|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Special Issue: Interdisciplinary Perspectives | Body | & |  |
| on Breath, Body and World | Society | | |



Breathing beyond

Embodiment: Exploring

Emergence, Grieving

and Song in

Laboratory Theatre

Caroline Gatt

University of Aberdeen

2020, Vol. 26(2) 106–129

* The Author(s) 2020 Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions) [DOI: 10.1177/1357034X19900538](https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X19900538) [journals.sagepub.com/home/bod](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/bod)



Abstract

Due to the simultaneous linguistic and musical quality of voicing, voiced breath poses theoretical challenges to notions of ‘embodiment’, especially as they are used in theatre practice/studies. In this article, I make two intertwining arguments to address questions of the place of semantic meaning and conscious thought in performance practice/theories as they arose in my anthropological engagement with laboratory theatre. Firstly, theatre and performance practice/theories keen to embrace ‘embodiment’ often leave out things like explicit analysis, reflexivity, referential or semantic meaning and so on because, as my ethnography shows, they are judged as secondary, and thus belonging implicitly more closely to dis-embodied ‘mind’. I engage in anthropological comparison to show how other ways of being/knowing complicate any sense in which practices labelled ‘embodied’ can be seen as primary in contrast to conscious, linguistic or explicit knowing. Instead I outline an onto/epistemology of emergence that offers an alternative imaginary in which no binaries exist a priori. Rather all is a matter of ongoing mutual con-stitution. Secondly, while the discourses of embodiment in performance practice/ theory that I critique may continue to reproduce dualist assumptions, theatre approaches influenced by Grotowski’s anti-method, focusing on continual revision of practice, offer insights for scholarship concerned with the ontological indis-tinguishability of social, psychological and physical phenomena. Laboratory theatre practices offer a prospective way of knowing, enabling an exploration of the ontological equality of breath, in this case in song, and the sorts of meaningfulness associated with language and analysis. In 2011, my Nanna (grandmother in Maltese) passed away in circumstances that remain traumatic to me. I turned with



Corresponding author: Caroline Gatt. Email: [c.gatt@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:c.gatt@abdn.ac.uk)

Extra material: <http://theoryculturesociety.org>

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 107 |
|  |  |

to my daily practices to find ways to scream, to grieve: to anthropology and to a particular practice of song in laboratory theatre, where encounter is actively sought. Arising from ethnographic and analytic engagement with such practices, in this article, I offer an anthropologically inflected critique of notions of embodi-ment in performance studies and performance philosophy. I present the alter-native imaginary of emergence onto/epistemologies and the prospective investigative practices of laboratory theatre. I do this by weaving autobiographical, ethnographic and anthropological threads to explore my own practice relating to the work of my collaborator Gey Pin Ang, a Singaporean director, actor and pedagogue.

Keywords

anthropology, breath, correspondence, embodiment, emergence onto/ epistemology, laboratory theatre, song

Introduction

Due to the simultaneous linguistic and musical quality of voicing, voiced breath poses theoretical challenges to notions of ‘embodi-ment’, especially as they are used in theatre practice/studies. Scho-lar/practitioners of the Grotowskian tradition often mistake his work as implicitly advocating ‘embodiment’. The ‘paradigm of embodi-ment’, which in the anthropologist Thomas Csordas’s (1994) seminal definition is aimed at transcending Cartesian dualism, works towards developing scholarship that acknowledges experience as the ground through which our lives come to have significance. Current theories of embodiment have effectively displaced such binaries, at least in large swathes of the humanities and social sciences. However, as the anthropological exploration of breath that I offer herein shows, fur-ther attention may be required to understand semantic and analytic aspects of experience that have been removed from focus due to these developments.

While key figures in 20th-century theatre, such as Artaud (2010 [1964]) and Stanislawski (2015 [1936]) have looked to breath to explore how theatre enthralls its audiences. Grotowski, the theatre director most closely associated with the development of laboratory theatre in Europe since the 1960s, does not advocate a particular training for breath (Nair, 2007: 140). Rather he explores ‘action’, in which voice is understood as an extension of the reaction and impulses of the person as an undivided being (Flazsen quoted in

108 Body & Society 26(2)

Magnat, 2015: 153). Grotowski lamented how he had been dogged by the assumption that his work was physical theatre:

the body became a conduit…[yet] it was not the body in and of itself, or…, the meat (la viande) that was important, but rather the flux of living impulses within the body. Hence the point of training was not to foreground the physicality of the body but to render this flux visible. (cited in Magnat, 2015: 121)

Action, understood as an impulse belonging to a living ecology makes it impossible to separate out breath or air as primary in some way. Doing so would be similar to foregrounding the body itself rather than as an affording action. In what follows I make two inter-twining arguments to address questions of the place of semantic meaning and conscious thought in performance practice and theory as they arose in my anthropological engagement with laboratory theatre.

Firstly, theatre and performance practice/theories keen to embrace ‘embodiment’ often leave out things like explicit analysis, reflexivity, referential or semantic meaning and so on because, as my ethnogra-phy shows, they are judged as belonging implicitly to a disembodied ‘mind’ (Farnell, 2000). In much of this field of performance practice/ theory, body, affect and movement are understood to be in some way ontologically primary, and language, reflection, analysis and so on as secondary. To highlight the inadequacy of arguments based on onto-logical primacy for understanding voiced breath, I engage in anthro-pological comparison (also see Gatt, 2015, 2018a, 2018b): Other ways of being/knowing complicate any sense in which practices labelled ‘embodied’ can be understood as primary in contrast to linguistic, explicit or analytic knowing. Instead of arguments based on the ‘primacy’ of this or that human activity or practice, I outline an onto/epistemology of emergence that offers an alternative imagin-ary in which no binaries exist a priori. Rather all is a matter of ongoing mutual constitution.

The ethnographic material for the article is drawn from research as an anthropologist/theatre practitioner with theatre groups since 2001, in Malta, Italy and the United Kingdom, with directors from Malta, Italy, Poland and the United States.1 I anthropologically explore my own studio theatre practice, which from 2013 was coloured by my grieving for my grandmother, mother and then father. Here I focus on

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 109 |
|  |  |

this process especially through the work with my collaborator Gey Pin Ang (2013–2018).2 Ang is an award-winning Singaporean direc-tor, actor and pedagogue, who was lead actress at the Jerzy Gro-towski and Thomas Richards Workcenter for over 9 years. In 2006, she set up an independent platform called Sourcing Within,3 through which she carries out her theatre research working with Taijiquan and song. Through a collaboration with Ang I came to attend to breath and Chi which is key to the critique of embodiment theories I present herein.

Secondly, while the discourses of embodiment in performance practice/theory that I critique herein may continue to reproduce dual-ist assumptions, theatre approaches influenced by Grotowski’s anti-method, focusing on continual revision of practice, offer insights for scholarship concerned with the ontological indistinguishability of social, psychological and physical phenomena.4 The argument I develop therefore follows Grotowski’s legacy, Ang’s contemporary work on ancestral heritage, and my own process of grieving. Attend-ing to breath in song through laboratory theatre offers an investiga-tive process resonant with emergence onto/epistemology. Laboratory theatre practices offer a prospective way of knowing, enabling an exploration of the ontological equality of breath, in this case in song, and the sorts of meaningfulness associated with language and analysis.

Studying with Theatre Makers, Breath, Airs, Song, Walls, Muscle, the Dead

For good part of the 20th century much social science drew on Durkheim’s sociology in a way that depicted the domain of human action as disconnected from (or transfiguring of) the material domain (1973 [1893]). As part of multiple movements of thought, the separa-tion of the social from the material was thoroughly questioned and various alternative approaches have been developed in recent decades. Consider Haraway’s (1991) naturecultures, Actor Network Theory (Pfaffenberger, 1992; Latour, 2003; Law, 1992) and what I have called Ingold’s ‘ecological phenomenology’ (cf. Ingold, 1992, 2000a, 2000b, 2007, 2013b). In more recent times, the critique of the division between human and non-human has dominated debates in the form of discussions of the Anthropocene (Blaser, 2019; Crutzen;

110 Body & Society 26(2)

De la Cadena, 2015; Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Meulemans, 2017; Orr et al., 2015). The emergence onto/epistemology I introduce below is one of these alternative imaginaries.

In a nutshell, emergence ontologies understand the world as an ongoing process of the collective formation (Latour, 2003). Any ‘thing’ (read parliament) in the world mutually shapes and is shaped by its manifold field of unfolding relationships (Ingold, 2000a: 187). Such relationships occur in a single continuous world (Ingold, 1993; Latour, 2003) where persons and actors are constituted by their ongoing relations: this includes, but is not limited to, relations with other persons, but also with microorganisms, the air, the ground, non-human animate beings and inanimate persons or things. Differ-ent things in the world have specific characteristics (themselves in constant formation at different rates of change) that Ingold, borrow-ing from Gibson, calls affordances (Ingold, 1992, 2008).5

Importantly, in relation to the argument in this article against considering some states as prior to others, emergence ontology has a concomitant temporality. In the view of the ‘past’ as long gone and inaccessible in the present we find a particular understanding of, specifically Rankean historicism. For Ranke, ‘occurrences’ are ‘deposited’ at successive moments while time carries on (Hirsch and Stewart, 2005). Alternatively, Bergson suggests the notion of ‘dura-tion’, where change is immanent (cited in Ingold, 2010). Here the past is not any older or more ancient than the present, ‘the past’ is itself ‘constitutive of that very movement’ (Ingold, 2012). This is a temporality of emergence, in the sense that past relations are all present in the current makeup of things. In what follows I explore the explicit and implicit discourses of ‘embodiment’ in a set of laboratory theatre practices through the heuristic of this emergence onto/epistemology in order to highlight how the focus on song from an anthropological comparative perspective reconfigures attention to voiced breath.

Questioning the Primacy of Anything

When I first joined Icarus Performance Project in 2001, two things struck me. First, the director advised that we should not read any books by or relating to Grotowski’s work. The reason the director gave was that in his experience practitioners that read Grotowski’s

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 111 |
|  |  |

writings, but had no opportunity to work with him during his life, tended to attempt to reproduce what is described in the books, result-ing in clichés. Second, for the first year when we worked with song we only ever used gibberish that the director invented and arranged on tunes from other songs. Similarly, the reason he gave for this when I asked was that in his experience actors too easily fell back on the feelings or associations explicitly referred to in the words, rather than genuinely exploring what associations arose in the moment of singing. When I probed further, he also explained his reading of Lyotard, and also in a Grotowskian vein, his interest in the ‘pre-linguistic’ and ‘pre-cultural’. Here we find an understanding of the world in which factors such as spontaneous (as opposed to clichéd) feelings are closer to some common or original humanity, and language and culture are later developments, even secondary and added on top.

When it comes to ‘affect theory’, in, for instance, Deleuze (1997), Guattari (1996) and Massumi (1995), we find a similar focus on what comes first, especially in the division between affect and emotion. Here I have space to offer only one example. Consider the following citation from Guattari (1996: 88), where after lamenting that art theory affect is conflated with emotion he writes: ‘An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into func-tion and meaning’. Note here how emotion is described as a second stage, coming after affect in experience. As elsewhere in this piece, Guattari talks about affect not only as different from symbolic (‘in its relation to language [when] they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined (linguistically, logically, narratologically, ideologically, or all of these in combination, as a Symbolic)’ p. 87), but also as prior and language, symbolism or semiosis being a sign that we have moved from affect to emotion (see p. 87). In Guattari, affect is understood as a primary state on the basis of which, and only on the basis of which, any further ‘dimen-sion’, such as language, emotion or the subject can emerge. The same insistence is found explicitly in Thrift’s (2008) work on non-representational theory, where he precisely argues that researchers

112 Body & Society 26(2)

should attend to non- or pre-representational registers in other words ‘affect’. And in anthropology, more recent studies deploying affect theory such as Navarro-Yashin’s (2009) work on ruined landscapes in Cyprus, which offers a detailed analysis of the concept of affect, nonetheless does not question this implicit ontology of primacy. She writes ‘Deleuze is referring to sensual intensities that may move through human bodies, but that do not necessarily emerge from them’ (Navarro-Yashin, 2009: 15) whereas language, cognition and the experience of subjectivity apparently do. Current developments in the field of biosemiotics show the anthropocentrism and conco-mitant Cartesian binaries that remain with this division of the sig-nifying human from the rest of the non-human world (Giraldo Herrera, 2018; Geraldo Herrera and Pálsson, 2016).

Importantly, in relation to the Grotowskian anti-method I mention in the ‘Introduction’ section, these are views Icarus Performance Project director argues against today (cf. Camilleri, 2019). However, I have repeatedly encountered this idea in theatre workshops: The understanding that spontaneity is somehow tarnished or blocked by analytic or referential thought. With nearly all the theatre directors I worked with there is a pedagogical preference for teaching through mimesis rather than instruction and an aversion for academic analysis at least as part of studio performance research. These approaches are theorised in performance studies as grounded in notions of embodi-ment, very often drawing on the seminal work of Zarilli (2004).

In Zarilli’s (2004) seminal text for performance studies, where through the concept of the bodymind, the lineage of which he does not discuss in this article, we find another attempt to transcend that Cartesian dualism. Thanks to Zarilli’s experience in kathakali, this article includes a discussion of breath that resonates with Ang’s, as we shall see below, on how breath draws attention to, and may offer ways of knowing, parts of the self that other ways of knowing do not necessarily offer. However, unlike Ang’s hesitation to discuss what things are, Zarilli, drawing directly from Merleau-Ponty, we still find the universalised ‘body’ (Lock and Farquhar, 2007), one that accord-ing to Zarilli should include Indian, Chinese or Japanese notions such as Prana, chi and ki, but without raising the questions of con-tingency, or ontological politics.

My collaborator Gey Pin Ang, whose work I discuss in the next section, similarly pins her discourse on the notion of ‘embodiment’

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 113 |
|  |  |

(Ang, 2017). In none of these examples, however, is the notion of embodiment analysed in any critical depth.

The insistence of the primacy of a particular category, in this case bodily or material and not cognitive, is a direct reversal of Cartesian hierarchy of mind over body. What it is not is a transcendence of viewing the two as separate, opposed categories. Considering things such as conscious reflection, analytical thought, referential knowl-edge and so many other practices as coming after so-called embodi-ment or affect has the effect of reducing attentiveness to and understanding of how voiced breath in song actually moves both singers and audiences. However, as Viginie Magnat (2013) has argued laboratory theatre enacts a scholarship of emergence, even if its discourses may not (Gatt, 2017b).

The essential innovation to be pointed out in emergence onto/ epistemology is that when everything is engaged in ongoing multi-faceted formative relationships, primacy, which it has been argued elsewhere is anyway a circular explanation (Ingold, 2000a), becomes a redundant preoccupation. The very world is constantly being made, and in this neither the so-called body nor mind are primary. What-ever processes are at play in a particular place at a particular time generate distinguishable ecologies of experience, in which activities such as reading, analysis, jumping, feeding the ancestors, theatrical improvisation, song, writing, remembering, re-enacting, repeating, sweating, selves either forming individual subjectivities (Humphrey, 2008) or dispersing in hive minds (Parrika, 2010) and so on and so forth need to be explored in their specific contexts. As Haraway writes in her Companion Species Manifesto (2003: 21), ‘I tell stories about stories, all the way down. Woof’ (pace Irigary, 1999).

But I seem to have lost my breath. In fact in much of what I discuss above there is scant attention to breath. So in what follows I return to breath to explore one such ecology of experience where symbolic, refer-ential, linguistic consciousness is not a secondary ontological step.

Meeting Nanna through Song

In 2013, I participated in a workshop with Ang in Avellino, Italy. Since then Ang has gone on to become a close collaborator and mentor, but this was the first time I participated in one of her Sour-cing Within Worksessions. The workshop in which I participated was

114 Body & Society 26(2)

one of a series where she proposes topics and offers directorial guidance to performers interested in her approach. Performers, often with relatively little means at their disposal, travel considerable dis-tances to participate in these workshops. ‘Sourcing Within’ incorpo-rates her own research as well as offering a platform for performers and other artists who follow her work and repeatedly participate in her Sourcing Within Worksessions.

Although the worksessions never follow any fixed routine, three elements are always included in some way: work with flow, includ-ing but not limited to Taijiquan, working with song and individual performance materials. In the afternoon of the first day, having worked on Taijiquan, song and group improvisation with words and actions in the morning all the participants, including Ang, spent some time working on their individual performance materials. I worked on mine too, which I had been preparing for the past month in Aberdeen.

The workshop was being held in the vaulted basement which was the temporary seat of a local theatre group. The group had occupied two of the rooms in these sprawling, dusty, otherwise unoccupied premises. After some time spread out working on our own, we were called back to the main room where Ang asked us to present our individual works one by one. I presented my solo étude, which included a lullaby my grandmother had sung to me when I was a small child. My Nanna (grandmother in Maltese) had passed away 11 months earlier and I was working with her song as a way to grieve and revisit my memories of her.

After I presented my étude, Ang asked whether I had learnt the song from someone, and I explained that my grandmother had taught it to me. She came towards me and asked very quietly, so only I could hear, whether I had a good relationship with her. I said yes and then she suggested, now in a voice that was audible to the others too, that I repeat my étude remembering how my grandmother moved and thinking the text of the song in Maltese, even while I sang the words in Italian. ‘What would her voice have been like when she was young?’ she suggested I explore. I sat for a brief moment on a stool, and then I began to say my text in the position I remembered her sitting in front of TV in the home where I grew up. Her gestures came alive to me as I sat in that posture. I felt her voice, her look, her densities inhabiting my own and changing my own shapes. Of

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gatt | | 115 | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |



Figure 1. Nanna Mariuccia Lowell, ne´e Mallia Pulvirenti, as a child, seated with her father, mother and brother. Circa 1918.

course, I wept streams of tears while I continued to work on the text and the song, as I weep now writing these memories of memories. Ang did not try to prevent or block my tears, nor stimulate any emotional response, she suggested simple tasks (Figure 1).6

Ang suggested that I allow the singing and the speaking to stop and start with my breath as it rose and fell. Later, she described how the words we speak can have so many associations in ourselves, so many meanings and effects on us. While she said this she traced a line with her index finger in front of her torso, looking like the needle of a seismograph. Each breathed word affects us in many diverse and multiple ways.

Although the song I was singing and the texts I was working with were not what Grotowski referred to as ‘vibratory song’, there is a quality of Ang’s work that reminds me precisely of Grotowski’s interest in that subject. According to Grotowski, we can recognise vibratory songs because they have persisted over the centuries

116 Body & Society 26(2)

(Grotowski, 1997). These songs embody particular resonances that move the people who sing them and is the reason for their persis-tence. In his terms, these songs awaken their singers, those who allow the songs to be sung through them. The songs enable the singer to perceive the atmospheres in which they were made or in which they had been sung before (Grotowski, 1997).

In her PhD thesis, Ang (2017: 71) writes that the foremost aspect she associates with breath and voice work is her relation to Hokkien, the Chinese dialect she spoke as a child, but had subsequently for-gotten as the Singaporean government banned the use of dialects in the media or public venues. Although Ang discusses vocal work at length she is careful to position this discussion in her understanding of the voice as located everywhere in herself. She writes:

If attempting to physiologically locate my voice, it can be seen as linked to a specific part of my body: my mouth…Looked at another way, my voice arises because of my mind, because of a thought, with a specific intention. I follow my thought and my body responds to it, and this articulates itself vocally. If I continue this mode of dissecting, more and more of my body becomes involved: responses and reac-tions from the tiniest parts of my body, as well as my muscles and my breath. There is voice because there is air going in and out of my mouth: breath. (Ang, 2017: 89)

Her work with voice has always been a form of search in relation to forgotten familial memories and her ancestral past (Ang, 2017: 71). Her introduction to theatre was through her first director Liu Ruo-Yu, who herself had worked with Grotowski in Irvine, Califor-nia some years earlier. Liu prompted Ang to work on song by trying to ‘connect back to that unknown mother tongue which [she] had forgotten’ (Tatinge Nascimento, 2010: 141). Later, Ang led her own theatre troupe called Theatre Ox. In that context, the actors, led by Ang, carried on delving into their forgotten Chinese dialects, along with Taoist texts. Ang writes that ‘[t]hrough singing, I conversed with my memories, thoughts and reactions to different existences from my past’ (Ang, 2017: 72). Both in her past research and in her recent pedagogical work with Sourcing Within, Ang’s work embraces words, breath, meanings, running, reflection, endurance, attention to symbolism, attention to the weather, to the places we worked in, the meaningfulness of language, the as yet not known….

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 117 |
|  |  |

* Chi and the Breathy Plasticity of Selves

When a participant in a worksession asked Ang about her under-standing of the body–voice connection, as Magnat paraphrases, she explains that ‘voice lives everywhere in the body, she conveyed its ever-changing flow through the image of personal associations rooted in one’s lived experience and memory, including what one thinks one has forgotten’ and that ‘vocal work entails a confrontation with oneself because the voice is composed of our imagination, desires and personal experiences. Including what we don’t want to remember, which can create tensions in the body in the form of muscular contractions that can block the flow of the voice’ (2014: 143). The relation between voiced breath and these changes can be heard in the quality of the sound in song. Though songs and sound may be transient experiences they emerge from postural, emotional, muscular, political, collective and personal habitual experiences that contribute to shaping the vocal chords, the tensions held in the spine or in the musculature enabling lungs to expand and contract, that shape the flow of breath in song, as the banks of rivers shape the ongoing flow of water, and simultaneously those flowing waters shape those banks. An important aspect of Ang’s description of voice relates to understandings of Chi.

Ang writes that Chi is an all-pervasive element:

It is what is coming in and out every second, every moment in us without us noticing and without us consciously noticing where Chi is. The moment I begin looking for it, that is when it starts to get blocked. We start to think how do I breathe? This is the moment my body starts to get a little uncomfortable. Yet, we are in Chi since the beginning, since the day when we come out of our mother. We are already in it. (Ang, 2017: 32, italics in the original)

She goes on to say that a forceful or effortful search for Chi is a sure way to block it. So although the theatre practice requires disci-pline and attention, in Ang’s experience certain attitudes towards ‘work’ block Chi. These ‘blocks’ are as perceivable as the shifts in vocal quality that can either give life to a song or stem its flow. Clear links are made between Chi and breath (Hsu, 2007, 2009, Kuriyama, 1999); in fact Chi is often translated as breath (e.g. Nair, 2007: 58–63).

118 Body & Society 26(2)

However, Chi cannot simply be translated as if breath were a universally transparent process.

In early 2018, Ang was in Aberdeen to give a Worksession. Dur-ing this workshop, when I started singing a particular song, I could feel the difference between my chest, shoulders, head and arms, and my legs, hips and feet. The song seemed to be located in my chest and throat. The rest of me felt like it was watching. ‘Disconnected’ is the word I have heard theatre practitioners use. I felt that parts of me, including something that feels like imagination, were not being invited into the song. In contrast to the ideal of an ‘organism in which consciousness and instinct are united’ (Grotowski, 2002: 210 cited in Ang, 2017), the experience of singing that song was out of sync with various other responses and relationships at the time of singing. As a result, the song itself sounded thin. I could not quite figure out what I was doing wrong, whether something was working in the song or not.

Ang came towards me to guide me. She touched my elbow and the tips of my fingers of my right hand. I interpreted this in two ways, to shift the distance between my trunk and my elbow/arm, thus allow-ing my lungs to expand more, and to awaken my fingers to the surrounding world (air, people, places). In these experiences, the skin on the tips of my fingers was not a boundary. There was a reaching sense, in that song, that reached through to the cold air just outside the walls of the studio, to wherever my family was, as well as to Ang, to the three other participants supporting me with their own non-intrusive presence. I perceived this without being distracted by it, for once.

Ang suggested that I keep saying the song, allowing the words to tumble out, no need to worry about the melody I understood. As she guided me I felt the need to close my eyes. Ang suggested constant adjustments to my head, especially my elbow and right forearm and fingers, and in that process of simultaneously letting go of the words to let them come! I let go of the melody, but not of my frame, rather I felt a stretching. This is how Home-Cook (2015) has characterised listening, as a stretching towards. In this song, the stretching was not towards one thing, simply a sense of ‘towardness’. This time I was lucky, only small parts of what I felt to be myself were opaque.

This openness was also risky. To the extent that when we walked closer, around a metre and a half away from one of the walls with my

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 119 |
|  |  |

eyes shut, I perceived it as an oppressive force pushing me back. Although I knew it was the wall and slanted ceiling, the sensation made me revisit childhood terrors of demonic presences instilled in me by my Catholic upbringing, or the fear of loneliness that the loss of my Nanna, and many other family members in that period, brought. I felt so open I was vulnerable to the denser presence of a wall and its own personality. And yet Ang quickly perceived not only my vocal and muscular recoiling, the fear that rippled through me, but also where could be adjusted to allow the fear to simply pass. In one way the adjustment was apparently straightforward, we turned towards the window and away from the corner. However, she also suggested an adjustment in my fingertips and head which took me to an entirely different sphere of associations. The experience of fear was there, it was acknowledged, but as Ang later commented there are always other things coming and passing too.

Note here the similarity of this stance with the understanding of the world in constant formation in emergence onto/epistemology. Since things are constantly coming into being our ways of perceiv-ing, such relationships can be equally responsive.7 In this theatre practice, including through speaking and singing, one can explore experiences and places, happenings, and persons present, absent, alive and dead. Ang calls this an encounter. Sometimes she attributes the experiences to Chi, but hesitates about categorical explanations.

Chi has been understood as different things in different historical periods in different cosmological, ecological and political environ-ments (Hsu, 2009, 2007, see also Yoeli-Tlalim, 2010 on Chi and Rlung winds in Tibetan Medicine). In certain periods, breath was wind that entered the body in different seasons of the year; wind travelling from certain prevailing directions carried specific charac-teristics affecting the body, some to promote health, others causing disease. In later periods, coexisting with more politically uncertain moments, the work of medicine was to protect the body from this permeability, and Chi became more of an internal wind (Hsu, 2007).

Due to these historical shifts in Chinese medicine and the under-standings of Chi in Taijiquan, the Chi circulating in the body is not breath in the sense that Western anatomy understands it, entering the body through the nose and/or mouth, into the lungs and back out (Kuriyama, 1999). Neither is Chi oxygen that enters the body through breath, is absorbed into the blood and then travels to

120 Body & Society 26(2)

different parts of the body through the circulatory system. Chi travels around the body through a variety of channels which are different to the veins and arteries of Western Medicine. There is no easy corre-spondence between Western biological understandings of breath and Chi found in both Chinese Medicine and the practice of Taijiquan (Kuriyama, 1999).

In Kuriyama’s (1999) comparison of Western and Chinese his-tories of medicine, we find an illuminating difference. While Greek medics depicted and attended to human ailment according to articu-lated limbs and pulsating rhythms, Chinese medics did not pay much attention to the pulse. Instead Chinese doctors depicted and healed the human as made up of flows of chi (Kuriyama, 1999: 63–64). In this comparison Kuriyama cites the Western medic Floyer writing in the 1700s. Floyer comments that the Chinese spoke through imagi-nation, that their hieroglyphic characters are better attuned to poetry than philosophy, while the Europeans excelled in rational reasoning and judgement. What Kuriyama goes on to draw out through this example is that understandings of the body, forms of writing and ways of knowing are all intimately related. Specifically, he argues that when the human is understood as constituted of flows, such as in the medieval medical drawings and texts Kuriyama studies, knowing and conscious thought, philosophy, are not separated off from imag-ination and poetry as they are in rationalist accounts of knowledge.8

In his book Restoration of Breath: Consciousness and Perfor-mance, Nair (2007) offers a critique of how notions of performance as movement and action are introduced into philosophy (in his account by Kiekergaard and Nietzsche). By drawing on extensive descriptions and analyses of what he calls ‘Eastern’ training and performance traditions and philosophies, Nair shows how breath, rather than being limited to non-semantic action, or non-conscious movement, has long been imbued with notions of consciousness across vast swathes of human history and populations. In the T’ai ch’I ch’uan of 13th-century Taoist priestly practice, Ch’I is a per-meating presence, it is substance, but can also exist without form, or in the form of a thought or action, the spiritual or material (Nair, 2007: 59).

The relationship of Chi to some experience of flow and encounter that I describe above is a reminder of historically and context-dependent constitution of human selves, not in a social constructivist

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 121 |
|  |  |

sense, but in an ontological sense that our very constitution is con-stantly being formed. Any engagement leaves a constitutive mark. As with knotted strings that, once unknotted, carry the memory of tension and friction that kept the knot in place (Ingold, 2013a: 13), the self that is always in formation. In the experiences I describe above I was as permeable and sensitive to memory as I was to temperature. As indeed, selves are also sensitive to other factors including political shifts, as we see in the changing understanding of chi in Chinese medicine. What an anthropological onto/epistemol-ogy of emergence enables here is an account of constitutive factors, flows and happenings that does need to make any ontological dif-ference between breath, muscle, analysis, wind, memory, paper, chi, politics, computer screen, place, practice, reflection, impulse, fibre optic under sea cables9 and so on. Anything can be taken into account and allowed with no a priori judgement of what is more important, of what is primary.

Conclusion

In sum, in this article, I have made two interlinking arguments. Firstly that attending to voiced breath through the practices of labora-tory theatre shows how material and the so-called intangible consti-tutive histories are always and already on the same ontological plane. Embodiment as it is theorised in theatre and performance practice/ theory does enable a move towards an obviation of body/mind, body/ world dualities. However, due to the insistence on the primacy of for instance body, movement, non-conscious perception, with mind, referential thought or analysis and conscious perception considered secondary, these narratives can only go so far in accounting for how voiced breath in song has effects on both singers and audiences. I have argued that by focusing on these supposedly primary aspects, these approaches throw out the baby of thought, analytical processes, the ability to imagine abstraction, referential knowing and so on, with the bathwater of Cartesian dualism.

I presented an alternative approach based on an emergence onto/ epistemology that explicitly incorporates the anthropological com-parative perspective as essential. Here the focus is on voiced breath, to show how while exploring song in laboratory theatre has real and constitutive worldly effects, the arguments need to be attentive to

122 Body & Society 26(2)

how being and knowing are always already otherwise in other places in other ways of life. Therefore, my second argument based on this comparative analysis and grounded in ethnographic analysis of Chi in laboratory theatre practice highlights how reflective consciousness is already onto/epistemologically imbricated in practices such as laboratory theatre singing.

Finally, I have also suggested that since the temporality of emer-gence onto/epistemologies understands all constitutive relations to be immanent in the world, this also affects how we understand and search for traces of the past. The theatre practices I describe offer a way to take seriously the traces considered lost in materialist con-ceptions of history. What the work of attending to breath in song suggests is that listening to song is a matter of constitutional his-tories. As Feld puts it in his acoustemology, attending to this con-stitutional path is a ‘reflexive feedback between sounding and listening’ to breath (2015: 14), a practice where listening to breath in song is always to give explicit attention to relational histories of listening. Laboratory theatre practitioners I worked with, such as Ang, understand their work listening to breath enacted in song as entering into a field of experience constituted by those past people and places.

This may not be as far-fetched as it sounds. Most of the technol-ogies available to archaeology today, such as thermal sensing, devel-opments in microscopy and even carbon-dating techniques, would have sounded like science fiction to the archaeologists of the 19th century. The history of our technologies for making evident what was previously invisible are themselves premised on the assumption of what is perceivable or not at particular moments in history (Sterne, 2003). The division of muscle from memory as respectively tangible and intangible is part of a particularly Western ontology (Kuriyama, 1999). These underlying ontological assumptions influence what tools are built to search for what are, contingently, considered traces, not least in archaeology (Shanks and Witmore, 2010: 276–277). The shift towards emergence ontologies across disciplines (Blackman, 2016: 261) signals the possibility that the ways to explore human experience, our constitution, our histories, our trajectories may require taking seriously the sort of ‘art of enquiry’ of laboratory theatre in which what is understood as the past or the present, as well as what the material and immaterial may be is kept open

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 123 |
|  |  |

throughout an investigation, and attention is given to how such cate-gories or experiences emerge from specific histories and entanglements.

ORCID iD

Caroline Gatt <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0509-4010>

Notes

1. I do not include here my fieldwork with dancers although my arguments regarding embodiment applied equally to that field, though the argu-ments come across more strongly with theatre because of the historical importance of language in theatre.
2. I would like to acknowledge the European Research Council for funding this period of my research, to thank Tim Ingold and other members and associates of the Knowing from the Inside project, University of Aberd-een. I would also dearly like to thank Gey Pin Ang for sharing work and life experiences, and all the participants in Sourcing Within Workses-sions who contributed to the research. Finally, thanks to the Aberdeen University Interfaith Centre for their generosity and kindness in allow-ing me to use their hall and supporting me personally during times of grief and confusion and my work although it confused them.
3. See [http://sourcingwithin.org.](http://sourcingwithin.org)
4. See, for instance, The Anthropocene Curriculum. Available at: [https://](https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/) [www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/](https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/) (accessed 29 January 2018), Ingold (2017) and collaborations between medical sciences, humanities and experts by experience in Blackman (2016).
5. It is important to note that Ingold’s use of the concept of affordances avoids the deterministic undertones of Gibson’s usage. For Gibson, an object affords what it does because of what it is, regardless of whether the affordance is perceived by anyone or anything in the vicinity. In this sense, he is a realist. Ingold’s approach, by contrast, is relational (as is Latour’s, 2003). Therefore, Ingold’s affordances are not fixed ‘objec-tive’ attributes. Rather, the perception of affordances, like any other engagement in the world, is also part of any mutually constitutive pro-cess. I have thoroughly analysed and developed this emergence onto/ epistemology elsewhere, also in relation to ontological politics, coloni-ality and collaboration (Gatt, 2013, 2017a, 2018a, 2018b) and in relation to theorising atmospheres (Gatt, 2017b).
6. From a therapeutic point of view, working with Ang on memory has always felt like ‘an opening up’ and passing through. I contrast this with some, though by no means all, experiences of grief counselling in which

124 Body & Society 26(2)

recalling and talking about memories of my deceased parents and grand-parents left me feeling knotted up and in need of hours’ more talk or release. Stanislawski, the theatre director well known as the first and still the most influential figure to have developed and articulated specific techniques for acting (Nair, 2007), had initially developed a technique for acting based on emotions called ‘emotional recall’. He pursued this path until one of his actors famously had a mental breakdown, after which Stanislawksi developed his technique of physical actions, in which associations are allowed to arise from the actions. Ang’s approach, which she does not label a technique (Ang, 2017: 67) is more like the work on physical actions, and yet is different because of the emphasis on ancestors.

1. At times, such as considering the effects of coloniality, it is necessary to face the terrorising corners of history, and yet we are not necessarily determined by them. The dilemma introduced by emergence ontologies in relation to for instance coloniality or identity politics has been raised when theories such as the invention of tradition came into relation with identity politics in New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Since the offi-cial national courts based their judgments on essentialist, fixist notions of history and tradition, any claim by anthropologists that an indigenous people constantly regenerated their traditions, as much as anyone else, caused setbacks in land rights campaigns. And yet also emerging from indigenous scholarship notions of victimhood, of subjection and dom-ination are also vehemently rejected as these portray the indigenous peoples as without agency. In my work with environmental activists, I have developed the concepts of vectors in order to address these dilem-mas, developing tools that can take into account both the subjugating effects of some processes and the abilities of different peoples and things to subvert, ignore, replace, invent their own situations (Gatt, 2018a).
2. Neither is imagination cut off from the real in medieval Europe (Ingold, 2013b) and practices such as reading (Carruthers, 1990, 1998), which now so perceived as closely related to referential knowledge, or ‘book’ knowledge as I described in the previous section, but that I also expand on elsewhere (Gatt, 2017a).
3. See Gatt (2018a: chapter 7) for an example of how this emergence ontology enables an understanding of how presence is generated by means of communication technologies, including the politics and his-tories constituting such technologies.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 125 |
|  |  |

References

Ang, Gey Pin (2017) Sourcing within: a reflexive investigation of a creative path. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent.

Artaud, Antonin (2010 [1964]) Theatre and Its double. London: One World Classics.

Blackman, Lisa (2016) The challenges of new biopsychosocialities: hearing voices, trauma, epigenetics and mediated perception. The Sociological Review Monographs 64(1): 256–273.

Blaser, Mario (2019) On the properly political (disposition for the) Anthropocene. Anthropological Theory 19(1): 74–94.

Camilleri, Frank (2019) Performer Training Reconfigured: Post-pyschosocial perspectives for the Twenty First Century. London; Oxford: Bloomsbury.

Carruthers, Mary (2008 [1990]) The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Carruthers, Mary (2008 [1998]). The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Crutzen, Paul and Stoermer, Eugene (2000) The ‘Anthropocene’.

Global Change Newsletter 41: 17–18.

Csordas, Thomas (1994) Introduction: the body as representation and being-in-the-world. In: Csordas, Thomas (ed) Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Grounds for Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De la Cadena, Marisol (2015) Uncommoning nature. In: E-Flux Journal. Available at: [http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/](http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/uncommoning-nature/.) [uncommoning-nature/.](http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/uncommoning-nature/.)

Deleuze, Giles (1997) Essays Critical and Clinical. Minneapolis:

University of Minesota Press.

Durkheim, Emile (1973 [1893]) The dualism of human nature and its social conditions. In: Bellah, Robert (ed) On Morality and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 149–163.

Farnell, Brenda (2000) Getting out of the habitus. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 6(3): 397–418.

Feld, Steven (2015) Acoustemology. In: Novak, David and Saka-keeny, Matt (eds) Keywords in Sound. Durham: Duke University Press.

126 Body & Society 26(2)

Gatt, Caroline (2013) Vectors, direction of attention and unprotected backs: re-specifying relations in anthropology. Anthropological Theory 13(4): 347–369.

Gatt, Caroline (2017a) The liveliness of books. In: Gatt, Caroline (ed) The Voices of the Pages. Aberdeen: Knowing from the Inside. pp. 61–85.

Gatt, Caroline (2017b) Living atmospheres: breath and permeation through song-action in experimental theatre. In: Schmitt, Susanne B. and Schroer, Sara Asu (eds) Exploring Atmospheres Ethnogra-phically. Farnham: Ashgate. pp. 135–152.

Gatt, Caroline (2018a) An Ethnography of Global Environmental-ism: Becoming Friends of the Earth. London; New York: Routledge.

Gatt, Caroline (2018b) Introduction to the special issue ‘Knowing Collaboratively: Considering Onto/Epistemology in Collabora-tion’. In: Gatt, Caroline (ed) Collaborative Anthropologies, vol. 10(1–2), pp. 1–19.

Gatt, Caroline (2015) The Anthropologist as Member of the Ensem-ble: Anthropological Experiments with Theatre Makers. In: Alex, Flynn and Jonas, Tinius (Eds) Theatre as Change: The Transfor-mative Potential of Performance, Palgrave. pp. 334–357.

Giraldo Herrera, César (2018) Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Giraldo Herrera, Cesar and Pálsson, Gísli (2016) The forest and the trees. HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 4(2): 237–243.

Grotowski, Jerzy (1997) Tue es le fils de quelqu’un. In: Wolford, Lisa and Schechner, Richard (eds) The Grotowski Sourcebook. London; New York: Routledge.

Guattari, Félix (1996) Ritornellos and existential affects. In: Gen-

osko, Gary (ed) The Guattari Reader. Oxford: Blackwell.

Haraway, Donna (1991) Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinven-

tion of Nature. London: Free Association Books.

Haraway, Donna (2003) The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs,

People, and Significant Otherness. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm

Press.

Hirsch, Eric and Stewart, Charles (2005) Introduction: ethnographies

of historicity. History and Anthropology 16(3): 261–274.

Home-Cook, George (2015) Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching

ourselves. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 127 |
|  |  |

Hsu, Elizabeth (2007) The experience of wind in early and medieval Chinese medicine. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Insti-tute 13: S117–S134.

Hsu, Elizabeth (2009) Outward form (xing 形) and inward qi 氣: the ‘Sentimental Body’ in early Chinese medicine. Early China 32: 103–124.

Humphrey, Caroline (2008) Reassembling individual subjects: events and decisions in troubled times. Anthropological Theory 8(4): 357–380.

Ingold, Tim (1992) Culture and the perception of the environment. In: Croll, Elisabeth and Parkin, David (eds) Bush Base: Forest Farm Culture, Environment and Development. London; New York: Routledge.

Ingold, Tim (1993) The art of translation in a continuous world. In: Pálsson, Gísli (ed) Beyond Boundaries: Understanding, Transla-tion and Anthropological Discourse. Oxford: Berg.

Ingold, Tim (2000a) The Perception of the Environment: Essays in

Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill. New York: Routledge.

Ingold, Tim (2000b) Concluding comment. In: Hornborg, Alf and

Pálsson, Gísli (eds) Negotiating Nature: Culture, Power and Envi-

ronmental Argument. Lund: Lund University Press.

Ingold, T (2007) Lines: A Brief History. Oxon: Routledge.

Ingold, Tim (2008) Bindings against boundaries: entanglements of life in an open world. Environment and Planning A 40(8): 1796–1810.

Ingold, Tim (2012) No more ancient; no more human: the future past

of archaeology and anthropology. In: Shankland, David (ed)

Archaeology and Anthropology: Past, present and future. London;

New York: Berg.

Ingold, Tim (2013a) Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and

Architecture. London; new York: Routledge.

Ingold (2013b) Dreaming of dragons: on the imagination of real life.

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 19: 734–752.

Ingold, Tim (2017) Anthropology and/as Education. London; New York: Routledge.

Irigary, Luces (1999) The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heideggar.

London: The Athlone Press.

128 Body & Society 26(2)

Kuriyama, Shigehisa (1999) The Expressiveness of the Body: And the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine. New York: Zone Books.

Latour, Bruno (2003) Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences

into Politics. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Law, John (1992) Notes on the theory of the actor network: ordering, strategy and heterogeneity. Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University. Available at: [https://www.comps.lancs.ac.uk/sociol](https://www.comps.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Law-Notes-on-ANT.pdf.) [ogy/papers/Law-Notes-on-ANT.pdf.](https://www.comps.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Law-Notes-on-ANT.pdf.)

Lock, Margaret and Farquhar, Judith (2007) Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press.

Magnat, Virginie (2013) Grotowski, Women and Contemporary Per-formance: Meetings with Remarkable Women. New York; London: Routledge.

Massumi, Brian (1995) The autonomy of affect. Cultural Critique 31: 83–109.

Meulemans, Germain (2017) The lure of pedogenesis: an anthropo-logical foray into making urban soils in contemporary France. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen.

Nair, Sreenath (2007) Restoration of Breath: Consciousness and

Performance. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Navarro-Yashin, Yael (2009) Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge. Jour-nal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 15: 1–18.

Orr, Yancey, Lansing, Stephen and Dove, Michael (2015) Environ-mental anthropology: systemic perspectives. Annual Review of Anthropology 44: 153–168.

Parrika, J (2010) Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and

Technology. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Pfaffenberger, Bryan (1992) Social anthropology of technology.

Annual Review of Anthropology 21: 491–516.

Shanks, Michael and Witmore, Christopher (2010) Memory practices and the archaeological imagination in risk society: design and long term community. In: Keorner, Stephanie and Russel, Ian (eds) Unquiet Pasts: Risk Society, Lived Cultural Heritage, Re-designing Reflexivity. Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate.

Stanislawski, Constantin (2015 [1936]) An Actor Prepares. London; New York: Bloomsbury.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gatt | 129 |
|  |  |

Sterne, Jonathan (2003) The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound

Reproduction. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

Tatinge Nascimento, Claudia (2010) Crossing Cultural Borders Through the Actor's Work: Foreign Bodies of Knowledge. London:

Routledge.

Thrift, Nigel (2008) Non-representational Theory: Space/Politics/

Affect. London: Routledge.

Yoeli-Tlalim, Ronit (2010) Tibetan ‘wind’ and ‘wind’ illnesses: towards a multicultural approach to health and illness. Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences 41: 318–324.

Zarilli, Philip (2004) Towards a phenomenological model of the actor’s embodied modes of experience. Theatre Journal 54(4): 653–666.

Caroline Gatt is an anthropologist (PhD Aberdeen) and theatre practi-tioner. Her recent publications include the monograph An Ethnography of Global Environmentalism: Becoming Friends of the Earth (2018), the special issue ‘Collaborative Knowing: Considering Onto/Epistemology in Collaboration’, Collaborative Anthropologies Vol. 10 (1–2) as editor, and the collaborative and multimodal collected volume The Voices of the Pages (2017/2018 Overprint) also as editor.

This article is part of the Body & Society special issue on ‘[Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World](https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/homepage/journal-content/bod-journal-content-2/bod-specials/Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World/)’, edited by Andrew Russell and Rebecca Oxley.