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“Presence” as the echo of your silence: A reflection on the 3rd Scenario International Conference

I-Chia Chiu[1]

I am standing on a mountain, receiving the swirl of a moist and strong wind around me. I let my hand out and touch the soil, reflecting on what brought me here. It is my first time in Ireland, yet the moment I touch the earth, I hear myself saying, "I am back." The words arrive so naturally, revealing a place beyond language, where time breathes in indescribable shapes. I came here for an international conference. After the conference, I left the city and followed the footsteps of a poet philosopher into the mountains. His name is John O'Donohue. Around twenty years ago, this Irish philosopher walked along the trails across these mountains, writing his way into the philosophical wonders of “presence” and “absence.”



Figure 1: The Scenario International Conference guides my hands to meet the paths across the Irish mountains.

[1] Please note that this is the author's translation into English of the conference report first published in Mandarin in the online journal of the National Culture and Arts Foundation (Taiwan), with the editorial support of the Foundation, under the tile “在場是你寧靜的回音：抵達愛爾蘭Scenario國際研討會”. I wish to thank John Crutchfield and Fionn Woodhouse for their assistance with the English translation, and Manfred Schewe for his kind editorial support.

“Presence” is a word that echoes throughout my journey. It was so alive at the Third Scenario International Conference. The call of the conference invites a reflection on the practice of "presence" and "co-presence”. These words stand on the intersection of interdisciplinary places, beckoning artists, practitioners, researchers across the fields to hold a dialogue with each other:

Presence /’prɛzns/noun

1. Proximity, vicinity
2. Attendancy
3. The ability to project an ease, a self-assurance

This was my first time participating in an international conference as a presenter, it was a surprise to be selected, as if I had suddenly been embraced by a very large community. At first, I had no idea how I would navigate the unknown thresholds ahead and present my work among many experienced participants.

In the mountains, the rain-marks on the rocks are an ancient language. I listen closely to the varied sounds of the mountains. In my hands is a book by O'Donohue, its cover featuring two words, *Anam Cara*[2], which hold a Celtic understanding of how one’s friendship with time can nurture one’s sense of presence. As I open the book, a leaf drifts out, its shape recognizable from a tree at Trinity College in Dublin, where I sat reading right before the conference began: “Time is the mother of presence. Our life in this world comes in the shape of time.” These words greeted me and nourished my wonder at the first line of the book: “It is strange to be here.”



Figure 2: In Trinity College, a leaf falls onto the palm of my hand.

[2] Anam is the Gaelic word for soul as Cara is the word friend. The phrase Anam Cara suggests soul friendship.

“It is strange to be here.” This line also found its place in a workshop led by Erika Piazzoli and a team of research practitioners[3] at the conference. In a room where the sound of seagulls waved through, the team invited everyone to walk around and greet each other using these following lines, “It is strange to be here. / Yes, it is.” As the phrase was repeated, the texture of our voices began to shift. Some delivered the line loudly with confidence, while some whispered as if there was a secret being shared.

This phrase, along with the shapes of body gestures it evoked, placed me somewhere else: Suddenly I found myself in the midst of a place of mystery, trees clattering, wind breathing, and the scrapes of light landing across my shoulders. At that moment, we acknowledged to each other that our encounter was full of mystery. To meet someone was entering a place beyond what words could carry.

The workshop remains unforgettable. The inquiry began with an art-based practice that invited participant-collaborators to embody words that were difficult to translate (such as the Mandarin word 緣分 yuanfen and the Japanese word 一期一會ichi-go ichi-e). This practice inspires educators to reimagine different approaches to cultivating cultural awareness. This brings me to reflect on the practice of embodiment: Through embodiment, people perform their cultural and social identity to express who they are becoming.[4] As the untranslatable words were embodied, a presence of absence was seen and touched. Like the tree branches displayed on the floor in the workshop, the body offers a quiet but gentle hold of the gaps between our native languages and foreign ones.

This workshop was one example of the 70-80 sessions at the conference. It was a multilingual, multicultural feast, with presentations in English, German and Italian. The three-day conference offered keynote speeches, performances, workshops, and paper presentations. Each morning, attendees would arrive at the reception and sign up for workshops with limited slots.

Near the reception area, there was an exhibition called “The abSENce-presenCE (SENCE)”—an invitation from the organizing team.[5] After registering on the first day, I walked over and recognized a book and one of my favourite stories: a short story titled “Eric” from Shaun Tan’s

[3] This workshop is "Presence as the Untranslatable", led by Erika Piazzoli, Serena Cecco, Modesto Corderi Novoa, Zoe Hogan, Jungmi Hur, and Annie Ó Breacháin on May 11th, 2024. The team has also shared their practice and research on an article published in 2024: "Performing Yuánfèn: An Exploration of Untranslatable Words in the Lacunae Project". Further information on the Lacunae Project is also available on Erika Piazzoli’s website.

[4] From Drama-based Pedagogy: Activating Learning Across the Curriculum by Kathryn Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee.

[5] The abSENce-presenCE (SENCE) exhibition was curated by Erika Piazzoli in collaboration with Dr. Tania Cañas. The artists were young people from Youthreach.

Tales from Outer Suburbia. For this exhibition, the team invited us to reflect on the idea of “absence” by reading this story and writing a letter to a character from it.

I still remember that moment— the sound of footsteps, the pen moving across a piece of paper. Someone was already seated at the desk, writing a letter with full concentration. I was drawn to this state of being. Presence meets presence,[6] so I decided to write a letter too. After a moment of silence, we finished and posted our drawings on the wall.



Figure 3: Letters on the wall

“Oh, you’re writing a letter to me!” We smiled and shared a moment of silence. Before we asked for each other’s names, we parted ways, each entering the conference. In this encounter with this new friend, I was so surprised that I followed my inner belief, survived the silence with silence. So often we were programmed to care for others by filling the silence with questions. We ask for names, we invite introduction of affiliations to reciprocate the others’ kindness and curiosities. But in that moment, I noticed that I endured the urge of caregiving with my breath, allowing the encounter to happen. Time took over this moment. There was a sense of unhurried intimacy. I recognized my heart felt content, so I could let go of the dependence on names and identities.

That quiet moment embodied the practice of co-presence through silence. It mirrored the delayed nature of language, and our contentment with that delay. Here silence was not a sign of stagnation but a threshold to notice our own habits of speaking, to allow a sense of ease to touch us, and to rebirth the rhythm of speech.

Over the three days, our pathways continued to cross in different places. I learned a name (Simone). I also learned about their appreciation for trees, their joy over the lunchtime cakes, as we dialogued into the idea of “presence.”

[6] From Book of Soul by Mark Nepo, Chapter 39 "Presence and Absence".

With "presence" in mind, I was also invited to wonder: How does the state of "co-presence" come into being? How is it interrupted, and how is it picked up again?

Months later, when Simone and I talked about that moment, she, too, remembered the letters we wrote. That instant of quiet connection became a lasting ingredient of our shared memory, a container of time that led two people to move from being strangers to friends. The gaps between words touched me deeply, reaching beneath identities and names. It made me realize that silence had also become a language I hold dearly.

Does the body also bridge the gaps between words? So often we try hard to listen, but if we rest our eyes on the speaking faces, we may find more aliveness. The being of faces could be far greater than the identity that inhabits words. Just as in the conference, the Keynote speaker, Rachael Jacobs, asked everyone: "What does your face look like when you are present? Where do you feel most present?"

In another setting, in Eva Göksel's workshop, we were guided to recall three languages we have learned in our life and draw them into a body map[7]. It could be a language in a linguistic sense, or a language in a broad and imaginative sense, such as music or dance. With Eva’s thoughtful scaffolded facilitation, we imagined where the languages might reside in the body. After drawing the map, we worked in pairs to come up with three images with our bodies, with sounds, and combined them into small performances to embody our maps and shared conversations.

How does language "inhabit" our bodies? In Ireland, I leaned in towards the language maps. I realized that the language of music could grow around limbs that play with instruments, the language of dance could move across muscles and bones. English might circle around in our throats while sign languages might make homes in our hands and eyes. On my body map, Mandarin and English were once in conflict with each other, competing for territory on the border across the time zones each of them carried. Now, when I think with my full body, not just with my brain, these two languages coexist more harmoniously. They flow like one river merging with another one. I still stumble in my practice, but I can be relieved when I simply let words emerge from the centre of my heart. This is an idea borrowed from the Mandarin expression “由衷”. It is a word for genuinity, as the pictograms of the characters literally suggest “from the center”. The words can come out naturally, not as a result of straining and hard effort.

[7] This workshop is "The gift of Presence: Cultivating a Teaching Persona for the Language Classroom" led by Eva Göksel on May 9th, 2024.

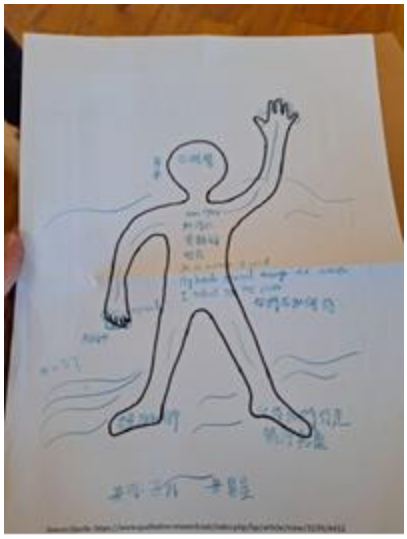


Figure 4: An image drawn during Eva Göksel’s workshop.[8]

It could be a challenge for me sometimes to find my own ease and a rhythm in collaborations in a short time. But my collaborator did not suggest anything for us. She simply took the lead in sharing about the body image she wanted to present. She gave me a moment to listen, so I could initiate a genuine question with my body: "How does my language want to dialogue with your language?" Just like that, a dialogue began. My collaborator’s legs made a jump on the wooden floor, and I heard myself mouthing a wind chime.

Languages contain the texture of light, the sigh of night. We’ve been growing up every moment since we were born, and every touch, hold, stretch and contraction of our body has its own meaning. A simple glance contains blessings. I closed my eyes. How many people's glances and smiles and memories of being together are filled in our eyes? I can't help but think back to the poet Natalie Diaz and her quoted words from John Berger:

> When the Mojaves say the word for tears, we return to our word for river, as if our river were flowing from our eyes…
>
> John Berger wrote: True translation is not a binary affair between two languages, but a triangular affair. True translation demands a return to the preverbal…
>
> We must go to the place before those two points--we must go back to the third place that is the river.[9]

[8] The template, as Eva Göksel shared, comes from the article written by Annelies Kusters and Maartje De Meulder: Language Portraits: Investigating Embodied Multilingual and Multimodal Repertoires

[9] From the poem "The First Water is the Body" in Natalie Diaz's poetry collection Postcolonial Love Poem. And also, Confabulations by John Berger.

Perhaps this also echoes what Rachel Jacobs mentioned in her keynote: “Our body is a site for learning.” For multilingual speakers, the body holds the bridge between the gaps in language, between what is translatable and untranslatable.

My body became my third language. When I also consider the language of the body as my mother tongue, I feel something large opening up inside me. What if — I wonder — what if breathing is also my mother tongue?

Our mother tongue wants to care for us, shelter us, and be cared for by us too. Words bring me a sense of presence, and the body calls for co-presence.

Ocean Vuong once cited Roland Barthes in his novel: "Two languages cancel each other, beckoning the third." In this conference, I wonder if the language of education can also be seen as a third language. Education carries a social and participatory significance that nurtures the dialogue between the Body and Language, although they do not necessarily cancel each other out. Participation is no longer about precise performance, but rather a unique process for each person—of “expanding, converging, and expanding again, embracing the fleeting moments of the present."[10]

I continue to wonder again: What happens when a teacher’s heart is cared for and touched? When hearts are engaged, it becomes easier for them to remember why they came in the first place. With remembering, they work side by side with us through the practice of courage and community across thresholds. As the educator Parker Palmer reflects on the idea of integrity, proposing: “How can we re-member who we are, for our own sake and the sake of those we serve?”[11]

In the past few days, I witnessed how people's faces softened. A slow landing. Many people's first language is not English, and Scenario is also a trilingual journal (Italian, German, English). I wonder if we all live in between languages, and if there is an echo of silence that inhabits this gap. I recognized that this wonder was also proposing that we continue to pay more attention to absence. The language of the body is like a lantern, holding things that words cannot deliver. This is exactly what I need. What was once silenced and forced to be forgotten can now be a library that allows us to be more sensitive and compassionate towards others, holding misunderstandings, fragile keepings, secret mourning’s.

[10] From Tzu-Pin Wei (Benny Wei)’s essay "Exploring the Process of Developing a Museum Theatre Piece by and with Young Adults with Disabilities:Take the Arts with the Disabled Project-Let’s Tell a Story Together with Luway Opportunity Center-as an Example

[11] From Parker J. Palmer's The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life



Figure 5: Leaves in hands

In the mountains of Ireland, I read O'Donohues's words:

> "Absence" is not the opposite of "presence", "absence" is the sister of "presence", and "vacancy" is the opposite of presence …Vacancy is a neutral, insensible, and blank space, while absence has real energy and vitality. Absence holds an echo, as its etymology in Latin means "somewhere else."

During the conference, I quietly celebrated. The role of art in language teaching needed no explanation—there are so many practitioners already recognizing the value of this connection.

There were also aspects of the conference that I am still trying to understand. As a first-time participant and as a learner of trauma-informed practice, I had quietly hoped for a more flexible schedule, though I recognize that the organizing team made thoughtful decisions within the resources available — just as the time frame also nurtured my ability to cross thresholds in the challenge of time. Meanwhile, I also find myself wondering how the conference cultivates a sense of belonging for participants with different access needs. For instance, I was curious about how the services of sign language interpretation were considered. What kinds of contexts and institutional wisdom might guide these choices, and what are the entries that could open new intersections?

Before it was my turn to lead a workshop, I rehearsed it over and over again but still found that I might not be able to finish the full plan within the limited 45 minutes. In frustration, I reached out to a tree. As its bark embraced my fingers, in that touch I realized that I could only let go of my resistance, giving myself to the life of the moment. When it was my turn, I looked around at the faces of these people. I didn’t know them yet, but these people already seem

familiar to me. The way a smile spread across my face might be the same way someone else feels theirs. The texture of the air entering our lungs, or the weight of our bodies resting on the chairs, was something we all could relate to despite nuanced differences. The clothes we chose to wear and the bag we carried each had witnessed our histories. It took a long time for all of us to have grown up, having left our homes, travelled all the way, so we could meet here. That’s how we arrived, and for that reason I celebrated.

In reflecting on my own workshop, I recognize something parallel here. In the workshop, people joined my wonder together: What if language can be seen as our friend? How has this friendship evolved and sustained over time? How does our memory of the body reflect our experience with language-learning? This inquiry intended to open dialogues about how the act of remembering might invite a way into re-membering – into being present again, especially when we are remembering something friendly. Now, with the co-presence of the community in the workshop, I witnessed once again how the sense of friendliness holds space on its own.



Figure 6: After a three-day conference, a group of new friends went for dinner together. These hands stayed as a central image. I remember hearing a friend joyfully explaining us to someone: “Oh, we are a bunch of language lovers.”

I met Rachel Jacobs again, towards the end of the conference, she asked me about what I did as a practitioner. I described how this journey had reconnected me to many things: writing, the art of teaching, my mother tongue, English, and people. The community. Listening to my stuttering, Rachel’s eyes suddenly warmed up and said to me, "Welcome home."

"Welcome home." This sentence can also be dedicated to everyone who is ready to start again and take themselves across the thresholds. No suggestion is needed; a single statement of witness is generous enough. Being seen is enough to bring us back to presence. On the way

home, I wondered: Who is walking in front of me? Who’s walking alongside me? Who is now walking behind me?[12]



Figure 7: “What are you researching on?”, “Myself?” a shared a moment of lightness, a laugh, bright and alive.

It rains often in Ireland; the grass is wet and green. The human heart is an unfathomable ocean. When writing, is it like fishing for a cloud from the ocean? You can't fish it out. But as we recall that we are breathing, every thought breathes with us. The clouds of thoughts gather, and form into rain when they are heavy enough. Like raindrops, the words come into being. And you, the reader at this moment, encounter these words. You and the words are reading each other.

After returning home, I sent a message and asked Simone, the friend I met at the Conference: "How did you land after you returned home? How did you land back to daily life?" Simone sent a picture of trees and rivers, accompanied by the sound of water, and replied: "Let me borrow something you said. You said: Breathe in, breathe out. That's it."

The wind comes from the rotation of the earth. There are our friends on the other side, and they are also breathing. When we walk, they walk too. The mother earth, a holder. Of footsteps, of breath, of words.

[12] This quote is from Michael Rohd of the Center for Performance and Civic Practice. In a training for teaching artists, he started by asking everyone to dialogue: Who walks before you? Who walks alongside you? Who walks after you?

"What are the small things we can do to invite us back to the home of presence?" The heart that clings onto things speeds us up. You and I have worked so hard to serve our future self, who is then caring for and watching over this present self? Through a touch and a dialogue with the body, which has been loyal to us all along, we remember that we are alive, and we are alive together.

Night arrives, breathe out, breathe in.



Figure 8: Life in the water