Still Spellbound: A Critical Performative Response to *'STILL POINT'*

Bryant Keith Alexander

In this essay I offer a critical performative response to the informing construct, "STILL POINT: Meditations on Silence, Solitude, and Social Sustainability" written and performed by Elyse Pineau with videography by Jason Hedrick. The response attempts to match the poetic and performative qualities of the text under review while offering commentary and critique as a means of both celebrating and extending the heuristic of performance activism through collaborative autoethnography.

I spent 4 years studying with Dr. Elyse Lamm Pineau as one of her first doctoral students at the university in Southern Illinois where the silhouetted ivory towers cast shade across the farm's back 40—that situates and locates this performance as the backdrop of other performances. Since then, I have spent an additional 24 years (to date) still spellbound in studying the flows, tides, and transatlantic drifts of her scholarship; standing at the crossroads and confluences of performance and pedagogy; watching her at the play of wood and wonder; witnessing her eulogizing for innocence

¹ Elsewhere I have advanced the notion of doing a "critical poetic response" and a "critical performative response" that attempt to match the poetic and performative qualities of texts under review, commentary, or critique as a means of both celebrating and extending the heuristic of performative engagement through the response thus foregrounding performative acuity as the tender of both performance and the response to performance. "I use the phrase 'performative acuity' to suggest the precise embodied use of language to serve aesthetic purposes and articulate meaning" (Alexander, 1999, p. 107). Alexander, B. K. (1999). "Moving towards a critical poetic response." Theatre Topics, 9:2, 107-125. See also: Alexander, B. K. (2011). "Troping a dope: A critical performative response to Kashif Powell's 'Jena six project,'" Performance Review: Text and Performance Quarterly, 31.1, 97-108. In each approach, I see the response as a form of dialogue with/to the informing artifact and performer.

² Throughout this piece I borrow language from the script of the digital performance as provided by Pineau.

in meditations on art and traumatized children; and windowing her shadow boxing with myths and miniatures of home, all while she nursed mother and articulated absence.

Still, and more; glimpsing her haunted by ghosts and collaborating with an absent other as she engaged and studied in a mirror of her own with Anais Nin.³

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Note: A variation of this text was first delivered at the International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry, January 4, 2022.

³ These illusions are borrowed from the titles of articles and performances penned by Pineau. The series serves as a form of citationality as reference to her ideological body of scholarly work. I explore this stylistic approach in Alexander, B.K. (2021). "Exploring self with/for others" in Alexander, B.K. & Weems, M. E. (2021). Collaborative sprit-writing and performance in everyday black lives, Routledge, 22-41—in which I attribute the construction "citationality as ideological performance" to Judith Hamera. The Pineau bibliography includes: Pineau, E. L. (2013). "Haunted by ghosts: Collaborating with absent others," Special Issue International Review of Qualitative Research, 5.4; Gale, K. & Pineau, E. L. (2012). "Flows, tides, and transatlantic drifts: An emergent methodology of collaborative performative writing," International Review of Qualitative Research 4.4; Pineau, E. L. (2010). "At the crossroads of performance and pedagogy: A prospective review," Educação & Realidade, 35.2; Pineau, E.L. (2006). "Homesteading: At play in the house of wood and wonder," Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies, 3.2; Pineau, E. L. (2006). "Shadowboxing: Myths and miniatures of home." Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies, 3.2; Pineau, E. L. (2004). "Eulogy for innocence: Meditations on art and the traumatized child," The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade XXVI: 1: 6-14; Pineau, E. L. (2000). "'Nursing mother' and articulating absence," Text and Performance Quarterly 20: 1-19; Pineau, E.L. (1990). "Teaching is performance: Reconfiguring a problematic metaphor," American Educational Research Journal, 31: 3-25; Pineau, E. L. (1992). "A mirror of her own: Anais Nin's autobiographical performances," Text and Performance Quarterly, 12: 99-112; Pineau, E. L. (December 2005). Writer,

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All this and more; through her exploration of *autobiographical performance*, and now as an *autoethnographic performance poet*—persistently *involved in small-world-making*; ⁴ making words dance, and still-life made active and alive.



There has always been a lilt in my friend's voice, maybe a Victorian lilt with a Canadian influence, a controlled but fiercely poetic alto rising and falling of the voice punctuated by an articulate "command of language assisted by imagination and a critical intellect." As an auditor and active audience member, I have ridden the waves of that performative poetic on journeys to new and wonderous places and sometimes back to painfully familiar spaces to which she consistently ask me to attend, again. I have always been grateful; grateful for the ways in which her work offers a *generative to genealogical exploration* of gratitude through performance—and new ways of seeing and knowing. In this performance I feel the same, and more.

In the digital performance, "STILL POINT," there is a tantric tensiveness. Not a push and pull, but a meditative *reverberating* relationality between the moments and movements of expression that create a dynamic and yet uneasy stillness in the alliteration of silence, solitude, and social sustainability. This tensiveness sustains the core of the *distillation of art and argument* that undergirds all good performance.⁷ But also becomes *sin quo non* to how autoethnography is a

Performer and Co-director: "Shadowboxing: Myths and Miniatures of Home," a solo autoethnographic production in the Kleinau Theatre, Southern Illinois University.

⁴ Pineau's words from this performance text.

⁵ See: "All Things Victorian: Etiquette of Conversation" http://www.avictorian.com/etiquette_conversation.html.

of In her essay "Intimate Partners," Pineau extends my construct of "generative autobiography" (Alexander 2000) to "generational autobiography" to, as she writes, "stretch the generative to accommodate the intergenerational family of persons and tales that spin themselves out from encounters with the storied selves of their kin" (p. 42). Pineau, E.L. (2003). "Intimate partners: A critical autobiography of performing Anais." In Miller, L, C., Taylor, J. & Carver, M.H. (Eds.) Voices made flesh: Performing women's autobiography (pp. 215-236). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Alexander, B. K. (2000). "Skin flint (or "The garbage man's kid'): A generative autobiographical performance based on Tami Spry's tattoo stories," Text and Performance Quarterly, 20.1, 97-114. The relationality of our work on autobiographical performance is explored in Miller, L. C. & Taylor, J. (2006). "The constructed self: Strategic and aesthetic choices in autobiographical performance. In D. S. Madison & Hamera, J. (Eds.) The Sage handbook of performance studies, (pp. 169-187). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. The construct of "a generative autobiographical performance" is an extension of the same collaborative impulse through performative response.

⁷ Pineau's words from this performance text.

critically performative and communicative endeavor that shares an exacting account of re-lived experience in a public forum in ways that are both particular and plural; establishing a *template of shared human sociality* to which we can recognize, critique, and employ as tools and for personal insight for social transformation.⁸

There is a necessary and intended uneasy stillness in this performance in which I can feel the forces of willful survival and impending threat pressing against the dynamic of living; of being, becoming, and bereft-ness. These forces hold the body of the performer erect in a simulated still-point as a performative act of social grace, if not an Alias Grace for self and others. But mostly a performative resistance to that which most ails us all (a/lone-ness); against that which most threatens us all (the coronavirus and it variants); to that which reminds us all about the perniciousness of racism in the United States, and the political materiality of bodily presence that we must put into action. Putting bodies on the line to take a stance and sometimes to march across party/racial lines—in our together aloneness. Dancing a tensive dance collectively onto the head of a pin, point, (she says) to make a point about our joint humanity. 10



The tensiveness of this performance, plays in the autoethnographic poeticism of Pineau critically telling her story through the lilting voice and the languaging of the message, as well as in the intricate and delicate videography of Jason Hedrick. Each, Pineau and Hedrick, engage in a choreography of movement; each telling a story drawing the eye, ear, and senses to a miniature but magnified moment of living engagement (the engagement of living through COVID). In Movement #1 entitled "Small Worlds, Built to Scale," we are drawn into her childhood dollhouse that sits in her retirement garden. 11 The camera and the words draw us into the reality and fantasy of the everyday spectacle of flora and fauna,

⁸ I am drawing this construction from Alexander, B. K. (2022). "Teaching and engaging autoethnography as qualitative methodology." In Pasque, P. A. & alexander, e. (Eds.) Advancing culturally responsive research and researchers: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, New York: Routledge. In the chapter I also cite Judith Hamera's construct "templates of sociality." Hamera, J. (2007). Dancing communities: Performance, difference, and connection in the global city. Palgrave Macmillan, UK, p. 23.

⁹ Pineau staged and directed an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace* in the Marion Kleinau Theatre, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, October 1997 during my time at the university. And I believe Jason Hedrick, the videographer of "STILL POINT" worked on that production as a stage manager. Here, I also use the reference of "alias grace" as a critical pun to the performative construction of *grace under pressure* in—and the ways in which grace is performed as an alternate to terror.

¹⁰ Pineau's words from this performance text.

¹¹ Ibid.

the details of design as desire and distraction; as seclusion and occlusion; of privacy and safety. These are small worlds that she/we build and retreat into; that she/we build to *control what we can*¹²; taking he(r)/art to hand, taking spirit to song, and writing words that craft the realities of living: together, but now, mostly alone, in *a lockdown-countdown to chaos*.¹³

The images of word and videography are moving—moving between monuments and miniatures, and miniatures as monuments strategically placed throughout—relative to the imagined real. At times the images are still; yet the still images are made to move in a juxtaposition of timestamps and the locational politics of her in the garden; of her in the dollhouse. In the performance she appears as someone who is both seen (at times), with a carefully negotiated visibility (eye/gazing, silhouettes, hand-molding gestures, in/as a distanced figure and figurine, to the real and surreal images of everyday life.) But she is fully present in the narrating of experience as the camera moves, and the artist behind the camera parallels her artistry with his artistry; critical angles that capture the essence of being-there in a skewed reality, as our current reality is apt to be. All of which helps us to be-there in her garden; in her *dollhouse*—or in our own Ibsenesque *Doll House*—as we all "explore the lack of reasonable opportunities for self-fulfillment" in a dominated world. Dominated by what? What is your *bête noire* of domination—men, sexism, heterosexism, racism, COVID?

This along with the visual rhetorics presented by Hedrick's vivid videography of each moment that stands in concert, nay in dialogue with the poeticism of Pineau's words; and with the touch of her hands in/with/as a nature of survival. The visual and the verbal narrative do a dance; a choreography of movement through a prophylactic partnering, separated by the required *10-foot* distance. The camera lens only simulates intimacy; this along with a sheet of Glad wrap¹⁶, here and there, through which we might see an opaque reality; and

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Here I am making a reference to Henrik Ibsen's play, "A Doll House." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Doll%27s_House#List_of_characters. The reference seems appropriate to the challenges of the main character, Nora. But I am also using the reference for both the symmetry of signal, as Pineau includes her childhood dollhouse as a character in the performance, and as she also references two other literary texts in the performance; "Because I could not stop for Death" by Emily Dickinson and "Happy Days" by Samuel Beckett.

¹⁵ In the performance text Pineau describes a visit with her daughter in which she writes: "I could not hold her or hug her, or stand within the circumference of her breath, even. Instead, we stood 10' apart across the span of my kitchen, this body of my body . . ." ¹⁶ In this movement Pineau is shown in her garden applying Glad (brand) wrap to the open side of her doll house. Her actions are exacting as she seals the space from the elements, along with an exaggerated gestural act of cutting the wrap with a pair of

maybe feel, through a mediation of protection; a prophylactic intimacy of the visual narrative that entices but keeps protected—though touch is what we yearn.17

In Movement #2, "A Body Bereft," we are asked to feel into the performance more, to locate our bodies more with her isolated body in the garden. We come to understand absence and maybe abstinence; loneness and being alone; we come to revisit the pleasures of the body but only in their absence; from a distance, in isolation. We are asked to see and simulate pleasure as visual memory; learning to make sticky toffee pudding and 100 variations on cream sauce as pleasurable diversion, indulgence, experimentation, or maybe just killing time. 18

In this movement, her bereft body is his bereft body.

In this movement, her bereft body is *my* bereft body.

In this movement, her bereft body is your bereft body, and our bereft bodies.

All living in a chosen isolation through COVID—contained by the threatfilled realities of our own mortality as we listen to the daily body count of local, national, and international loss.

Through her body, and the critical poetic articulation of her experience, we come to understand that in our voluntary solitude [or otherwise], in our home confinement [or otherwise]; we are engaged in a commitment to community survival; decided deprivation in the social distancing of COVID-times as an investment to our future possibility—for self and other.

In Movement #3, "The Sound of 6000," she does what we all have been doing, though maybe not as conscious, counting. Counting the days, the hours, and minutes during COVID, during self-isolation, during home confinement, solitary or not; voluntary or not, as the price and the privilege of survival.

The pivot point of this movement for me is the recognition of *privilege* itself; self-isolation as a chosen act that she so clearly points out as an intentional politic. 19 The ability to do so, to self-isolate, is a privilege that I too share in the higher education middle class academic life that I live; knowing that many of the counted dead from COVID did not have that privilege to stay home, to work from home, to telecommute via ZOOM, and conduct business/instruction/professional activity or make-a-living from the safety of home. Many were not able

Lynn C. & Pelias, R. J. (Eds.) The green window: Proceedings of the giant city conference on performative writing, Carbondale, IL: SIUC Press, (2001): 66-77.

on privilege in "Engraving the silver spoon: A critical calligraphy of privilege." In Miller,

scissors that speaks to a particular volitional intent to hermetically seal and protect more than just the doll house.

¹⁷ See Alexander, B. K. (2004). "Bu(o)ying condoms: A Prophylactic performance of sexuality (or Performance as cultural prophylactic agency)." Cultural Studies/Critical *Methodologies*, 4.4, 501-525.

¹⁸ Pineau's words from this performance text.

¹⁹ I believe that Pineau began her important autobiographic and autoethnographic work

to voluntarily *not* be in the presence of others and the risk that it brings. As I sit (and sat) viewing this digital performance, I recognize the privilege of my own COVID confinement with the choices of presence and absence; of testing and access to vaccinations and medical care as needed, access <u>to</u> and an excess <u>of</u> food (drive through, delivery, and grocery store getting fresh produce in my masked weight-gain COVID convenience)—which is very different from every one of my siblings still living in southwest Louisiana.

I too am counting time; counting the days, the hours, and minutes of sounds, those heard in my self-imposed homestay and the muffled sounds of those still suffering and dying from COVID and governmental in action.

She narrates the sounds of 6000 hours and then she writes:

"When your Body is forced into stillness, reverberate.

When the world is broken, help gather what has shattered and sow it like seeds.

And when the sound of 6000 strong knocks on your door . . . open it."

In Movement #4, the end of the digital performance entitled, "Sundown in a Small Town," she takes us there.

There, outside of the dollhouse and outside of the garden.

There, outside the confines of forced isolation and onto the streets of social activism.

There. Into the location. Into the filmic rendering of that small town that reads as activist affect; ²⁰ a critically performative and publicly political stance as a displayed commitment to possibility in the face of a history bereft of transformation—bodies emerge on the line. Bodies bereft by the history of racism in America forced out of COVID isolation to march, declare, and declaim that "Black Lives Matter." This in a small town with a history of racism that is still palpably present. The documented march is a necessarily staged scene of revolution, resistance, reimagining, reparations, and redemption that is overdue. ²¹

I know this region of the country.

And I know this small town.

As a native southerner born in southwest Louisiana, I know of sundown towns where "Ain't None Allowed"; where Black people had a curfew of danger not to be out after dark, and thus to be subject to the threats of White rage,

²⁰ See how Harris and Holman-Jones (2019) write on *activist affect* in "Activist affect." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25.6, 563-565.

²¹ I am adding this line after the formal public presentation of these notes only to complete the thought sequence of the Black Lives Matter march in this small town. The alliterative phrasing is drawn from the section leads in Alexander and Weems (2021), Collaborative spirit-writing and performance in everyday Black lives. New York: Routledge.

racism by any other name. These were the lessons of my childhood and my adulthood as a Black man living in America and growing up in the South. These were the lessons embodied and enacted even when I was a graduate student at that university, where the silhouetted ivery towers cast shade across the farm's back 40 that situates and locates this performance—hers, and mines, now making us intimate partners in "the telling of the told."²²

When traveling through the town of this narration to drive the distance to visit family in Lafayette, Louisiana—my (Triple A) AAA Quick Trip Tik map (not unlike, and maybe informed by *The Negro Motorist Green Book* of the 1930's)²³ was programmed by request (and my father's beckoning) to NOT STOP in these "sundown towns" at night; not to stop for gas, not to stop for drink or food, not to stop to piss or shit; and when possible, not even to drive through these small towns at night—at all²⁴—to avoid the (Triple K) KKK of our historical nightmare.²⁵ And of course to avoid those un-sheeted brethren in small town America. ²⁶ Those who do the same dastardly deeds against difference under the smiles of "southern hospitality" and being a good neighbor.²⁷

²² A repetition of the line drawn from Pineau's text. Here I am also making a reference to Pineau (2003) "Intimate partners", while alluding to Pollock, D. (1990). "Telling the told: Performing like a family," *The Oral History Review*, 18.2, pp. 1-36. Here is where my current and past collaborations and encounters with the region of the text further resonate.

²³ Pineau references Victor H. Green's 1930's, *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* (also known as The Negro Travelers' Green Book, or simply the Green Book) which was an annual guidebook for African American road-trippers. It was originated and published by African American New York City mailman Victor Hugo Green from 1936 to 1966, during the era of Jim Crow laws, when open and often legally prescribed discrimination against African Americans especially and other non-whites was widespread. The guide served as signal and solace to African American travelers in unfamiliar territories https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Negro_Motorist_Green_Book: See the 2019 version of the book: Green, V. H. (2019). *The Negro Motorist Green-Book: 1938 Facsimile Edition. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books.* Also see the film, "Green Book" starring Mahershala Ali and Viggo Mortensen. Peter Farrelly (Director). (2018). *Green Book, Dreamworks Pictures.*

²⁴ See this website that attempts to document historical "sundown" towns in the United States of America: https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/using-the-sundown-towns-database/state-map/>.

²⁵ In this construction, I am juxtaposing the **Triple A** of the American Automobile Association in relation the **Triple K** of the **Ku Klux Klan**, an American White supremacist hate group. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ku_Klux_Klan.

²⁶ The notion of "un-sheeted" is a reference to the white robes/sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/kkk-robes.

²⁷ See how I engage the notion of "southern hospitality" through the artwork of Jerry Weems as "imperialist nostalgia... governing relations of dominance and subordination" as an idealized relational performative of the south" citing McPherson, T. (2203),

I live to tell the stories. I live to tell the stories of harassment and threat, stories of being called out of my name; stories of being taunted, tracked, and trailed even in the years between 1994 -1998, the years of my doctoral work.

I am heartened by the courage and activist affect of this digital performance, and of my teacher-colleague-friend, and the promise that it presents.



From beginning to end, Pineau builds an argument leading from "STILL POINT" to BOILING POINT at the confluence of COVID and racism in small town America, while she also maps the confluence of the personal and political.²⁸ Through a fierce poeticism, she reinforces the essential practices of voice and volition that necessitates survival before the sun goes down on these social crises that we are living in, and hopefully living through (both COVID and resurgent racism). This digital performance is both brilliant and bold, as it bespeaks of the

Reconstructing Dixie: Race, gender, and nostalgia in the imagined south (p. 9,) Duke University Press. This in Alexander, B.K. (2021). "Dreamscapes and escapedreams: An autoethnography through the artwork of Jerry Weems." In Alexander and Weems, Collaborative sprit-writing and performance in everyday black lives, pp. 72-85. Just a note: My engagement with the art of Jerry Weems is a direct influence of Pineau, E. (2011). "Intimacy, empathy, activism: A performative engagement with children's wartime art." In Denzin, N. K. & Giardina, M.D. (Eds), Qualitative Inquiry and Global Crisis, 199-217. The reference to being "a good neighbor" pivots on Pineau's diachronic use of that referent in this section of the digital performance, and the ending impulse of the performance that still reverberates in me. I find that the references of "southern hospitality" and "good neighbor" in this context have synchronous and complex intent that makes a farce of the kindness and sociality to which each allude. During the discussion of the performance, at this international conference, an international participant from Canada made a reference that also pivoted on Pineau's emphasis on "neighbor"; this through a Canadian-cultural interpretative frame of the word and Canadian-US bordered relationality. I thank him for his comment and in mentioning his comment, I am extending the dialogic nature of performance and performative response to him - and our joint experience of this digital performance.

²⁸ Whenever I use the word "confluence"—I think of the actual confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in Southern Illinois, 30 minutes or so, from the locale of this performative rendering of experience. A site that I visited many times between 1994 -1998 and reveled in the turbulent beauty of a confluence as a struggle of paths and destinations that leaves each forever changed: https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/im- ages/6261/confluence-of-ohio-and-mississippi-rivers-at-cairo-il.> I write about the more complicated constructions of confluences in Alexander, B. K. (2020). "A Welcome, a warning and a wish: On entering a doctoral program in educational leadership in the year 2020." Special Issue: "Higher Education in the Time of Trump: Resistance and Critique." Qualitative Inquiry. First Published August 21, 2020 https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420948086>.

best of autoethnographic performance-based activism, as starting point of intervention—inviting diverse viewers to activate their own generative autobiographies linked with place and space.



And after all these years in our shifting relationality; between student \Leftrightarrow colleague \Leftrightarrow friend, she continues to leave me **spellbound** in the power and politics of autoethnographic performance. **Still.**



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