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Performative embodiment and unravelling grandparent- grandchild relationships

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Abstract

This paper seeks to intertwine women's embodied experiences of wartime, dancing and chronic illness. The author introduces "Granny" through the unravelling rhythms of grandparent-grandchild relationships. Through narrative poems, the author shares Granny's dramatic stories of World War Two. Bodies are socially and historically located which therefore illuminates the ways in which her past is sedimented into her body and provides an understanding into the multi-layered ways her wartime, her performing bodily experiences and asthma encompass the past, the present and the anticipated future. The author reflects on the how some of these stories echo the breathless battle weary heroes referred to by Homer in the Illiad which is where asthma can be traced back to.

Key words: war, dancing, embodiment, narrative poetry, vignettes, asthma

Performative embodiment and unravelling grandparent-grandchild relationships

This paper seeks to explore the unravelling grandparent-grandchild relationship and the multi-layered ways in which bodies are socially and historically located. Co-constructed narrative poems aim to illuminate the ways the past is sedimented into her body and provides an understanding into the multi-layered ways her wartime, her performing theatrical embodied experiences and chronic illnesses, particularly asthma, encompass the past, the present and the anticipated future. Upon acknowledging that the body is the vehicle of being-in-the-world (c.f. Leder, 1990), I reflect on the how some of Granny's embodied experiences of World War Two are intertwined with dancing and asthma and highlight the visceral depths of asthma which echo the very breathless battle weary heroes referred to by Homer in the Illiad.

The vignette that follows, aims to give the reader some intimacy with the relationship between Granny and me and how this research came about through the rhythms of history that (unknowingly) flow through my family.

Writing Granny's stories

I help my 4yr old daughter fumble into her pyjamas and she darts into the kitchen where I hear, "Oh, hello! How are you? How was your day?" My Granny asks.

"Fine thanks, Great Granny" I hear my daughter reply.

"Eh, pardon?" My Granny queries and frowns in frustration.

"FINE." My daughter repeats loudly. Granny's hearing is getting progressively worse. She often defensively responds "Eh?" sharply, much to the annoyance of others who then have to repeat themselves and raise their voices. Granny gets cross with other people for "mumbling." Other times, when she's

watching TV, or speaking on the telephone she'll adjust or remove her hearing aid.

Granny awoke one morning to find that she had lost her hearing aid, only to find my daughter playing with it in the lounge.

“Oh dear, you don't want to be playing with that waxy thing!”

I share my daughter's eagerness to visit her Great Granny and love the homely, safe, and comforting feel. My daughter goes to bed without much fuss, which is always a treasured relief. I walk back into the lounge and sit down in front of the laptop.

“Wait!” Granny says. “Aren't you going to have some dinner? And before you're on that thing all night, can you show me how to view and save photos people send me on email, please?”

“Yes sure!” I jump up eagerly.

I'm impressed with Granny's enthusiasm to learn how to use the Internet. I'm only too happy to help her on her quest to find her way around modern technology. She loves seeing the family's photos and keeping in touch during the cold winter months when she doesn't leave the house much. So, we spend a good half hour or so figuring out what she wants to know. I show her, she has a few goes, and then she writes it down to remember for next time.

“Right, yes, thank you” she says. “Let's have dinner.”

We go into the kitchen and each dish out our shepherd's pie portions (I try and get all the crispy bits!). We pour a glass of wine each and take our trays into the lounge. Granny sits in “her chair” and I sit on the sofa next to her and we chat over how our day's been. Sitting down, breathing, eating a home-cooked meal and having a chat with Granny is bliss. It's an unusual pleasure just to exchange how our days

have been. She sips her wine and coughs occasionally. At one point, she has to stop talking and she coughs incessantly for quite a few minutes.

“Oh dear” she sighs. “Sorry about that.”

“That’s OK, Granny” I assure her. “What were you saying?”

“Gosh, I can’t remember now” she says. “Oh dear, my memory is not what it was.” I feel for Granny.

“Oh, don’t worry,” I say. “Happens to me all the time.”

We sit there quietly and carry on eating our dinners for a few minutes; I scoff mine pretty fast, before asking, “Would you mind watching my presentation tonight, Granny?”

“Oh yes, of course,” she perks up. “I don’t mind at all.” She moves into another chair across the room.

“Right, I’m ready when you are” she declares. “Remember, just... go... slow.”

As I discuss the injured males in my study, half way through, I suddenly hear groaning. I look up and see that she has nodded off and is snoring. I smile and laugh to myself thinking, “*Oh great! I’m boring!*” I give an intentional gentle cough to clear my throat and she wakes with a start as I carry on as if nothing unusual has happened. As I finish she says, “Oh yes very interesting. Just as I said, you know, go slower and speak clearly and er, not so many ums, but yes, very interesting.”

“Thanks, Granny,” I reply.

“You know,” Granny reflects. “I remember when I had an injury. I was 3years old and my whole body was put in a plaster cast.”

“Huh? Pardon?” I answer shocked.

“Yes, that was quite something.” She says quite light heartedly. “Yes, I had to learn to walk again.”

“What?” I reply. “You’ve never told me that!”

“Hmmm. Right, well, I better be off to bed.” She says getting up slowly from her chair. “And you better get to sleep too... don’t stay up too late will you. What time do you have to get up?”

“Um... er, 6.30a.m.,” I reply, still stunned.

“Right, well I’ll check on you at 7a.m.,” she says. “Make sure you’re both up.”

I sink down on the sofa and am left quite stunned at these new revelations of Granny. Granny had an accident at 3 and couldn’t walk? She had to learn to walk again? *My* Granny! Wow! *My* Granny! Why has she never said? Why has she kept that quiet? Why doesn’t our family share stories? I start feeling annoyed by the silences in our family. I feel annoyed by the way we never *talk* about anything. All the traumas in our lives and we keep them so quiet. *Why?* What other stories might there be? I start thinking about how little I really know about Granny and her life. I don’t really know much about our own family history either... where am I from?

She goes into her bedroom and potters about getting ready for bed. She goes into the kitchen and I hear the rattling of her tablets from her container. She returns to the bedroom with a cup of tea and I hear her inhaling her puffer a couple of times before coming back in and checking on me. As she pokes her head round the door I say, “Hey, Granny, why don’t you write down your stories? Or I could give you a dictaphone and you can record them.”

“Hmmm, yes, yes. Well, make sure you go to bed soon” she repeats. “You work so hard. You really do.”

“Yeah, I know, Granny. Don’t worry.” I say. “I’ll get to bed soon.” But I don’t. I stay up reading, refining my presentation, and writing more notes before collapsing into bed way past 12, fully clothed. I drift off to the faint sounds of Granny’s heavy laboured breathing and think about the thought of one day being able to write about Granny’s stories.

Introducing Granny

These stories were shared by my Granny (89yrs) at her home through face-to-face informal interviews, telephone calls, emails, text messages and **Facebook** chats between 2010-2012. During the interviews, she is concerned about “jumping around a bit” and not telling her story in a linear way. Additionally, Granny expresses that “not many people would know” what she has told me because there is “nobody around anymore.”

Every year at Christmas, she says, ‘I wonder if I’ll be here next year’ which sends sadness shivering through my soul. My mum turns away, perhaps scared of the reality that might face her.

“Aw... you’ll be here next year Granny. You’ve got to make it to 90” I reply with a smile and a comforting squeeze of her hand and she agrees.

“Yes, my brother and sister made it to 90... I’ve got to make it to 90 as well. That’s what I’ve always said; I’ve got to make it to 90!”

“Exactly” I confirm confidently, hiding my dread that she might *not* be here next year.

“Vox participare”

I wanted to share my Granny’s story in a way that painted pictures in the mind, allowing us to walk inside that picture and to step into someone else’s world (Sissay, 2006). Furman (2004) argues that, “the images inspired by a poem engage

the reader in a creative relationship that moves beyond passivity to co-creation” (p. 163). It was important to represent each person’s stories authentically in a way that also embraces the bond between us. I chose poetry to re-tell her stories, particularly because poetry allows the heart to lead the mind rather than the reverse (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009). I employed a poetic form referred to by Prendergast (2009) as “Vox Participare” (participant voiced poems) where the words from the interview transcription are used to form the poem. When writing Granny’s voiced poems, I worked to extend or accentuate the *meaning* and the *concept* of the poem through their diction, as opposed to prioritising sound, rhyme and rhythm. I now share Granny’s performative embodied stories through poetic representation. The poems aim to ‘weave together’ interrelated themed narratives of dancing embodiment, bodily disruption, and adjustment.

I just accepted it all

I had a very happy life. Then, something happened to me,

I had an accident; I was about 3,

Entire body in plaster,

“*She’ll never walk again,*” they told my mother.

Nothing very drastic at the time, it didn’t seem to me,

With nurse maid out walking,

Hands holding,

Very few footpaths in the country

Not much traffic either...

Coming one way, a single decker,
Another car coming another,
Thought I was going to get squashed, against the church walls...

So I *slipped* her hand to run across the road...
Didn't see the bicycle which went over my spine,
Damaged the base of my spine,
I got up and walked abode...

A week later, my sister noticing,
I was limping; in my groin, these great swellings,
Sunday, the doctor came out that afternoon,
To see what was troubling

Put to bed; a man made this plaster case thing,
Plaster case right round here,
Down here, on my legs to about there,
Birth chair made; strapped in to this thing.

Board for the bed,
By the window; people knew they said,
A mirror; as they walked past, waving,
I could see them; me waving back.

I was fed. Feeding mug, like a teapot,

I couldn't sit up,
Every day, doctor. Abscesses they tried to burst,
they couldn't get anywhere very fast.

One day, my sister,
Gave up nursing; me she looked after,
Tied up with new business my mother and father were,
New staircase built in. I remember...

All the doctors, family and everything,
Only way they could get in,
Coming up in a hoist through the window,
While they put this new staircase in.

When I was in the plaster cast; father and baker boys,
Carried me to the school to take part in a play,
I was just put down on the table or something,
I remember being carried up there, flat on a board or something.

At one time, my mother organised a Christmas party,
All the children round Christmas tree,
He came up the stairs,
Into the bedroom, "*Is there a Jane here?*"

Of course that was the end of me,

I screamed the place down, *aaahhhhhhh...*

I wouldn't shut up. I thought he was going,
to take me away you see.

I can always remember, I thought
it *was* Father Christmas, it was – Daddy,
I don't know why I screamed, I remember it so well,
Shame really; they had to tell me.

Great Ormond Street; within 6 months I was up, walking,
Father burnt the cradle as soon as I was out of it,
He wanted to get rid of it,
Keep fit, from about 5 - that's actually how I got very involved in dancing...

I guess I just accepted it all, I accepted it all.

It's never stopped me, from jumping on moving buses in London,
Always been nervous about crossing roads,
Even now, I always walk miles and find traffic lights,
I certainly wouldn't run across in case I fell over.

Bodily experience

The body is the medium through which people experience their cultural world and bodily experience reflects the culture in which it occurs and a bodily disruption is likely to heighten awareness of self and the way someone might make meaning during

times of such disruption (Becker, 1999). Bodies are socially and historically located which therefore illuminates the ways in which Granny's past is sedimented into her body and provides an understanding into the multi-layered ways her wartime, her performing bodily experiences and chronic illnesses encompass the past, the present and the anticipated future.

A Panter

I've always been a bit of a panter

No-one said, I didn't realise that it was asthma

Always told I was a shallow breather

Mmm... I still am, out of breath very quickly

I didn't notice it

To me I was just normal

I think now when I puff and pant

I probably think that I did that

I don't remember being quite so--,

I was dancing all the time.

The body is the vehicle of being-in-the-world and how we carry all our bodily experiences with us (Leder, 1990). Granny's embodied memories of war **that follow** and her descriptions of being "a bit of a panter" echo the way asthma was initially referred to in the Illiad by Homer who used the term "pant" to describe extremely breathless battle weary heroes (Saunders, 1993). Granny's shallow breathing movement was normalised and habitual for her and she also thinks that she would not have noticed her asthma because she was immersed in her dancing. For Granny, her

shallow breathing is part of the “habit body” (c.f. Crossley, 2001) and her asthma might have been a hidden condition lying in wait. As Crossley (2001, p. 127) reiterates Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) reflections about habit:

Habit is not a mechanical response... but rather a form of embodied and practical understanding or know-how which manifests in and as competent and purposive action, and which ‘attaches’ to the world by way of the meaning it concerns therein. To acquire a habit is to grasp and incorporate, within one’s bodily schema, a tacit and practical ‘principle.’ (p. 146)

Tied to the notion of the “habit body” is the idea that the body is the medium through which people experience their socio-cultural world, and bodily experience reflects the culture in which it occurs (Crossley, 2001). The “habit body” is thus situated in cultural environments which influence the way in which people with asthma listen for symptoms, which might involve minimising, ignoring or hiding symptoms (Crossley, 2001).

Embodied war stories

Circumstances of the war itself may determine and help shape people’s narratives, specifically, in this case, women’s narratives. The majority of personal stories about the Second World War have been about soldiers; told by men conceptualised by the notions of honour and glory. Whilst much poetry captures some of the embodied experiences and tragedies of soldiers fighting on the “front line” and in the trenches during the war, there are limited accounts of women’s wartime experiences, as well as the ways in which people attempted to maintain a “normal way of life;” encompassing the “back regions” of war (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, we can read *about* history, however, there are rare accounts of women’s *embodied* experiences from the war and first person narratives are very valuable

because they are the sites of personal meaning (Denzin, 2001). What appears to be missing from wartime historical documents, are these everyday life narratives of women's *embodied* experiences in the war. Granny's stories are about women's embodiment and her interrupted *lived experiences* in everyday.

The following poems appear to highlight the cultural significance of the female performing body in that social era during the war. There are both contrasting and similar representations in the poems between the (female) communicative body as a form of theatrical and personal expression, and the (male) disciplined military, functional, expendable body. The performativity of poetry merges the ways in which these two representations are shared. As Granny shares her stories with me, I get a sense that she "underplays" many of her stories. For example, this next poem is about how the declaration of war caused interruption to her life, symbolised through colour, sound, movement and imagery, which reinforces the dramatic ways people reacted to the threat and disruption of war and integrated this into their lives.

Entertaining the troops

Edinburgh; the king's theatre,

1939, "*War is declared*"

Landlady woke us all up,

Quite a family, "*You are to go*" producer said

all sent home, all theatres, cinema, everything closed.

Everybody wandering... wondering what to do,

Then... the sirens,

Nobody really got very bothered,

They thought they were just testing them out,
Nobody really worried.

Edinburgh in the dark, travelling,
On the train; all blue lighting,
Bombed any minute; waiting,
We didn't know what the war was gonna be like at all,
Everybody in good spirits, away chattering.

Telegram; out of the blue,
Hoping to re-open the show,
"WAS I AVAILABLE" Of course!
"YES, AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS" Telegram back.

Within about a week; back up to Edinburgh,
Rehearsing to re-open the show, a different show, geared to the war,
In digs; some air raids going off
Nothing, nobody really bothered,
First 6 months of the war nothing really happened.

Fantastic really, amazing, very big productions
Individual parts, one of the youngest,
I was very luckiest,
One of the smallest,
I used to get quite a few parts that were on my own.

When my name was in the program,
Send it home to my mother... obviously,
Don't know what happened to any of them,
Now, nobody's got any of them,
A shame, just one of those things you see.

In digs, in this tenement,
Down the staircase and sat under the stairs,
always these big stone places,
That's where we all ended up when the sirens...
Down there... then, back to bed.

One friend, one of the girls, another principal dancer,
Putting her coat on always; soft fur,
Sirens went in the night,
She was there; everyone did their bit,
We just carried on as normally as anybody could.

Quite a few air raids,
Nothing very serious,
Bombed very badly in Glasgow,
The docks and everything,
Thank goodness, I missed it all, we all did; we'd all gone home.

Glasgow again in 1940--... one,

That's when I met Grandpa...

Granny reminisces many times and trails off into thought when she's telling me these stories. There are many silences, which I think the gaps in the poems allow for. When Granny speaks about Grandpa's experiences, unsurprisingly this evokes emotions and triggers memories of Grandpa in me. Grandpa died when I was 3 years old and so these stories also painted pictures of who he was as well. During our chats, I say to Granny how "I remember when you moved here and I remember... I've got vague memories of Grandpa here."

"Oh yes, in fact, I've got pictures that you've drawn for him" she replies.

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah, yes I have," she repeats.

"Aw, I'd like to see them" I suggest.

"Yes, well you can. I know where one is anyway, definitely. Mmmm.... Oh yes, you drew him pictures and your brother drew pictures for him..."

I watch her drift into some place deep in her memories for a few moments... until she says, "um... I've your pictures here. Amazing. I must find them for you and let you see them."

"Mmm, yeah I'd like that" I reply.

As Granny tells me her stories in great detail, it strikes me that life was much slower in those days and it feels like that they were able to enjoy it more, despite the war. Nowadays, it feels like it is more difficult to really enjoy life, because of the technologically fast-paced life; sometimes life feels like a race or a sprint.

Nonetheless, Granny expresses much disruption and the sagas during the war. She

reflects and reminisces about a significant event, involving Grandpa in the following poem.

His ship was torpedoed

She was born, your mother,

War was still on, 9 months old before she met her father,

Up to Glasgow, with our daughter,

Stayed in digs that I used to stay in.

Round all his friends; very proud,

He always carried her; very proud of her,

I came back home,

Food from his ship; pram laden.

My brother had seen it in the paper, not me,

Everyone told they weren't to tell meeee, all knew apparently but meee,

"Is it true that your husband's ship's been torpedoed?"

"No, of course not, if it had I would've been the first to know wouldn't I?"

Disturbing, waiting outside for my parents; I remember waiting,

"Do you know what she's just said?" I said,

"Where is she?" they said,

"She's upstairs," she said, so she was told off.

I still didn't get suspicious,

Didn't really know he'd been torpedoed, the ship,
Until... from London; he rang up,
Another ship picked them up, could go, pick him up.

All he was worried about,
No stud for his collar,
Of course, he'd lost everything,
On the ship... absolutely everything,
All the things he was bringing back for her,
In New York; he'd had made for her,
There you go, such things happen...

doesn't it.

Only at sea for a few days, Grandpa said,
"Lost about 8 men, that's all" he said,
Submarines aim at Engine room; break the ship up really,
Always the trouble apparently,
5 troop carriers went that night off, apparently,
Ship was loaded with oranges, Grandpa said,
All he could remember was all these oranges floating about...

He died 26 years ago,
Unbelievable isn't it...

Mmmm, 26 years ago...

it'll be 27 in May...

It'll be 28 this year, here...

Granny's poems demonstrate the spacio-temporal aspects and the fluctuating interactions between the "front regions" and "back regions" of one's life and the importance of attending to the "back regions" with a considerable amount of dramaturgical discipline to "put on a good face" for the "front regions" of one's life (Goffman, 1959). Concepts highlighted in many of these poems (e.g., vocabularic identifications (identity talk – minimising/underplaying seriousness), passing (normalcy strategies e.g., carrying on as normal), echo Goffman's (1959, 1963) concepts about the way people employ a strict attendance to techniques to stage a successful performance in order to prevent embarrassment and disruption to social interactions; what Goffman (1959) refers to as "*impression management*" and "*dramaturgical discipline*." Goffman (1959, 1963) explains "impression management" by employing the metaphor of "dramaturgy," which permits a sociological understanding of the vital emotion of embarrassment. The body is the site where meaning is inscribed which mediates the relationship between self-identity and social identity: consequently, the social meanings attached to the expression of bodily display are an extremely important factor in an individual's sense of self, and in his or her feelings of inner worth (Goffman, 1959). For example, Granny "underplays" many of her experiences which is culturally significant during that period. Not only is the presentation of self concerned with the maintenance of a positive and convincing self-image, but humans are role-playing actors following culturally-formulated scripts/ a theoretical perspective (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, Denzin's (2001) appreciation of Goffman's work argues that we inhabit a

performance-based, dramaturgical culture where the dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance.

You waited and you listened

Grandpa; job in London,

5 pounds a week; paid his fare to London and kept us,

House; we could rent *half* of it,

Nobody living in it; rented *half* of it,

1 pound 2 and sixpence a week.

Down the stairs; kitchen, front room,

Upstairs; bathroom, front big bedroom,

She was in the little one at the back,

A little box room,

1 pound 2 and sixpence a week.

Right in the line of fire all through the war,

Your Mum says she can remember,

me throwing her into a garage when a doodle bug was coming over,

Doodle bug stopped; counted 10,

If you heard it land, that was okay,

If you didn't hear it land, it was *not* okay.

They used to go over all the time,

all these barrage balloons,

they used to cut through the wires,

There were pilots, aircrafts...

She was just a little girl when all this was going on really.

In the next house,

Already bombed; house next to us,

All like rubble,

I always think of it when I see Scabious, little blue flowers,

Growing wildly all over this bombed out house.

Indoor shelter; like those big blaze tables,

Metal; like a big metal table,

She had her cot mattress,

Right up against the wall,

Grandpa and I were slimmer in those days,

We had a single mattress next to it,

We used to go to bed in there,

that was it...

Hear the doodle bugs,

You waited and you listened,

You heard the engine cut out,

Listened... waited...

Rockets; worst things,

Didn't know they were coming until they landed,

Horrible when they went off,

Noise they made; so near us,

She used to scream

You know, just, she didn't like that at all,

Nervous all the time really,

Put on a good face,

You did go about; didn't just hide away.

Always there in your mind,

Until the war was actually over,

1945,

In the May, 1945,

Always there in your mind.

Rationed with food, very much so,

A lot healthier,

Restricted on what we ate,

I'm sure I over eat really,

I think everybody was healthier, a lot healthier...

As Granny trails off again, she touches on the ways food was restricted in the war and thinks that "everybody was healthier" then. I look at Granny sitting in "her chair" and am reminded by how much weight Granny has gained over the last

20years. As a child, I remember sitting at the dinner table, eating my tea, and looking up to see her as a straight slim figure, staring outside, inhaling a cigarette by the “French doors.” This was just after Grandpa died. She must have been about 60years old then and soon after she stopped smoking. I think about how much she has changed shape during the years that have ensued.

She continues to describe how war is “always there in your mind” reiterating how memories become deeply embodied. She refers to her disciplined dancing, routine and culture, and habitual restrictions during the war which meant that discipline was something that became embodied. She talks about how these habits were carried into other aspects of her life; these things stay with you. Thus, as Klemora (1991, p. 5) reiterates Merleau-Ponty (1987, p. 101), the body is its past: it carries the past along, “secretly nourishes it, devoting to it part of its strength.” Granny’s body, “bears not only its injuries and scars, but also all bodily memories and skills” (Klemola, 1991, p. 5) and the forfeit of breath (“shallow breathing”) that became part of her “habit body” (c.f. Crossley, 2001, p. 127).

Granny’s responses

When I give Granny the poems to read she thanks me. She takes them to read them in her room by herself. Later that afternoon, she emerges quietly and stares thoughtfully out of the window. I am not sure whether she has read them or not. She sits down in the lounge and I offer her a cup of tea.

“Oh yes, that would be lovely, thank you” she replies smiling. I go into the kitchen and pour her a cuppa and take it in to her. I sit down on the sofa next to her and sip my own tea. After a while, I eventually ask what she thought about the poems.

“So what did you think Granny?”

“Yes, yes, hmmm...” she thoughtfully replies. “Well, I mean, they are just so accurate. I don’t know how you remember it all”

Later that month, on the phone to Granny, I ask her to reflect on how this has been for her.

“So, how do you feel about taking part in this “research,” when I ask you about your experiences?”

“I don’t mind at all” she responds. “As long as I make sense in all the replies. It doesn’t worry me at all. No, no, you can ask me anything at anytime... but not if you’re desperate for money, that’s different.”

I chuckle to myself and thank Granny for sharing her stories and unravelling the rhythms of history of her performative embodied experiences.

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