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CHURCHILL DOWER, Ruth

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Citation:

CHURCHILL DOWER, Ruth (2023). Body-listening as an act of anthropocentric resistance. In: FAIRCHILD, Nikki, (ed.) 6th European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry: Qualitative Inquiry in the Anthropocene: Affirmative and generative possibilities for (Post)Anthropocentric futures. Congress Proceedings Book 2023. University of Portsmouth, 10-16. [Book Section]

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BODY-LISTENING AS AN ACT OF ANTHROPOCENTRIC RESISTANCE

Ruth Churchill Dower

Manchester Metropolitan University (UK)

Abstract

Thinking and moving-with a posthuman, feminist materialist curiosity, I will be enfolding the sensory languages of movements, materials, molecules and musculoskeletal systems of under-fives with some alternative notions of creating, perceiving and valuing expression. Research reveals that the majoritisation of spoken language together with the pathologisation of silence (1, 2, 3) casts an opaque veil across spaces that are not yet inhabited by words (4), restraining the possibilities for sensory knowing to become more-than-expressive. This oppression creates centrifugal forces that make the young human responsible for a ring of singular expectations that are all but rosy. This dominant need for talk as a primarily cognitive process that “fl[ies] between lips and brain” (4, p.15) is exemplified in early childhood policy and practice but seems to miss or resist the plural, off-kilter entanglements of expression-exchange that ‘are not quite within the register of the perceptible [...] but are nonetheless felt’ (5, p.17).

Duchamp (in 5) calls this the ‘infrathin’, which values not so much the what/who/how-s lying in the cracks of a multimodal event, but their potentiality; their more-than qualities. These are inklings of something that happens in the interstices of expressions or encounters (5) by which a difference makes itself known and felt (not necessarily by humans), through the marks – or effects - that are left behind (6, 7). I argue in this paper that, by shifting the focus away from centrifugal perceptions of audible, spoken languages towards an indefinable ‘prehension’ (Whitehead’s term for *grasping towards* or *sensing* in 5) of these expressive differences, human *and* more-than-human educators can build care-full ecologies of practice, such as body-listening.

This paper will engage in a speculative practice of opening ourselves to intervals that might lead to a sense of the infrathin in unspoken languages, where we might prehend the effects of a material difference or an affective process. For instance, in considering the multiplicities of expression, we might notice the taught stretch of the vocal folds, allowing sound waves to be released at a certain pitch, or the finesse of skull-bone conduction allowing us to hear-feel our vibrations. We might consider how these intersectional, and intra-relational parts might shift from human to more-than-human, able to produce more-than the sum of their parts, whilst influenced by quantum, thermodynamic, sociocultural, economic and political forces. And we might ask how this dynamic of expressive forces offers a suggestion of how languages might be received, understood and listened to, whilst resisting the temptation to pin them down in the very language that cancels and refuses their existence. Ultimately, we will ask whether a pedagogy of body-listening could enable educators to co-create, prehend and value the minor key of small languages that are often unexpected and therefore missed/misunderstood within an anthropocentric frame.

Keywords: not-speaking, expression, neurodivergence, body-listening.

SPACES FOR RECONFIGURING REFUSALS TO ENGAGE

Not talking can often *look* like a refusal to engage. However, in my fieldwork, children often removed their faces from the adult gaze exactly at the moment they *did* want to engage, in a bid to reduce the anxiety of expectation and of *getting it wrong*. At three and four years old, they are already aware that their difference is othered and feel that, somehow, their expression is lacking; that *they* are lacking.

The fieldwork for this PhD research involved creating spaces for expression *without words* both on zoom (during the 2020 covid lockdown) and in a large, airy art gallery following the release of lockdown. Expression took the form of movements between bodies, materials and the space, entangled with humming, laughter, sighs, songs and other spontaneous exclamations that articulated nothing in particular other than a joyful accompaniment to their movement. Expectations to speak at any stage were removed entirely from these six research families, whose children struggle to vocalise words when 'required' to do so. In fact, most of the children had already received a diagnosis of selective mutism and some were also being assessed for autism. So, instead of a space full of instructions and expectations, on Saturday mornings over a period of six months, children were invited to move, touch and dance-with particular materials, such as their parents' limbs, teddies, balls of wool, long branches, lycra sheets, feathers, silky scarves, water, paint, torches, cushions, blankets and tents.

As a collaborative parent-arts-educator-researcher, I reduced my talking over the fieldwork period and invited the research families to allow their bodies to become spontaneously entangled in improvised movement. This was achieved partly by modelling a form of dance called contact improvisation (using a large teddy as my child-partner since non-related families were still not permitted to have physical contact post-lockdown) or with the materials I had brought for that week's exploration. As families became comfortable with the invitations to move and the increasing spaces for silence, ironically the sounds emerging from their children's young bodies became more and more frequent until, by the fourth week, every child apart from one was comfortably chattering away during each session, in and amongst their many other vocal and non-vocal expressions¹. It seemed their sense of being othered dissolved quickly in these spaces where their preferred embodied modalities – the very difference that had been labelled as *lacking* in other spaces - was welcomed and enjoyed without the need for justification. It seemed the less the adults talked, instructed or interpreted, and the more bodies attuned to each other's possibilities, the more these children found space for their own languages.

In this paper, I take a posthuman, feminist materialist position of curiosity and invite us humans, nonhumans, bodies, affects and atmospheres to resist semiotics and instead enfold the sensory languages of movements, materials and molecules within our musculoskeletal systems, just like many of our research children do. In this way, by becoming-with our own spaces of silence, we may also experience some *alternative* notions of creating, perceiving and valuing expression, which I will call a pedagogy of *body-listening*.

In what follows, I will set out the theoretical foundations for body-listening that resist anthropocentric tropes of 'child' and 'speaking' and explore some of the thinking behind speculative embodied approaches that can be experimented with in the spaces occupied by young children who sometimes don't speak, whether that might be in the home, the nursery school, kindergarten or elsewhere. In conclusion, I will invite readers to experience a speculative practice of opening themselves to intervals that might lead to a sense of the infrathin in unspoken languages, where we might sense the effects of a material difference or an affective process.

¹ The one child who remained unable to speak out loud nevertheless engaged with his whole body and happily communicated in whispers with his mum. He was the only child in this group who had already started school and had learned how to develop close, playful relationships with his teachers and peers without needing to speak.

SPECULATIVE POSSIBILITIES, COLLABORATIVE BODIES AND ENTANGLED TALES

You might be forgiven for imagining that speculation is about investment forecasting or making some kind of calculated prediction about future gains in order to simplify or minimise potential risks and eliminate historical or emergent troubles. This kind of capitalist, socially constructed version of speculation is designed to imbue a sense of individual power and intelligent thinking behind the (increasingly *normalised*) culture of gambling with the world's finite resources. As if money, oil, knowledge, AI, or any form of currency, belongs exclusively to us. As if we humans were separate from, in control over, or superior to the earth.

I offer another perspective: speculation is about becoming intrinsically open to all kinds of unpredictable risks by acknowledging the intra-agential responsibility of ongoing processes (as opposed to fixed gains or losses) in order to animate all bodies, *including* their historical and emergent troubles, and counter the reduction, suppression or denial of them. Barad (8) suggests this “requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder” (p.2). As part-human, I take this to mean opening up to dynamic, collaborative, often unfathomable, experiences of being-with, or becoming-together, that are not determined by social, capital or anthropocentric constructs (although the imprints of these are carried in such experiences) and are not centred or dependent on human deity but on worldly relationality.

Like Haraway (7) I would argue that, even in the Anthropocene, by putting on the felt spectacles of speculation (such as listening through touch rather than observation), such a sense of opening up to the world can result in breaking through the embedded notions that tie us in to our highly pressured ways of being and knowing. In so doing, humans may be able to call out the trouble with positivist methodologies and listen-anew to the responses that come from within and beyond its worldly boundaries. This is *important listening* because, as Barad (8) highlights, “Many voices speak here in the interstices, a cacophony of always already reiteratively intra-acting stories. These are entangled tales. Each is diffractively threaded through and enfolded in the other” (p.1-2). If this is the case, then listening must be done with, through and between bodies rather than words. In fact, the theories of Haraway, Barad, and Manning all bring slightly different perspectives that resonate with this research in joyful becomings outside of neurotypical ways of being.

But we don't have to master this body-listening alone, as is required with many individualist processes of the Anthropocene. Haraway (7) provokes an ethical ontology of 'rendering-capable' each partner through their entanglements, i.e. the space where potential (which she calls 'becoming-with') is triggered and comes to the fore through co-production. Haraway calls this “sympoiesis” (p.33), meaning co-creation by collectives with indeterminate boundaries, whose knowledge, agency and power (as in, dynamic forces, not ownership) are distributed amongst constituents, albeit not in equitable shares – hence the need to stay with the *trouble*, as discussed in Haraway's (7) book. This is a good metaphor for the uneven, messy ecology of practices that takes place in speculative inquiry through the continuous relay of giving and receiving (not necessarily on reciprocal terms), merging and emerging, and becoming-with. Enabling the sympoietic in speculative practices invites new relations, different possibilities and vital potentialities that, as Barad (6) states, “opens up the possibility of hearing the murmurings, the muted cries, the speaking silence of justice-to-come” (p.216).

In human dynamics, improvisation could be imagined as a method of speculative inquiry, since it describes processes of experimentation *together* without preconceived ideas or any anticipation of the outcomes. Indeed, jazz musician and teacher, David Lines (9) coins the term a 'pedagogy of improvisation' which he urges educators to “unsettle taken-for-granted, normalised and overcoded concepts of education that close down educative possibilities and differences” (p.53). He suggests this

requires experiential skills such as sensory attunement where “players need to have careful sensitivity to the unfolding play of events, to the gestures of other players, to their own gestures and a commitment to the whole sonic experience” (p.55).

Perhaps if improvisation, or speculative fabulation, were to become more embedded within the methods of posthuman early childhood practices, it might help prioritise greater possibilities for the more-than-human, help humans to resist the seductive, yet reductive, stability of identities and classifications (such as ‘nonverbal’), opening up spaces for different realities to be storied, and for multiple identities to relate.

ON LISTENING TO, SENSING AND OTHERWISE PERCEIVING MINOR GESTURES

We might ask how this dynamic of speculative practices enables even the tiniest of body languages to be expressed, felt and listened to, whilst resisting the temptation to explain (and therefore reduce) them with spoken language. Can a pedagogy of body-listening enable educators and children to co-create, sense and value what Manning calls the minor key of small languages that are often unexpected or missed altogether within an anthropocentric frame? Manning (10) describes the ‘minor gesture’ as “a force that courses through [the “major”], unmooring its structural integrity, problematizing its normative standards” (p.1).

Barad (6) also holds that there is a radical kind of cause-and-effect (or perhaps a cause-and-affect) that happens within the speculative process which is not a case of individual entities affecting each other but where, in an ongoing, improvised, co-creation, “bodies differentially materialize as particular patterns of the world as a result of the specific cuts and reconfigurings that are enacted” (p.176).

In other words, improvisation as a method cannot exist as a discreet, bounded and measured activity because it is always, already embedded within all our speculative, intra-active relationships. All that needs to happen to experience this is to take a particular cut by resisting the oppositions that enable humans and more-than-humans to be open to the affects of alterity and becoming-with, i.e. to experiment with listening to bodies’ minor gestures together.

As an example, the material of human skin is, in fact, immaterial. Skin is always already in an iterative symposium of ongoing decomposition and recomposition with the surrounding molecules of oxygen, blood, nerves, technology, bacteria, electromagnetic interferences, light waves and other more-than-human phenomena. In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know how much of us is actually ‘human’ at all. The molecular constitution of skin is constantly changing, redefining the electromagnetic forces that are experienced between skin and anything else in its vicinity – in fact, not even ‘between’ since those forces (according to quantum dynamics) are immanent and integral to all matter that is constituted within that experience. So that, in every microsecond of a scratching, stroking, cleansing or healing event, there is no separation between human and nonhuman, biology and chemistry, atmosphere and sensation.

Whilst ‘skin’ is – perhaps incorrectly - considered to be the ‘name’ of a bounded, embodied material (constantly purified, highlighted, shaped, sometimes forced into a temporarily fixed, normative representation), it is in fact a dynamic process of speculative becomings. Less a collective of materials sharing (or being denied) their agencies, as if they can be isolated and determined. More a process of agentic collaboration in processual becoming as material and immaterial entities intra-act – a constant state of *doing* rather than *being* - an *agencement* – a skinning.

Speculative method is all about these unclassifiable and indeterminate *agencements* growing from the folding-in of relationships whose expressions can be sensed but not defined, which resonates closely

with Duchamp's concept of the *Infrathin*. Manning (5) introduces this concept of the infrathin as being so immaterial that it barely even registers nevermind being defined in words. Duchamp offers an example of the Infrathin as being the warmth of a seat that has been recently vacated (in 5), where the movement of the seat (the expansion of the foam that has relinquished a weight, the cooling down and contraction of the structure that has lost its warmth, the release of weighty sensations of the former presence) is changing the landscape.

However, this, in its basic form, can be explained by physics. So, it is not necessarily the changes in temperature or shape *per se*, but the residual sense of a prior presence in contrast to the now empty space, always already in relationship to the event (and its histories) that preceded it. So how do we sense the infrathin left behind from a [child-skin-hand-sock-dance-sweat-joy] where so many minor gestures are expressed and felt without words?

Manning (5) holds that it might be possible to set up the conditions to foreground the "minor gestures that [...] make felt what otherwise would not register" (p.1) by attending to what produces felt intensities that make a difference. Like Barad's (6) clarification of diffraction – it is about mapping "where the effects of differences appear" (p.72) not the difference itself. But actually experiencing the elusive 'thisness' of what is left behind seems to be an almost impossible task.

What of the immaterial *experience* of the presence that has just been and is now gone? The singular musical intensity released by the pianist, or the laboured breathing of the elderly reader, or the chatty rhythms of the young storyteller who sat on that seat? The vacating of the seat did not happen in a vacuum, void of molecular movements or intensities. In between the occupation and the vacation, something infinitely resonant, and yet unparsable, happened. As Manning (5) affirms, "Beyond capture, the infrathin is a grasping at the singularity of an interval too thin to define as such and yet thick with the texture of lived relation" (p.17).

RENDERING-CAPABLE OUR DISTRIBUTED BODIES

So, as I see it, we have three key challenges as educators, artists and children...

i As we open up our pedagogies to allow for body-listening, how do we allow space for the minor gestures, the infrathin, the a/effect of those differences, without using words? It is so much harder than we might think!

ii And, if we can stop filling the space with words, how do we render-capable bodies' incorporeal qualities, such as their affects, memories, expressions and partial identities, for intra-acting with other bodies? How do we (more-than-human plural) make space for molecular kin and oddkin to meet, relate and become reconfigured?

iii Finally, how do we spot and sit with these important but elusive textures of lived relations without trying to 'capture' them as if they were data to be pinned down? How do we resist trying to measure growth or progress against reductive, anthropocentric values?

Contrary to popular understanding, Barad (6) explains that 'quantum' actually means "the smallest quantity that exists" (p.108) not the largest leap, as we often think. They confirm (8) that these immaterial, infrathin, minor gestures are simply "quantized indeterminacies-in-action" (p.210). So, perhaps, as human-non-humans, we can create spaces to experiment with finding our quantized indeterminacies-in-action, or our minor gestures, of body listening, and see if we can sense the

infrathin within these. Here are a few starting points to help activate the processes of body-listening (you might even like to activate your screen reader² as you focus on the activity with closed eyes):

- In a quiet space, sit or stand in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes, relax your forehead... jaw... ears... mouth... neck... shoulders... hands... hips... knees... legs... toes.
- Take a couple of minutes to listen to the sounds around the room.
- Take a couple of minutes to listen to the tiny sounds inside your own body. Many arise but are sometimes hidden and need close attention.
- Slowly shift your weight from one foot to the other (or sway to one side in your chair) and stay still. Continue to listen to the new sounds that arise. Shift your weight back and listen again.
- Look at the backs of your eyelids. Cast your eyes over every millimetre of them.
- Notice the shapes and colours behind your eyelids, and how they change as your eyes move.
- Pass a hand in front of your face slowly. What changes in colour, shadow or texture do you notice?
- Repeat a few times, getting faster, slowly spreading your fingers, using both hands, passing them across in a prayer gesture, then side by side, etcetera.
- Put both hands very gently over your face. Hold them there. Make the tiniest shifts of your fingers to move them into the most comfortable position within the contours of your face. Keep making tiny shifts until your hands and your face are completely attuned to one another.
- Push your hands into your face with more pressure. What is the most pressure you can take? What is the longest time your hands and your face can hold each other in that position? What are parts of the body are taking part in this entanglement of forces? How are they engaging?
- Begin, very slowly so that it is hardly noticeable, to withdraw your hands from your face and release the pressure. Watch how the colours, shadows, light, weight and sounds change.
- What is the least amount of pressure your [face-skin-muscle-nerves-hands] enjoy? What new parts of the body are taking part in this hardly-touching event? How are they engaging?
- Place a fingertip gently on the Tragus – the small, pointy, gristly part of your ear that sticks out next to the cheekbone. Very slowly make tiny, gentle movements on this sinewy piece of flesh.
- Listen to the sounds of the strokes, the taps, the circles or whatever movements your fingertips feel compelled to make.
- Sit and play with those sensations, making them louder, softer, more repetitious, more random, etcetera.

² See https://libguides.csu.edu.au/screenreaders/Tools_for_screen_reading for several options to have different document formats narrated by your computer through in-built or third-party software.

- Reflect on how attending to these tiny gestures triggers different sensations, affects and engagements across your body. Do not try to make any sense or sensibility of them, just sit with these feelings. At the end, you might notice how the sensory and physical parts of you become foregrounded over the cognitive, reasoning parts, and how judgement falls away.
- Repeat at any time, making small adjustments each time, in tune with your playfulness, enjoyment and peacefulness.

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