Thinking Around Tenure: Ducking Under the Finish Line

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ABSTRACT: To find new *ways around thinking* about tenure track, we propose seven movements as a means to think beyond the limitations of binary, conceptual frameworks. A living inquiry in place, language, time, and self/other is the lens through which we experience the complexities and complicities of tenure ambitions; we point out the difficulties of a track which defines what matters, what is possible, and even what exists. Also, in the poetic and performative process of co-constructing text, we attend closely to the contexts and strategic relationships for performative knowing and exploring.

RESUMÉ: Afin de trouver de nouvelles manières de réfléchir sur un poste menant à la titularisation, nous proposons sept tendances permettant d'amener notre pensée au-delà des limites du binaire, au-delà des structures conceptuelles. Une enquête vivante mise en place, un langage, une période et nous-mêmes ou les autres, constituent l'outil, la lunette à travers laquelle nous voyons, ressentons les complexités et les connivences des ambitions pour la titularisation. Nous faisons ressortir les difficultés de la voie à prendre, celle qui définit l'essence des sujets traités, ce qu'il est possible de faire et même ce qui existe. Il est à ajouter aussi que dans le langage et dans la méthode performative de coconstruction d'un texte, nous suivons consciencieusement les contextes et les liens stratégiques pour acquérir une meilleure connaissance et réaliser un meilleur examen.

In Doctrine

You are amongst 80 newly-hired assistant professors. Welcoming you all to the university, the president proudly lists the acclaimed alumni of Oxford, Berkley, Harvard, and MIT amongst you (you notice that he skips your institution). Administrators speak to the university's benefits; the

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process for appealing tenure is reviewed; top researchers are showcased. Two hours later, you are still sitting in a cramped seat; your morning coffee sours on the tip of your tongue, like a word unsaid, unsayable. You want to spit it out, to interrupt the flow of self-congratulatory praise; yes, the university has a top-notch maternity leave policy, but it's too late, you're past the best date due; you shift uncomfortably under the weight of the not-so subtle colonization emanating from the podium; pre-tenure oppression settles in the chair beside you like an unwelcome guest, and you discover that you're insanely envious of the tenured English professor who reads Leonard Cohen poems under olive trees during her research term in Corfu, drinking ouzo.

But then they introduce the university's Teaching Award winners, who in 15 minute fast-paced segments teach their best lesson, and you realize, as your new colleagues visibly squirm at the thought of lectures and lesson planning, that you recognize these teaching strategies – your heart skips a beat. As a new member in the Faculty of Education, this is your area of expertise! The Assistant Vice President of student affairs (or was it financing?) speaks of Education as "an entry point into the souls of today's youth," and you rise to your feet, shouting, "Bravo!" It is only when turning around you realize that you alone among your new colleagues have been moved to respond. You slump into your seat, where for the next five years you remain barely audible until you have been safely tenured and standing out is no longer a risk.

Two Scholars and a Deadline

With university institutions facing (and creating) difficulty in their hiring and promoting practices (Berkowitz, 2009; Austin & Wulff, 2004), the call for non-tenured professors to speak of their experiences offers us an opportunity to "think around" tenure. Our desire to engage is driven by a hunger to articulate what has been an embodied experience, deeply felt as newly hired assistant professors, writing now from different coasts. Our collaborative response is a performative text. A performative or acousmatic text is one that opens spaces where readers may dwell, engage, and interweave their individual narratives (Daignault, 2005; Pollack, 1998). We are wary of deadlines and alert to the potential readership of our senior colleagues, all of which embody metaphoric (and literal) ironies, but we persist.

Gravestock, Greenleaf and Jones (2009) found that the three categories of teaching, research, and service remain the foundational criteria for tenure. Our intent is to enflesh with words the subtle and

not-so subtle institutional rituals, practices, and habits that actively dis/encourage new faculty members. And in this work together, we have learned the importance of *noticing*. What occasions, what corridor conversations, what rituals, what experiences call us to attention? What is noticed is a disconnect on what matters: between the spoken and the embodied, between the expected and the lived, between the desired and the received.

We propose seven movements of conflicting emotions to consider when thinking around tenure. Each movement is not identified and investigated as in a stage theory analysis; our purpose in noting the movements is to put into tension the notion of stationary thinking; to think around tenure in the way athletes, dancers, and performers engage spatially in their different locations. We hope to think around obstacles, noting that complexity is integral to our tenured environment (Fisher, Gingras, Jones, Metcalfe, Rubenson, & Snee, 2009); thus, we are always calculating imperfection, pitch, bias, nuance and so on, as we make our movements around the track.

Noticing What Matters

We engage in a practice of noticing what matters, a living inquiry refracted through a performative lens. Living inquiry (Meyer 2006, 2008) speaks to an inter-relational space of inquiry and pedagogy that pays attention to notions of *place, time, language, and self/other*. Drawing on Krishnamurti and Heidegger, Meyer writes:

> Living Inquiry is a practice of inquiry into being-in-the-world. It concerns care of oneself in the world. Living Inquiry encompasses how we experience our worldliness in every day living and what awareness as a clearing brings before prejudiced eyes – those ready-made interpretations that otherwise happen behind our backs. (p. 1)

A phenomenological engagement of attending to what matters requires that research be "intimately linked with you and your awareness of yourself and the world" (Malhotra, Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 5). Engaging in living inquiry requires that we become mindfully aware of the inter-relationships embodied between self and other within contextual situations where cultural, racial, environmental, linguistic, gendered, aesthetic, and political engagements matter. Engaging in living inquiry requires careful attention to our interactions and relationships within the contexts of our temporal, contextual, relational, and physical locations.

Focusing on our daily habits of engagement gives us pause: how do we care for ourselves, our work, and each other within the context of "noticing" place, time, language, self/other? Thus, in our inquiry into the tenure-track phenomenon, our daily experiences become raw data; our field notes co-emerge as conversational scripts and performative reflections. Through poetic renderings and performative interplay we tease out what matters and perform new recognitions. Our noticing and then writing to that noticing (also noticing our writing) are what co-create this text.

Securing our running shoes we set off at a fast clip of "thinking around" the tenure track.

Setting Up the Parameters of the Track

East Coast Author (ECA)

ECA: Okay, we're agreed. Seven movements: Anxiety, Disbelief, Paralysis, Acceptance, Recognition, Resistance, Recovery.

West Coast Author (WCA)

WCA: What do we mean by paralysis?

ECA: The inability to respond.

WCA: And acceptance?

ECA: You don't question anything. You just do whatever they ask.

WCA: It's recognition I can't get my head around.

ECA: That's when you see the game. You don't like it. But you go through the motions. See CV attached. Resistance is when you begin to question the whole system, you know something's wrong and you refuse to engage.

WCA: And recovery?

ECA: When you start to play – when you say, whatever, and do it your way.

WCA: Got it! Let's get it on paper. I have a meeting in 20 minutes. *(types furiously).*

ECA: Wait! Something's missing.

WCA: What?

ECA: Exhilaration, Perplexity, Exhaustion, Hunger

WCA: And these are important because?

ECA: Exhilaration – you get hired and you frigg'ing can't believe your luck! And when you publish your first article? Sweet!

WCA: *(whines)* But our outline. We've spent hours –

ECA: Hear me out. Perplexity. You don't understand why you can't keep up. Why every time you send an email, 24 more pop up on your screen. Perplexity is like a low-grade temperature. You keep wondering why everyone goes on and on about tenure when you've only just finished your first month on the job. You wonder what they know that you don't –

WCA: Stop! We've gone off track. Deadline's tomorrow.

ECA: And you're exhausted, right? All those committee meetings, essays to mark, writing grants, and what about your contract review? How up-to-date is your CV?

WCA: 2004.

ECA: You think you're on track, but you're running madly off in all directions –

WCA: Look, I'm hungry. Let's talk over lunch.

ECA: Ah, hunger. My point exactly!

How Did You Spend Your Day Today

> *I heard it said that how you spend your day is how you spend your life. It matters.* (Meyers, 2006 as cited in Lobo, 2009)

Stumbling across this sentence, our *west coast* author wonders, "How *do* I spend my day as a tenure track assistant professor? And is this day the harbinger of the rest of my life?" Such wondering leads to a rush of inter-coastal emails:

> friday, july 17/09 11:30am
> Hi Sean
> i'mhopingtofindtimetoworkonourarticle.ijustspent2hours respondingtoemailsfacultymeetinginfifteenminuteswhat's the deadlineforarticle? replyASAP.

After two days, Sean's response arrives:

> 10:55 p.m. Pacific Time
> – *what's he doing up at 3 a.m. responding to email? Doesn't he have an 8:30 a.m. class?*

Hi Lynn,
Sorryit'stak'nmesolongtorespond.Johnhasbeenherethisweek andweareworkingonourpaperfor*CJE*,andputtingtogetheracallfor chaptersforaneditedcollection,*WaysofBeinginTeaching*.Funny thingisthatwhilehe'sbeenhereworkhasbeenpilingup, even though we'vebeen doingworkallalong.Howthehelldoesthathappen? P.S. Formyson'sbirthdayyesterdaywewatched*TheTerminator*.Is achievingtenurelikebeingterminated?Onwhosetermsistenure? Arethosetermsterminal?Howterminalisaterminaldegree?Can wesay,likeSchwarzaenegger,"I'll be back?"
– *he has time to see a movie?*

Running the Track

Conversation 1.

*TT1: Hey, how was your summer vacation?
TT 2: Amazing! I wrote four articles. Submitted five conference proposals. Finished a grant proposal. Plus joined the dean's advisory committee! You?
TT 1: (*pause*) Umm ... I spent the time with my kids in our backyard pool ... (*hunches shoulders, slinks away*)

*tenure-track assistant professor.

Of the many ways to "think around tenure," the first are the traditions which call forth a chosen way, a track. We might "think around" this track in the same way an athlete runs laps. The track can define the training and its purpose, what matters, what is possible, and even what exists. The academic track is fairly standard: research, teaching, and service. How they are weighted matters. While administrators may insist that all three events are valued equally, we in our sweaty track suits know that publications in the top peer reviewed journals are our first hurdle. As new faculty, we learn quickly that we are running a track that is fixed, and while there may be multiple events, the one that really matters (as any Olympian athlete knows) is the 100-metre dash to press. Administration offers help (sort of)

Conversation 2.

Dean: How are you doing?
TT: Honestly? I'm overwhelmed. Today I've got the faculty meeting, three students to meet, a four hour class to prepare, an article due tomorrow, a grant to write by Friday.
Dean: Sounds like you need some advice in time management.

New faculty are under stress (Austin, 2002). The intensity of academic life is bewildering. As new faculty we are invited to relax, to get a feel of

the place, to take time to figure out our research program. Yet we immediately find ourselves writing research grants, presenting at conferences, working with graduate students, teaching new courses, putting in service hours, and seeking desperately to publish, publish, publish! There is a disconnect between what is expected, what is said, and how we engage. Consciously or not, we are engaged in an escalating spiral of "academic upmanship," that, according to Jones (2007), is not about to change any time soon. You know you're in trouble when you start wondering whether coaching your daughter's soccer team would be "good for the CV."

Jostling for Position on the Assembly Line

Conversation 3.

Dean: Your responsibility is to publish articles.

TT1: I research with three other colleagues. Do collaboratively written papers count?

Dean: Absolutely! Just make sure you are lead author at least once for every four papers.

TT2: Isn't the idea of first author becoming archaic? Why don't we list our names alphabetically and say that we've contributed equally on each paper?

TT3: That wouldn't be fair! My last name begins with — how do we weight the value of production in the academy?

Production speaks to an industrial model that seeks to meet demand and blacken bottom-lines. Normalizing such a model, Groarke & Fenske (2009) divide Canadian academic hires into first rate and second rate. This kind of categorical hypothesizing leads them to question why taxpayers fund graduate programs. The creation of crisis for policy change, as documented by Pinar (2004), reinforces the tenure track paralysis that we critique here. Hannah Arendt (1958) addresses the differences between action, work, and labour, emphasizing that it is through action that we engage most meaningfully. However, ignoring Hummel's (1994) "tyranny of the urgent," we dash around the track, the tensions of an unspoken dichotomy nipping at our heels. And should we question "the raising of the bar" we are presumed by others to be "slackers" unable or unwilling to keep up the pace necessary to cross the finish line.

But what is desired is genuine recognition of our presence within the scholarly community, an opening of a conversation that moves us beyond running in competition with our untenured colleagues towards a pre-

established finish line. In our own research endeavors (poetic inquiry and performative inquiry) we are shape shifters, eager for an agency of engagement that receives permission to re-imagine the academy. It is in our hunger for open country that we stumble in ruts made by the runners who preceded us.

A Question of Pacing

Conversation 4.

Colleague: How's life?

TT: Awesome! I just got my fourth article accepted!

Colleague: Slow down! If you publish too many this year and none next year, the tenure committee will wonder what happened to your productivity. *(wags finger)*

As in any blood sport, academic competition leans towards reliance on quantity: of research grants received, conferences attended, and articles published. Are we failing to understand (or have we forgotten in the name of expedience) that scholarship is arrived at by thoughtful inquiry, dialogue, engagement, and reflection? Is it not possible that for every year of multiple publications, we might welcome a fallow field, in which new ideas and research engagements are generated, pondered upon, and researched? What if, in lieu of a track, we imagine a meadow of wild flowers (Leggo, 2005)? Those who sit on promotion and tenure committees may shake their heads at a gross simplification here, but this is the experience of two who receive (and perceive) judgment. For us, running the tenure track, the imperative to "publish or perish" is like having an officious referee breathing down our necks, indifferent to the value of our play.

Does Size Matter?

The new assistant professor attends the seminar for new tenure track faculty. As expected, the three-tiered requirement of teaching, research, and service is emphasized. What is surprising is the size of the seminar leader's comprehensive tenure binder. Daunting.

He feels intimidated, a bit fearful, somewhat squeamish. He feels like he did when he first went to the gym and struggled with his measly five pound dumbbell while the woman next to him curled 85 pounders.

He hurries to Staples that afternoon. Binders that thick have to be special ordered. Apparently there is no general use for a binder this large. The sheer bulk, the very largess of the largeness helps him envision a

kind of academic supplement, something to replenish the body's energy after the rigorous workouts of teaching, research, and service.

Running a preset course may be expedient, and we applaud such athletic prowess as Chapnick's (2009) advice for preparing a teaching dossier. But we worry for the scholarly well-being of those left in the dust. What about the lingerers, the wanderers, the ramblers, those who are not on the fast-track bypass routed around the city, those who come to new meanings through contemplative strolls along city streets?

Conversation 5.

*SA 1:	So, how's it going?
TT1:	Well, what I'm thinking about –
SA 1:	Don't worry about getting tenure. You'll be fine. (*pat on head*)
TT2:	My work is about …
SA2:	Don't worry about getting tenure. You'll be fine. (*pat on head*)
TT3:	Is anybody listening?

*Senior Academic

Retreat to the Sidelines

Through disbelief to perplexity, exhaustion to paralysis, you cannot believe how you are responding to what you did not expect. This is not possible, you think, as you lie on the couch, day after day, in the season of February rains, you cannot walk, and later as March is pulled into April, you can no longer talk. Nothing and everything matters.

Conversation 6.

TT:	I didn't think you existed anymore.
12 YOS*	Perhaps you should read more poetry?
TT:	I feel like my life is going off track.
12 YOS:	Not yet.

*Twelve-year old self

It is quite possible that being on track and off track are entrenched in the same construct of meaning. The frustrated non-tenured athlete/academic imagines injury, pain, obstacle, strife, short-coming, and so on, all in relation to getting back on track. The track remains a fixed length by which measurement is taken, and whether on or off, it is the track that matters. If Yeats's (1920) poem, *The Second Coming*, can serve as a brief illustration, the point is that no matter how wide our circles, no matter how far off track we get, we are still circling the same pole. For the academic, the center holds quite well.

Conversation 7.

Colleague: Your vita is huge!
TT: I know *(points to a syringe)*.
Colleague: You could go into business.
TT: How do think I've been paying for conferences?
Colleague: Would you? *(points to his arm)*
TT: My pleasure. *(inserts syringe slowly into colleague's vein)*

As any athlete/academic who has *accelerated* his or her progress can tell you, the gains (think productivity) are not sustainable. In the on/off track dichotomy those who think alternatively around curves and obstacles are easily positioned as unproductive. The hard-bodied academic with the *sshrc-ed up* training routine is like the Olympian archer who hits the mark reliably, without error, without variation, without deviation.

And while the athlete/academic metaphor has been rejected (Pinar, 2004), and archery itself does not sufficiently illustrate the complexity of thinking (the target is hidden, the wind shifts, or we discover imperfections in our stance or in ourselves), it persists as a dominant metaphor in thinking about education as the pursuit of excellence. The phrase "sustainable work" hardly registers in a world that values "hard work," or encourages young scholars to "think harder." What does it mean to think sustainably, to think beyond the limitations of binary conceptual frameworks of tenure/not tenure, and to actively seek out those tenets which value the spiritual, the emotional, the passionate, the subjective, the intuitive, the non rational, the chaotic, and the sacred?

It is in the naming that you come to recognize the oppression that has borne you along this track. To step off the track, out of the race, has given you pause, a time to breathe, to listen to the beating of your heart, not in frenetic panicked response to what you should be doing, but to the slow rhythmic drumming of time and place and language receiving your return to what matters. Here, in the presence of your own being, you release expectations, and open your heart to what else could be possible. Paralysis slips away to a new movement that is a first step of our marking our presence.

This positioning and maneuvering for sustainable thinking is an ethical/ecological concern about how we get around from place to place and what kind of damage or tracks we leave; our motivations and ambitions leave traces in the places we frequent. For tenure, what are the ethics of movement, of propulsion, of promotion? How do we power

our moves to acquire more space, or more status, or more money? What wheels do we turn to teach certain classes, to be involved with important projects, to be nominated to influential committees? Who empowers us? Who withholds permission? We scramble to the top row bleachers to where Hannah Arendt, Maxine Greene, Paulo Friere are located, and shout out to those running the tenure track below us, *Beware*!

Conversation 9.

TT: I'd like to take some of the students in my critical pedagogy course downtown to protest the raise in tuition fees.

Dean: What if you made the front page of the paper? Or the evening news?

TT: That would be the idea.

Dean: Perhaps if you protested something that was not related to education?

TT: Something the university endorses?

Dean: Simply alerting you of the possible consequences.

Recovery Through Play Inspired by Hunger

We avoid eye contact, for to actually engage would be to confess that we have no answers, that the pain is too great, that our hunger dwells in places too deep for common conversation. You are privileged, I say, and you laugh. Tenure is not a right, not a privilege, why are you even imagining that what we are addressing is tenure? Could tenure not be a simple metaphor, one that appeals immensely, if only because it is so easily misunderstood?

Conversation 10.

Realtor: How's university?

TT: I'm still hoping for tenure.

Realtor: What's that?

TT: The holding of permanent office, possessing property.

Realtor: So you're still renting there?

We cannot change the topic of conversation because we are always thinking about tenure. Even when not thinking about tenure, we are. Stuck in the dichotomy, we tenaciously tend to yield to the tensions and tender of tenure. But perhaps that is the way round the dichotomy – not thinking – avoiding thinking – at least disbelieving our own thoughts. Perhaps we could inhabit our thoughts as renters, as nomads without stake or claim, no ambition or imagination, no machinations for our holdings to increase.

With tenure, what complexities and complicities need to be addressed? The notion of complicity is related to Gramsci's theory of consent, where those best positioned to make social change do not because they consent to the status quo. Is this a partial explanation for why literature critiquing the tenure track is so thin (Gravestock, Greenleaf & Jones, 2009)? We are simultaneously naïve and complicit in our desires to shape the environment that is the academy that is us.

The underbelly of academia is the attendant fear that governs each academic action. Will joining the Faculty Association be problematic? Should you question a senior academic's stance? Who is sitting on the tenure committee? How do you not offend? Who should you not offend? How can we not be offended?

As we write from opposite sides of the continent, a flurry of questions emerge in response to Maxine Greene's (1978) dictum that we must be wide-awake and aware of the ethical engagements that shape our lives, the ways and forms through which we engage. It has been said that a system is in trouble when only the newcomers are unsettled. Who are we if we allow ourselves to be judged by others? In the initial writing of this text we were so sure that it was we who were betrayed, who risked failure because we did not adhere to the rules of the game; sure that we should balk at the starting line because this was not our race. Responding to a visiting scholar at one of our campuses who advised, "You must play the game to win the game," we say, "We've already won." To say so goes back to our sense of play which identifies and shifts those factors that are part of the constructed impasse between new scholars and the tenure tracks they run on.

Tracking and Trackless

You are hunted, haunted. This is not a dream. You are wide-awake. Coming anew to agency, to deciding what matters: choosing how you want to spend your day in the unfolding imagining of the rest of your life.

Conversation 11.

TT:	I'm only going to admit this tonight, okay?
Beer Glass:	I'm listening.
TT:	Tenure trackers are too afraid to resist. We write papers, attend conferences, give lectures; our greatest action is to take over coffee shops.
Beer Glass:	Why?

TT: Because we don't want to feel powerless and ineffectual. By aligning ourselves with an institution, something bigger than we are, we don't seem as –

Beer Glass: Irrelevant.

TT: Cheers.

Our task of thinking around and about tenure has facilitated just as much doubt as recognition. The more accurately and exactly we think about tenure, the further away from tenure we become. How do we now navigate these academic spaces so that what matters is not the track but the possibility of multiple ways of engagement?

Conversation 12.

TT: Anything yet?

Mirror: Nothing.

TT: You'd think we'd see something. Do you see anything?

Mirror: Nothing.

TT: Should I step through?

Francisco Varela (1987) proposes that in the unfolding of our lives, in the doing of the work to which we are committed, "what we do is what we know, and ours is but one of many possible worlds. It is not a mirroring of the world, but the laying down of world" (p. 62). Our thinking around tenure has offered us alternative ways of thinking about the environment that holds us as we enact our presence. Davis, Kieren, and Sumara note:

> Far from merely existing relatively autonomously in the same location, individual and environment continually specify one another. Just as I am shaped by my location, so is my location shaped by my presence. (1996, p. 157)

What matters is that in our wide-awakeness we now recognize that we have the responsibility to shape the environment even as we are shaped by it. We have come to understand that we are the players, and there is agency in how we choose to play.

Hannah Arendt (1958) in her work about natality speaks to the responsibility of those who receive us. How we are received into academic locations that offer us an opportunity to inquire into what matters, matters.

How high can i fly before you reach out a hand
to halt this plummeting ascent. (Fels, 1999, p. 21)

Our trust (and collective responsibility) is that the institutional signposts that guide us in our trek to tenure do not simply designate a road to travel but are invitations to multiple possibilities, multiple ways to announce our presence. As Spanish poet Antonia Machado reminds us:

you lay down a path
and when turning around
you see the road you'll
never step on again.
Wanderer, path there is none,
only tracks on ocean foam.

(Machado, 1930, from Proverbios y Cantqres, as translated by Varela, 1987, p. 63.)

As the east coast author readies his surfboard to catch an incoming wave, and the west coast author kayaks to Wreck Beach, we release the finish line that has tethered us in our thinking about tenure. We are willing to engage in the shifting oceans that are our inquiry. As Osho advises:

Don't move with any fixed idea.
Go naked and nude
Go open and empty
And you will find not only one meaning,
You will find a thousand and one meanings. (1999, p. 186)

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