



Book Review:
Dance, Place, and Poetics:
Site-Specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing

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Abstract:

Celeste Nazeli Snowber's 2022 book *Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-Specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing* cannot fully be captured in a review. The book combines dance videos, sound recordings, poetry and incredible photos. The author offers a refreshing and rejuvenating yet radical approach to a relational understanding of ourselves and others, both humans and non-humans. In this text, I walk the reader through the book. I summarize and highlight the main themes and trends as they relate to curriculum studies.

Keywords: embodiment; somatics; site-specific performance; poetic inquiry; curriculum studies

Recension

Résumé :

Le livre de Celeste Nazeli Snowber, *Dance, Place, and Poetics : Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing*, publié en 2022, ne peut être entièrement décrit dans un compte rendu. Le livre combine des vidéos de danse, des enregistrements sonores, de la poésie et des photos incroyables. L'auteur propose une approche rafraîchissante et rénovatrice, mais radicale, de la compréhension relationnelle de nous-mêmes et des autres, humains et non-humains. Dans ce texte, j'accompagne le lecteur à travers le livre. Je résume et souligne les principaux thèmes et tendances dans la mesure où ils sont liés à l'étude des programmes d'études.

Mots clés : incarnation; somatique; performance in situ; enquête poétique; études de curriculum

Book Review

Snowber, C. N. (2022). *Dance, place, and poetics: Site-specific performance as a portal to knowing*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Invitation

As I walk you through Celeste Nazeli Snowber's 2022 book *Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing*, I encourage you to find moments to "stop, listen, and be awakened to the inner and outer landscape" (p. 6). As a dancer, researcher and somatic practitioner myself, I had the honour of studying under Snowber's supervision during my doctoral journey at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC. She embodies and brings to the book her creativity, joyful spirit and passion. The teachings and significance of this book cannot fully be captured in writing. It is a book that must be experienced, held in your hands, smelled, and slowly discovered.

Over the past 30 years, the author has been developing embodied ways of inquiry and a "curriculum of nature" (p. 1) within the field of curriculum theory and arts-based research methodology. *Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing* highlights Snowber's relationship to site-specific performance and somatic, poetic, ecological, and scholarly practices. This book is an invitation to embed the knowledge of places and bodies into the foundation of education.

This book is a visceral body scream that reclaims our totality as human beings: a call for integrating "the inner landscape of the interior life, which is invisible, to the outer landscape" (p. 21).

In her research and in the crafting of this book, Snowber centres arts-based research, curriculum theory and embodied ways of inquiry (e.g., walking, dancing, poeticizing) as the core of who we are as humans and, in turn, of who we are as researchers, educators and academics. Dance, place and poetics are what make us authentically who we are. As the author puts it: "Take courage to be yourself. Dance as if no one is watching. Move with your breath. Do not be concerned about what others may think" (p. 102).

I am taking up Snowber's invitation "to be receptive to what is before us and within us", to stay "open to the unexpected" and "be surprised by what emerges" (p. 102). If we don't stay open to the unpredictable, we miss out on the opportunity to attune to the wisdom and knowledge of the body. Pedagogically, the importance of staying open to the surprises of emergence connects with the art of improvisation and the lived curriculum (Aoki, 1993; Snowber, 2002; 2017); this approach foregrounds "what emerges in the moment as opposed to the planned curriculum" (p. 32).

Snowber softly weaves together citations from botanists, poets, arts-based research scholars and philosophers in an expansive attempt to dissolve perceived disciplinary boundaries. Knowing in connection with the natural world requires us to remain open to the unknown; the unpredictability of weather and of nature are central to Snowber's practice of site-specific performance. As she writes, "we are tidal creatures and creatures of weather" (p. 15). The teachings are always connected with

the learning that occurs and has occurred on site, through movement, poetry, and the central theme of call and response with the natural world.

Snowber calls us into dancing, walking, writing and experiencing this book as a performance act. She invites us to be receptive to what is already in us, what has been before us and what is in front of us; she invites us to respond to the *residences*, as Snowber calls them, which are in our bodies. It is an invitation to open up our senses; to listen, perceive, see and respond in new and surprising ways. Keeping this in mind, let's begin with an overview of the main signposts you will find on your path.

Signposts

Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing is composed of eight chapters, which focus on different aspects of Snowber's site-specific practice. The book includes poems, photos, videos of the author reading/dancing poetry and dancing in nature, as well as sound recordings from the natural world. Despite the strong focus on the non-human world, the author does not romanticize nature and does not shy away from expressing the challenging reality of working, creating and being in relation with the natural world during a time of ecological crisis.

The first two chapters serve as an introduction and foundational explanation of Snowber's practice as a "landscape artist" who walks, dances and poeticizes in a reciprocal relationship with the Earth. The site-specific practice described in this book is not about staging performances in a particular place, but rather a response "in movement to the subtleties that take shape in the moving, vibrant landscape" (p. 63).

Chapters 3 through 6 dive deep into Snowber's approach to a research-creation practice that begins with the body. In these chapters, the author explores the endless power of responding "to creation that is both living and dying at the same time" (p. 31). Snowber reminds us that we are "wandering into wonder" (p. 29) when we dance, walk, write, attune somatically, slow down and learn in reciprocal relation with natural elements. And all these practices are an invitation to let our bodies guide research-creation.

The last two chapters are an invitation and exploration of the body as a portal. I believe that dance taught me how to get in touch with my body, and my body taught me and keeps teaching me everything that I know. Snowber's words resonate with me and in me: "It is my feet which take me to the truths I need to reclaim. The body knows what the mind cannot always articulate" (p. 87). Snowber has theorized the body as a free GPS, "able to guide and direct us" (Snowber, 2017, p. 249; Snowber, 2012). The body helps us negotiate space with other human and non-human beings. The body guides us where we thought we couldn't go, opening up portals to the unknown.

Finding Tracks

In the previous section, I summarized the structure and offerings of *Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing*. I will now provide some of the main takeaways: tracks left behind on the trail. Although each reader will be called to different tracks; I have focused on those tracks that contribute to Canadian curriculum studies as an academic discipline.

First Track: Dance, Place and Poetics

As an improviser, writer, educator and dancer, I agree with Snowber's proposition that the practice of improvisation relates to "the lived curriculum and what emerges in the moment as opposed to the planned curriculum" (p. 32). These insights are grounded in the work of curriculum theorist William Pinar (1994, 2004) and Ted Aoki (1993), as well as of scholars who have expanded and shifted the field of arts-based research over the past three decades (Cancienne, 2008; Cancienne & Snowber, 2003; Leavy, 2015, 2017; Leggo, 2001, 2005, 2016; Prendergast et al., 2009). The expansion has created space for embodied ways of inquiry, including writing from the body (Snowber, 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2016b), autobiographical writing, and a "visceral expression of language and the earth" (p. 2). Arts-based researchers have been theorizing and writing about dance in connection to research since the 1990s yet, as demonstrated by the importance of this book, "it can still be a revolutionary act of transgression in the philosophy of bell hooks (1994) to integrate the body as a site of knowing" (Snowber, 2017, p. 249).

Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing convenes with the growing scholarship on walking, composing and creating (Hotton, 2015; Irwin, 2006; Lasczik Cutcher, 2018; Lyle & Snowber, 2021; Snowber, 2016b; Springgay & Truman, 2018), which generates a "curriculum of nature". Of particular interest is the connection with Irwin's notion of "walking the course" (2006, p. 77), rather than rushing through it, and of "walking as attunement" (Lyle & Snowber, 2021). Walking in nature might appear to be a solitary practice, but we are never alone. To dance/walk is a practice of attuning, paying attention, preparing for listening and responding to the call of the natural world or, as Snowber names it, creation. To dance/walk is a relational practice: a deep listening to the authors, scholars, and human and non-human beings that have left traces of knowledge within our bodies. It is through this practice that the knowledge of the body surfaces.

Second Track: Site-Specific Performance

Snowber reframes limitations as portals (p. 12); limitations are doorways to new discoveries. She describes how she embraced site-specific performance as a response to the perceived limitations of time constraints, and developed a practice of walking, writing and dancing in place, which has been nourishing her "scholarship, artistic practice, dances, poems, and performances" (p.12) for over 30 years. She also describes how she was able to shift the perceived limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic through finding spaces in the urban landscape to connect and reconnect with nature, to explore her surroundings and wonder at the beauty that once went unnoticed.

Site-specific performance is a portal into knowing that spans across educational and scholarly research. Snowber connects the unpredictability and vulnerability of nature with “the vibrant, living curriculum of the unknown” (p. 33). Throughout the book, Snowber brings us on a journey to discover her connection with water, particularly the great teachings of the shoreline of the Ocean and the “random beauty” that is Ocean’s curriculum (p. 46). In chapter 5, the author describes her artist residency at the UBC Botanical Garden in Vancouver. It is in the garden that “poetry becomes a philosophy of place rooted in the soil with multiple shades of green” (p. 60). I took up Snowber’s invitation and I went for a walk, moved in nature and reflected by writing:

Butterflies and shadows.
How do you
 fly
when the outside judgment is always telling you
 not to?
There is a garden inside my body.
An internal landscape I can always go back to.

I feel the influence of Snowber’s words in my reflections. She asks us to consider why it is that we are attracted to the imperfections in nature and so scared of them in our day-to-day lives? She challenges us to value the lines, wrinkles and scars on our bodies as we do in nature: the texture of tree bark, the twisted shape of branches, the cracks on a rock’s surface.

The teachings of site-specific performance, as Snowber describes throughout the book, are rooted in an understanding that we must be open to the yet-to-be-known. Site-specific performance teaches us to be courageous in letting the beauty of the unknown take over. Snowber investigates the endless possibilities that arise from vulnerability and unpredictability through this artistic and creative practice.

Third Track: A Portal to Knowing

Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing offers a radical reimagining of relationality in a time when we are increasingly divided. The book is a call to all educators, researchers, scholars, artists and humans to reclaim our wholeness. Snowber challenges the split that conceives modern science as the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false which results in a hierarchy of *truths*.

The body has often been conceived as the excess, the “too much”, the more-than of scholarship. *Excessus*, from Latin, means a departure, a going beyond, a surpass of the limits (Hoad, 1996/2003). To reclaim the excessive body into scholarship, as Snowber has done for the past three decades and continues to do beautifully throughout this book, means including all parts of one’s self. Snowber challenges the systems, rooted in colonial and Western worldviews, which have taught us—over and over again—that our bodies are not welcome because they are *too much*. Instead, she invites and urges us to let all the parts of our bodies be part of who we are, reclaiming our whole selves.

Conclusion

Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing challenges the idea of compartmentalization in academia and our school system. This book is an invitation to attend to the myriad modes of knowing by exploring curriculum as living through walking/dancing it. Dancing, writing and researching are presented as ways of being rather than separated practices.

In this book, Snowber offers a rejuvenating and refreshing yet radical approach to a relational understanding of ourselves and others, both humans and non-humans. Her poetic and rhythmical words dance through the pages, inviting the reader to attune to themselves and the natural world.

This book is imbued with potential and exciting avenues for discussion and inquiry. I consider this book an essential part of Canadian curriculum studies and a timely invitation to support authentic and relational learning, slow scholarship (Cutcher & Irwin, 2017) and well-being.

Perhaps, just like I did, you might want to go for a walk/dance, with a cup of coffee and a notebook in hand, before diving in. After all, we are given permission to take our time with the book and “wander in its pages” (p. 12).

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