

Composing a Home Away From Home

Carrie MacLeod

*The questions compose the life. The composer shapes the questions.
The composition responds.*

When I first came to EGS as a post-masters Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (CAGS) student, I didn't know how to ask questions. Although I'd always been curious about the possibilities of arts-based inquiry, I didn't consider where questions actually came from. I had not paused long enough to consider what might actually happen if the questions came directly from an art-making experience. After all, the arts are unpredictable and can demand something that I might not be willing to give.

Then what?

To be unmade in the making involves risk; there are repercussions from traversing unmarked terrain. Certainty melts away as fast as the glacial spring thaw when questions are surrendered to the wilds of the imagination. Anything can happen. This spectrum of possibility is contingent on a deeper sense of instability. There are no guarantees that I will find my

bearings or even come to my senses when all is said and done. Yet, this discomfort comes as a timely gift and asks something new from me. For the first time in my life, I am given just enough space and time at high altitude to find the core question that will lay the groundwork for the next ten years of my life.

The search begins.

Do questions simply hover in certain places and wait to be found? Can I trust that a piece of clay will reveal something profound to me in the shaping and reshaping? Is it possible to let go of slippery perceptions and find bold lines of reasoning in the dark shadows of a charcoal sketch?

I begin to look for my core question and listen to the rhythm of my own breath in the stillness of the Swiss Alps. With each exhale, my hands instinctively move into body percussion. Suddenly the question of “home” arrives in the heat of my hands. After years of working and living with refugees in Sierra Leone and Canada, I am compelled to ask who is making a home for whom when entire livelihoods are disturbed and defiled.

As this question moves through my hands, I am reminded that homecomings arrive in unfamiliar forms. I remember the widowed women boldly singing from the borderlands even when their mother tongue is shunned. I recall the amputee dancer who reclaims his body through the pulse of phantom limbs. I remember the drumming circles that hold the communal weight of too many lives lost in war.

There is more to home than meets the eye. My core question transforms into a multi-modal inquiry as fellow students accompany me with body percussion, movement and sound. Others observe from the sidelines and know this roving invitation is not a fixed obligation. The beat takes over and I lose myself in rhythm to find my place with others.

I am not alone in my question here.

Years later I am on the other side of the picture in my role as faculty in the Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding program. Students from around the globe come with unresolved questions that beg for immediate answers. Rather than devising premature resolutions for complex problems, we animate the difficult questions through culturally fluent frameworks. Impasse arises when inquiries continually come from the same bodies of knowledge. Thus we reposition our questions in a range of art modalities to gain insight into crises that stem from protracted conflicts.

Finding new entry points into the questions is a rigorous task that may indeed ask more from us than we are willing to give. In this era of mass displacement on a global scale, the arts ask what it means to be more fully human *with* one another when homecomings are unmarked and unknown. Perhaps asking this question is itself a way of composing home.



Carrie MacLeod applies an arts-based approach to peace and reconciliation initiatives in post-war contexts and within refugee and immigrant resettlement programs in Canada. In Vancouver, she is the Coordinator for the Enacting Resilience project at the University of British Columbia and teaches in the Vancouver Expressive Arts Program. At the European Graduate School, she is on the Faculty of the MA Program in Expressive Arts in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding and is the Director of the International Centre for Arts in Peacebuilding.

