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Practice-Based Research in Three Personal Turns

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Article abstract

In this contribution to the forum on Practice-Based Research (PBR), the author reflects on PBR "moves" throughout her career, identifying three moments when she could feel her practice change, in very personal and embodied ways. She reflects on the "personal turns" and the unanticipated methods and information that emerged.

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Practice-Based Research in Three Personal Turns

Sherrie Tucker

I. Telling Performances

My middle-aged but much younger self interviews older jazzwomen (about the age I am now). I write about, but don't play, jazz. Somehow, I get the idea that I need to break out my old flute and jam with musicians before I know the right questions. I think, "This needs to be part of my practice."

- I can't believe Professor Spencer let me into Combos.
- I am terrible. *Because I don't do this. Dub. . .*
- So why am I doing this? I will never know the right questions.
- I love my combo. Sometimes we "click."
- No, no, no—no one told me there was a recital.
- I hire a hypnotist who tries to curb my vibrato.
- I will never know the right questions.
- There are days when I still miss my combo.

Flooded with doubt, euphoria, frustration, flow, embarrassment, joy . . . leads me—not to the right questions (perhaps to different ones?), but more importantly—to a practice of "telling performances." Most interviewees played in big bands that never recorded. Except in their bodies. I notice when they describe a very particular memory of playing, something changes in the telling. Tell me more! Tell me everything you remember about that arrangement, that night, that performance. Call the play-by-play from where you sit or stand. Rhythm section. Trumpets. Bones. Reeds. What happened? Who came in when? What did you do?

So much gets told in these telling performances! All oral history is always performance. But in these moments of particularity, it turns, somehow, kinesthetic! I hear it. I feel it. I try to figure out what is exchanged and to write in such a way that some of the performance reaches you, too.

II. Torquing Back

Egad. How did I write an entire book on *swing bands* without so much as *glancing at* the dance floor? I thought I was in my body. I thought I was in the music. Let's listen to the telling performances of social dancers this time. Same generation as the *Swing Shift* women, all of us ten years older. Yet, *déjà vu*, somehow, I think I need to learn to swing dance to ask the right questions.

Sherrie Tucker is professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas. She is the author of *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Duke, 2014) and *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke, 2000), and co-editor, with Nichole T. Rustin, of *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Duke, 2008).

- Plus: I love to dance. Minus: I hail from the free-form acid dancing generation that considered couple dancing oppressive. We danced with the wind and groups and mostly ourselves.
- Hello energizer bunny students in vintage outfits. Can you help an old professor?
- Hello again. Remember me? I drop in from time to time, perpetually at square one. . .
- The body remembers what the body remembers.
- I ask a question at a conference. Dance scholar Christi Jay Wells takes my hand. A lesson in space, weight, velocity, lean, crouch, skeleton, torque.
- I never get good at swing dance. But I learn to feel when I am pulled off balance, or feel nothing back, or find myself turned in a new direction. I learn that torque is not a metaphor but an important concept for democratic practice.

Dance floor democracy is practice-based research grounded in the inevitability and necessity of weight-sharing and the different ways this plays out. Ways that harm bodies. Ways that aspire to, and sometimes achieve, mutual benefit that allow us to do together what we cannot do alone. Flying. Turning. I get better at understanding that I cannot see everyone, and that tomorrow night is different—the palpable, fleeting, incomplete. A practice. Because if it isn't, I fall into the habit of imagining I dance alone and analyze correctly.

Trying to write from many partial perspectives.

I write the book at least three times.

It takes fucking forever. I finally let it go.

III. Improvising Across Abilities

No more so-called sole-authored books. Besides, not many World War II-generation interviewees left. I'm fourteen years older, with a new ADHD diagnosis, and a memory less able to support delusions of expertise, at least in public. I want to play and talk about it later. I want to share weight among others and learn something new. Saying yes to collaborative research opportunities through Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP). Tempted to say "Yes" to Pauline Oliveros and her new project, Adaptive Use Musical Instruments (AUMI)—instruments that are free of charge, and playable by everyone. You move how you move—and you are a musician! All abilities. All bodies. All ages. No experience necessary.

- But I don't do this! *This is not my practice*. I don't do technology. I don't do disability studies. I am not a musician. I don't do the present. AUMI is cool, but it isn't me.
- Pauline: "What do you do when you do your work?"
- Ask for and listen to stories. Learn from musicians and dancers about bodies, difference, democracy. Everything I say leads back to AUMI research as something I already do (or want to do).
- Shocks of recognition: the absence of bodies from my field of vision. Where did children with disabilities go to school in my town? Which bodies (of any race or gender) are disqualified from today's definitions of jazz virtuosity, as defined by high school bands, university performance programs, and jazz careers?

- *What if* AUMI invites the inclusive practice and sounds of surprise that I love in the parts of jazz I love? *What if* its intended practice of weight-sharing is more inclusive, and *what if* it genuinely proceeds from the assumption that improvising across abilities generates new knowledge, new music, and transforms consciousness?
- I'm in. I still think I'm signing up to observe and write.
- Yes! Says Pauline. Welcome to the project. Start an AUMI improvisation group where you live.
- Improvising across abilities is not a metaphor. It is not a topic. It is a practice.

Starts and stops and awkward pauses. Humility. Finding people who want to play. Facing my own ableism. Learning tactics for accepting my ADHD as part of who I am. Explaining AUMI again and again: “it uses camera tracking”—eyes glazing over—until we play. And we do! Doing it in Kansas since 2011.

No way to write about it without doing it. Writing anyway. Playing anyway. Even if I don't write. Playing with others and writing with others. Writing because we want to share what we have done and learned. Inviting submissions because we want to learn what others have done and learned.

Our collectively edited book about what people do with AUMI is coming out soon!

Download AUMI at <https://aumiapp.com>.