, "No question is more central to our identity as scholars than the question of what counts as scholarship" (np). Parks's fear cannot be easily dismissed, but in the case of performative writing, it is misplaced.

Performative writing is not the wrecking ball swinging into the academic house. While most would acknowledge that scholarship is contingent upon historical, economic, ideological, and disciplinary patterns, few are ready to reject the considerable body of scholarly work in the name of relativism. Every time a paper is graded, an article for a journal is reviewed, or a scholarly essay is written, scholars are reflecting and affirming what they value. To argue contingency is not to argue for the utterly arbitrary: There are some good reasons for valuing what scholars have. In this sense, one might agree with Parks. Parks, however, need not fear performative writing. It is at most a hairline fracture in the academic foundation, a fracture that has been noticeable for years as scholars have attempted to force the scientific paradigm to answer their questions. Despite the fact that many have declared the logical positivist house in ruins, scholars continue to reside there. Despite the fact that many have shown how building structures with the mind only is flawed architecture, scholars continue to do so. The performative writing fracture may help academic houses settle into greater alignment with human experience. Performative writing fixes the fracture by adding design features; it welcomes the body into the mind's dwellings.

It is also useful to remember that formal argument based in and upon the methods of scientific inquiry is not the mode for discovering truths; it is, like all modes of inquiry, nothing more than a rhetorical style. Scholars need not be tied to the belief or practice that their scholarship must look a particular way, particularly a paradigmatic way that has its uses but has limited power in accounting for human experience. Instead, scholars might embrace another rhetorical style, what Goodall (1991) calls “mystery,” “to encourage us to see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, Other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by some simpler linear or causal logic” (p. 125).

Second, performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective. Human experience does not reduce to numbers, to arguments, to abstractions. As poet Stephen Dunn (1994) notes, “Oh abstractions are just abstract // until they have an ache in them” (p. 212). Performative writing attempts to keep the complexities of human experience intact, to place the ache back in scholars’ abstractions.

This is not to argue that experience equals scholarship. Performative writing does not indiscriminately record experience; it does not simply duplicate a cinema verite experiment. Instead, performative writing is a highly selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles. Each frame is studied and felt; each shot is significant. Much is left on the editing floor. Everyday experience, then, is not scholarship, but the shaping of everyday experience into telling and moving tales can be. The performative writer functions as States (1996) suggests the artist does, as “someone who says, ‘This is the way people behave *N* number of times,’ and knows how to put the *N* into expressive form” (p. 19).

In this manner, performative writing makes its case, a case, to borrow from Fisher’s (1987) familiar argument, based in narrative plausibility and narrative fidelity. It is a case that is more interested in evoking than representing, in constructing a world than in positing this is the way the world is (for example, Tyler, 1986; Ellis, 1995).

It is a case that does not just rely upon its descriptive portrayal, no matter how precise or poignant, but also depends upon its ability to create experience. Tyler's (1986) assertion about post-modern ethnography holds for performative writing as well: "It is not a record of experience at all; it is the means of experience" (p. 138). Thus, performative writing offers both an evocation of human experience and an enabling fiction. Its power is in its ability to tell the story of human experience, a story that can be trusted and a story that can be used. It opens the doors to a place where the raw and the genuine find their articulation through form, through poetic expression, through art.

Third, performative writing rests upon the belief that the world is not given, but constructed, composed of multiple realities. All representations of human experience are partial and partisan (for example, Goodall, 1989, 1991, 1996, 2000; Phelan, 1993, 1997). At best, scholars might achieve, to use Clifford's (1986) phrase, a "rigorous partiality" (p. 25) and acknowledge, like all "standpoint epistemologists,"¹ that all our utterances are committed, positioned. Performative writing resists arguments that attempt to prove all other explanations inadequate or suspect. Performative writers do not believe that the world is one particular way. They do not believe that argument is an opportunity to win, to impose their logic upon others, to colonize. They do not believe that there should be only one house on the hill. They do not believe that they can speak without speaking themselves, without carrying their own vested interests, their own personal histories, their own philosophical and theoretical assumptions forward. They do not believe that they can write without loss, without mourning (Phelan, 1997), without metonymy (Pollock, 1998).

Performative writing, then, takes as its goal to dwell within multiple perspectives, to celebrate an interplay of voices, to privilege dialogue over monologue. It cherishes the fragmentary, the uncertain. It marks the place that poet Tess Gallagher wishes to locate, the "point of all possibilities" where "time collapses, drawing in the past, present and future" (1982, p. 107).

Four, performative writing often evokes identification and empathic responses. It creates a space where others might see themselves. Although written in a variety of forms, it often presents what

Trinh Minh-ha (1991) calls a “plural I,” an “I” that has the potential to stand in for many “I’s.” It is an “I” that resonates, that resounds, that is familiar. Performative writing also often beckons empathy, allowing others to not only see what the writer might see but also to feel what the writer might feel. It is an invitation to take another’s perspective.

Through identification and empathy, then, readers become implicated and human experience concretized. Readers see more clearly how they and others constitute and are constituted by the world. They come to feel that they and others are written, given voice, a voice that they did not have prior to the reading. In this sense, the “I” of performative writing might best be seen as a geographical marker, a “here” rather than a “self.” In short, the self becomes a positional possibility (Garber, 1995).

When performative writing does not point beyond the writer, it may appear self-indulgent, narcissistic, self-serving or, to put it perhaps more kindly, therapeutic. This was one of the many attacks upon the *Text and Performance Quarterly* (1997) special issue on performative writing.² The argument was simple: If an article had such qualities, surely it wasn’t of any value. No one, however, seemed to question why one might object to the self being indulged, reflexive, served, or healed within scholarly work. On occasion, some noted the history of legitimating practices as if that were proof enough (that is, it hasn’t been allowed; therefore, it shouldn’t be allowed) (for example, Wendt, 1998).

Yet, notions of self-indulgence, narcissism, self-serving, and therapeutic do seem to disturb, to rub against what scholars hope their research might achieve. For such scholarship is not just about the self, although the self can never be left behind. Such scholarship, even when based upon the self, points outward. Its aim is to tell about human experience. It is for this reason that identification, that space of recognition and resonance, is often an essential aspect of performative writing. Moreover, the self can be a place where tensions are felt and uncovered, a place of discovery, a place of power, of political action and resistance. One often knows what matters by recognizing what the body feels. This is in part the lesson phenomenologists have been trying to teach for years (for example, Leder, 1990; Sheets-Johnstone, 1990).

Five, performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal. It starts with the recognition that individual bodies provide a potent data base for understanding the political and that hegemonic systems write upon individual bodies. This is, of course, only to articulate what feminists have understood for years: the personal is political. It is to realize the potential in Benjamin's (1979) insight, "To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need" (p. 228). Yet, too often research, even feminist and Marxist, does not call into play its own insights; it does not call upon individual experience to make its case. It does not work behind closed doors. It does not show how politics matter to individual lives or how individual lives are evidence that social justice is absent. Performative writing insists upon making such connections. It is, to use Pollock's (1998) word, "consequential." It offers, as Denzin (2003) puts it, "kernels of utopian hope, suggestions for how things might be different, and better" (p. xi).

Six, performative writing participates in relational and scholarly contexts. No writing occurs without context. In traditional work, the burden is to demonstrate how a particular argument advances current knowledge, a movement toward some all-encompassing explanation. The relationship between the writer and the reader is a distanced one, a relational positioning that demands that neither person become connected to the other. Performative writing, on the other hand, assumes that at given times certain questions are of interest, not because their answers might be another step toward some final explanation, but because of how they connect people within a scholarly community and locate them as individuals.

Some questions are productive to embrace because they participate in the ongoing concerns of a scholarly community. Performative writing, when done well, understands its place within disciplinary history. As it participates in that tradition, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, it hopes to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1983), "experiential particularity" (Baumeister and Newman, 1994), "deconstructive verisimilitude" (Denzin, 1997), "theatrical narrativity" (Crapanzano, 1986). Any piece of performative writing is a story

among many but a story about issues that matter or can be made to matter to the community.

Some questions are productive to embrace because they connect individuals, not just as scholars, but as people who are willing to place themselves at personal risk. By confessing, by exposing, and by witnessing, performative writers pursue their scholarly interests. In doing so, what might have remained hidden is made public, what might have stayed buried is put under examination, what might have been kept as personal commitment becomes public testimony. Such efforts often ask readers to respond, not just at the level of idea, but as one person who has become connected to another. Performative writers offer readers an interpersonal contract that they can elect to engage.

This section finds its fitting end with the words of poet Philip Booth: "I strongly feel that every poem, every work of art, everything that is well done, well made, well said, genuinely given, adds to our chances of survival by making the world and our lives more habitable" (1989, p. 37). Performative writing participates in this spirit, in the hope that current research might become a place where all are welcome to reside and where all might come to recognize themselves in all their human complexity.

4

A Gathering

Consider (1) what is on the table, (2) how it has all been placed before you, and (3) why it is there for you to consume. First, around the table are my colleagues. They are looking, seeing how I've served them up for your pleasure. Some are central influences who I write and write, hoping that I might somehow get down how their work has shaped my thinking. Around the table, too, are my students whom I've tried to serve well. More often than not, though, I've left our encounters feeling I should have done a better job. Finally, there are those I know only by some act of momentary audiencing. I've always enjoyed looking. I apologize to them all for using them to serve my interests.

In the middle of it all, I am there as a stuffed bird, the centerpiece, the dominant taste, eager for all to build a meal around me. I lie before you having had a long and full career. I'm glad to give myself up for this moment together. Given my central place on the

table, I cannot be ignored. Cooked, I cannot fly away, even if that were my wish. I hope you like fowl. Please add your own sauce. As you might guess, my preference would be for a light one. But truly, my desire is not to be the main course.

Also coming to the table are performances, a variety of seasonings and textures that turn the ordinary into art and art into the ordinary. Each requires a clean palate if you are to be fully satisfied. Knowing when manners are followed and when they are broken helps but isn't essential. I hope that you can savor the taste of each spice and that I have added enough of them bring out the flavor.

In the mix of it all is an argument, passed around from hand to hand, put in one mouth after another. For some, the argument is over-done, burnt; it was left in the oven for too long without a cook's careful eye. It is spit out. For others, the argument melts in the mouth; it's a sweet for all that has turned sour. Notice how savory it is.

Finally, there is a bit of wine which could just as easily be taken for a tear or a drop of blood. It spoils the linen but reminds you that you have eaten.

I apologize if what I served isn't enough for you or if it isn't sensitive to your dietary needs. I tried to offer both the cooked and the raw. I admit I'm suspicious of people who like everything that's put in front of them, but I do hope there is something here for you, something that you can swallow. If not, there is no need to throw out what others might enjoy. After all, out there are academics in need of nourishment.

The book is here for you to consume. Take small bites if you prefer, sampling here and there. No one will find everything to his or her liking. I won't try to force feed you. Whether to eat or not is always your choice. But perhaps, having had a little encouragement, you have discovered or will find something that you truly enjoy. More and more people are welcoming this kind of cuisine into their diets. They say once you acquire a taste for it, it's hard to stop indulging yourself. They say it seems more natural. They say it makes them healthier.

After you are finished, excuse yourself from the table. I'm sure you are tired of being told how to savor the smells, how to chew on this and that, and how to swallow it all down. First, feel free to take whatever you like. If you've found anything to your taste, please take

it with you. Second, know that I'm open for suggestions. You can send any thoughts to rpelias@siu.edu. Perhaps we can chat. There is always more to learn in the kitchen.

5

Performance

Performance:

1. An act, a doing, behavior
2. An art, an aesthetic form

6

A Critical Stance

He thinks he knows what he likes and what he doesn't.

He likes when he is vulnerable, open, not because he is an exhibitionist or because he thinks his views are so interesting or different from others, but because he believes that by fully sharing his perspectives he might make a human connection, he might uncover what matters in performance, and he might feel honest. He worries how he might be read, but recognizes that no one ever has control over such matters. He worries that he cannot take anything back, but knows that everything he says is only a part of an ongoing conversation. He likes that what he shared is what he felt.

He dislikes when his research hides behind the illusion of objectivity, when his research reduces complexity into significance claims, when his research asserts Truth. Surely he should know by now that the body will never equal a number, that the body will never settle into a proposition, that the body will never reduce to a problem to be solved. The body, in order to live, must have a heart.

He likes when his language tries to enter that heart. Then, his words allow him to get some sense of the center, the beginning point, the raw. Motive often finds its way to metaphor. When he is getting at the feel of things, he feels he is doing what he should. He likes to lean in.

He dislikes when his language is direct, flat as an instruction manual. It is never about how to put everything together. Without

searching underneath the directions, he cannot even see what is there. Without the curves and claws, without the spills and slips, without the rough and the rhythmic, his words are nothing more than a repetitive grammar, an empty nest, a broken lever.

He likes that he has spent many years thinking about performance. Its impact on his life, he believes, cannot be overstated. He thinks he is more sensitive to its power, to its ability to inflate and deflate, to its efforts to position people by the products they produce. After seeing its offerings, he is pleased that he was not silenced, that he sought a new discourse, a discourse that attempts to speak through art.

He dislikes that sometimes he forgets what he has learned. Too often his critical remarks are nothing more than his attempt to put on display what he thinks he knows. Too often his critical responses forget the person for whom his responses might matter in the name of some idea or some principle when, in actuality, the only idea or principle worth remembering is that all criticism comes to rest on someone's body. Too often his judgments spring forth as pronouncements from a Mount Olympus of his own imagination. He should know that there is no speaking as a god.

He likes that he completed the manuscript, one sentence at a time. The long hours hunched over his computer fade. The moments of frustration when he couldn't find the right words fall away. The times he lost faith slip by. He sees himself holding the finished product in his hands for the first time and he smiles. He has always loved books.

He dislikes how the book might be treated by the critics he was hoping to persuade. He sees it tossed aside, unread. He sees it marked with angry comments in the margins. He sees it reviewed with professional courtesy but with disdain. He is sad.

7

Mind/Body

Never let the mind or the body become the other's synecdoche. Be a hammer to my bent nail, a saw to my broken branch, a chisel to my bland finish. Come close. Be right here.

8

A Final Thought Before We Continue

I need to say something to you now. Don't be alarmed. I don't think what I have to say will surprise or disturb you, and if you don't want to accept what I will offer, that's fine. No negative consequences will follow. But, if you hope to have the relationship that I think we both want, then I need certain things from you. Quite honestly, if these are things you can't give, then we should part ways. I won't be angry with you or resent your choice. I know there are multiple demands on your time beyond what we share together. For my part, as I proceed, I will try my best to keep your interest. I believe that is something you want. And as I try to keep your interest, I'm hoping you will focus on what I have to say. Let's make this just between us. We can't get very far if we don't start here.

As we move on, please attend not only to what I am saying, but also to how I am saying it. I can't begin to tell you the number of hours I've spent finding what I want to say and how I want to say it. I've thought about what I should say when, about the arguments I'm trying to make, and about how I want you to feel when I'm finished. I've considered your possible resistance. For me, the how is just as important as the what—they really can't be separated. Any writer will tell you that. Just think about the countless love stories you've encountered. They are always about two people trying to find their way to each other. It's the how that makes us want to hear another love story, that separates the good ones from the boring ones. As I go on, I'll do my best not to bore you, and I'll do that by thinking long and hard about how I say what I want to say. In return, I need you to appreciate word choices that give the familiar a productive kick; sentences that move you along with ease, turning this way and that, capturing the complexities of the ins and outs, discovering nuances through details, or that come as quick as a telling glimpse; and arguments, by carrying much more than logical proof, show why a given point matters, why it has consequences in human lives, why affect can't be left out of any human account. I won't always succeed in giving you such things, but I will always try, and I would truly appreciate it if you would occasionally pause to consider if such things are there.

I might just mention here an important associated point. Please hear me out before you claim you know me or dismiss what I'm offering. If you decide you don't want a relationship after a few moments, that's fine. You can just leave. I'll be disappointed, but I'd rather you walk away early on than pretend that you are interested in what I have to say without hearing me out. And please, don't quote me if you are just going to tune in now and then. Although I may be wrong, everything I say I believe is worth saying; otherwise, I wouldn't be saying it. I'm sure you've had the experience of someone telling you what you think or assuming she or he understands you before you have a chance to explain yourself. It's frustrating, isn't it? Often it just feels rude, doesn't it? Please, don't be that person. You'll know when my turn is done. I'll welcome your response after I'm finished.

In anticipation of your response, I want to remind you that I'm doing the best I know how. I hope you appreciate that, and I hope that you will be generous. I'm hoping that as we move along, you'll be able to think about what might be of use to you instead of what's wrong with what I've said. We spend too much of our time letting our critical teeth tear into the work of others. It feels rather violent, don't you think? It seldom makes for good relationships. I'm surely not trying to say that you can't disagree with me, but there is no reason for either of us to make our case at the expense of the other or to form some alliance against others who don't happen to see or do things the way we do. When you disagree with me or become disappointed in something I've said or how I've said it, please feel free to say so, but let's not play a game of "got you now." We should be in this together, working always to put our best feet forward. Sometimes we might step together; other times we won't. In either case, we can best find our stride if we go forward with respect and care.

Respect, you might say, is earned, and there are things that you see me doing that you just can't abide. I can accept that. My way of proceeding sometimes breaks away from expected models for doing things. I know that. But I hope you think there is some value in testing limits. I don't much like playing the role of academic police, and I would guess that you don't either. Let's leave our police in the closet whenever we can. We will be better people if we do, people that others might want around.

As I said before, it helps when we have a shared commitment. I want your considered thoughts, so that we can be better together. I'll try not to make you angry with me, but I need to know when I do. I'll try to be sensitive to you, but I need to know when I am not. I'll try not to disgust you, but I need to know if I'm making you turn away. On a more positive note, I'll love it if you tell me what I've said moves or intrigues you, if it is of some emotional use to you. I'll love knowing if you entered the emotional space I was trying to create. I know this is asking quite a bit of you. I do need you to be receptive, open, vulnerable, reflexive. When we are connecting heart to heart, I feel we are where we belong. Isn't this what we really want?

So, please, give me something in return. I can deal with almost anything, but silence is by far the hardest. In relational terms, the silent treatment is called stonewalling. Building a stone wall between us won't get us very far. I realize that you are free, encouraged often, to do whatever you wish with utterances that come your way. You are entitled to do so. It's the postmodern go-to position, and there are some good reasons for going down that road. But that keeps us from creating something together, keeps us from connecting with one another, keeps us apart. I'd rather move forward by being present to you, by trying to make us work. I believe acting in this way, bringing an attentive sensitivity to our time together, will place us in the most productive and most caring relationship to one another. I hope you can go there with me.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of "standpoint epistemologies" see Denzin (1997). In the chapter entitled "Standpoint Epistemologies," he examines the assumptions of standpoint texts by focusing on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Gloria Anzaldua.
2. The infamous *Text and Performance Quarterly* special issue (January 1997) produced a flurry of CRTNET NEWS postings, convention programs, and published responses.



Appreciation

For an appreciative, compassionate criticism:

Aplaud

Announce your pleasure, even if minor, even if your disappointments seem to be pushing forward, even if you want nothing more than to escape. Clap as loud as a duck quacking for the bread spread out on the ground. Pound your hands together until you hammer in what deserves applause. Make sure you've been heard.

Beckon

Call forward the heart of the matter. Be pleased when you know it is near. Feel it beat in your hands. Hold it firmly until it pulses through your body like a drug. Become addicted, at least for a moment in time.

Confess

Tell what you would rather not. Tell about yourself. Tell how it entered you, how ready you were for it to come, how it has changed you. Remember, your critical comments always say more about you than the object of your commentary. Banish any fear.

Dwell

Inhabit it until it is as comfortable as a pair of your old shoes, as recognizable as your own signature, as familiar as your own dwelling. Drop into it, settle, and relax. Come to believe you are with an old friend.

Performance: An Alphabet of Performative Writing by Ronald J. Pelias, 23–27.

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Emulate

Learn its voice, its rhythm, its dreams. Live with it. Live in it. Wear it like a tailored suit, like a glove, like a second skin. Become its impostor, speaking from inside it as if you have always belonged there. Watch it become you. Then, return it to its rightful owner.

Finger

Run through it with the skills of an old librarian who moves through a card catalogue to see what is there. Learn its “a” to “z.” Find the drawers of its references. Bend to read the information you need. Caress the cards that matter.

Graze

Feed on it, content as a cow in a field of green. Invite others—some who are like you and some who are not—into your pasture. Chew on it, working it over and over until it is ready to digest. Ruminant. Then, start again.

Hasten

Lose no time. Remember, a life is at stake. Take responsibility for the actions that might be needed. Act quickly. When necessary, your job is to free the arteries, to do bypass surgery, and to massage the heart. Use electric shock only as a last resort.

Ignite

With enough effort, everything can be made to burn. Work your words until they are kindling. Find what is just smoldering and fan it. There can never be enough oxygen. Know how fire consumes, how it seduces, how it calls. Enjoy the combustion. Douse nothing.

Jump

Like a young boy who hangs frozen for the first time suspended from a rope over a deep water hole, know that you must let go. Remember that the moment before you drop is always the most frightening. Release your grip and plummet down. Know that the pleasures of plunging deep below the surface are what will convince you to jump in again.

Kiss

Following the extended glances, the flirtations, and the soft promises, bring it into your arms. Hold it firmly, looking into its eyes and feeling its skin. Sense its warmth against your body. Wonder why on this particular day a new lover has come into your life. Kiss in the bewilderment of it all.

Labor

Work your body until it sweats, its muscles loosen, and it can take all pain in stride. Work your mind until it can't be stopped, until it is electrified by possibilities and terrorized by failure. Your goal is to give birth.

Massage

Rub each word with adjectives, penetrating as deep as syntax, sliding as smoothly as the sentence, and coming down as hard as an exclamation point. Moisten its skin. As skin comes to skin, connect. Don't stop until your palms find the spine.

Nail

Even though something always will remain loose, nail down whatever you can. It will give you a house where you can reside. Decide if you want to buy it. See what improvements might be needed. Check for leaking faucets, cracks in the walls, and damaged floorboards. If you must, replace the roof with a new name.

Observe

Magnify. Bring it into focus. Place it under a microscope so that each detail will be apparent, so that its intricate life, its permeable cells, its genetic structure will unfold before your eyes. Then, stand back. Look at it through a telescope and watch its universe expand. Remember, everything, including yourself, wobbles.

Pardon

Know that it will only flourish if not locked up. Your job is not to police. Instead, be a compassionate judge. Excuse. Do what is best for all involved. Seldom does it make sense to remove someone from the family. No one should be put away and forgotten.

Query

Question only your motives. Wonder why you want to know what you do. Consider why you are pointing where you are. Examine how often you say the things you do. Ponder whether now is the right time and place to say what you feel you must. Contemplate how you say what you do. Reflect upon whom your comments are really about.

Release

Let yourself go. React. It is permissible to respond, to shed a tear, to become angry. Reassure yourself that by doing so you are only being human. Remember, being human is a fine way to be. Remember all the wonderful people you have known who have been that way.

Search

Assume you are on a quest for treasure. Cut through whatever forest you must pass; climb whatever mountain that stands in your way; navigate whatever body of water you must cross. Believe that all your efforts will lead to your reward. In the end, when you have done everything that you possibly could, discover that the quest was the treasure.

Trade

Everyone has goods. Give your beads for its bracelet, your bread for its wine, your sweat for its calluses. In the market of ideas, see what is there. Know the value of what you have to offer. Do not overestimate. The profit is in the exchange. Beware of only browsing. Swap your heart for its lungs.

Unearth

See what is buried beneath the bones. Feel for a faint pulse. See the life there. See it struggling to get out of its deep cave. See where it wants to go. See how to help it crawl from its bed, how to brush the dirt from its clothes, how to welcome it back. See why it is wanted. See who it is.

Vow

To the Muses, to Apollo, and to Dionysus pledge your allegiance. Swear upon all that is written that you will never use words to harm, to rip the heart from those who might be struggling to live, to work yourself into the center of attention. Swear this and more on the grave of those who brought you here. Make an oath. Promise everything.

Wrestle

Fight it to the ground. Let your body twist and turn around it as you try to pin it down. Watch it slip away. Know that you are in a struggle. Hope only for a draw. Realize that there will never be a three count—a one, two, three that ends it all.

X-out

Cross out nothing. That's not your job. Point here and there to places that seem to offer the fewest rewards. Know that in the pointing you are pointing to yourself. Know that the "x" blots out, obliterates, destroys. Know that the "x" yells "no."

Yearn

After you think you are done, cry for another chance. Return to the place of the offering and search for what you missed. See if you can meet again so that you can say what you need to say now. Remember, reaching out lives in the hope of a future. Crave what's next.

Zero

When everything is working, the sum of one plus one is one. One minus one is an empty whole. The sum of all that is said and done is what you can circle.

B

Becoming

A decision

to reach,

to listen,

to lean in,

a turned head, an earnest ear, a set eye,
ready,

ready to stretch,

to slide closer,

closer,

a search for what might be there,

filled with assumptions, habits,

ways of doing,

but guarding against the easy take,

anticipating,

relishing the familiar

and the strange,

wanting to find

the person in and between words,

the heart, located in desire,

the body, built with attitude

the reasons, found in the logic of why.

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An entry,

a taking on, part by part, a trying on, bit by bit,
 rejecting and accepting, choosing,
 breathing into the yes and the maybe,
 the turn of the hand, the sound of the
 named, the feel of the claimed,
 pushing aside the no,
 a vine wrapping itself around,
 wanting to know which way to turn, which
 way to attach,
 questioning, maneuvering, considering,
 playing, imagining, wondering
 if one might cling to another
 without damage, without danger,
 without dissent.

A knowing,

a performative claim an argument a case
 based in hard deliberation attention reflection
 following a decision tree: grounded, branches to
 branches
 stems to stems leaves to leaves
 until the parched is satisfied,
 an embodied act felt visceral
 based in the telling body the sensuous the somatic
 the heart's method: feeling the pulse, breathing each
 breath,
 waist deep
 until the head knows its heart and the heart knows its head.

A holding,

a firm knot, a keeping, an earned comfort,
sensing it as your own, inhabiting, making it a home,
settling in, finding comfort, a familiarity, a fabric,
feeling secure, knowing what is locked in and locked out
a set script, stylized, learned with repetition, found, figured,
a recognized habit, moving into the bones,
a worn path, remembered through sweat,
a deep cut, worked slowly into the skin.

A becoming,

the self turned, transformed, tagged as another, possessing
what can never be possessed, tailored to a shape, touched,
transported, standing in thanks and regrets, knowing what
is loss, what is gained, knowing only the translated trace,
knowing the triumphant and troubling trespass, knowing
the theology of the intertwined.



C **oncealment**

The story I tell of how my first marriage ended always includes the same details: After seven years of marriage, after surviving the year I was in Vietnam, and after the birth of our son, it was over in a flash. One day we decided to take in a film—Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford in “The Way We Were.” We were sitting in the theater waiting for the film to start when Ann started crying. “What’s the matter?” I asked. Through her sobs, she answered: “I’m leaving you. Tom and I are in love.” Tom happened to be my best friend at the time. The next day Ann and my son were gone. I was in shock—I thought our marriage was on solid ground. At this point I typically add a quick footnote to lighten the moment: We didn’t stay to see the film.

This story, in slightly altered form, is one I’ve used in my writing. It carries a degree of disclosiveness that is often found with performances of personal narratives and autoethnographic research. In this piece, I want to turn on my own writing to examine what is gained and lost by sharing what is often kept private. I examine how the “self” is often constructed in a positive light, even when revealing its most negative aspects, and how that positive construction of self, although perhaps deceptive, may function productively. In other words, I wish to look at some of the issues that surround revealing the often concealed in our performance and scholarly work.

Performance: An Alphabet of Performative Writing by Ronald J. Pelias, 33–51.

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