

Narrating kinship, care, love and loss in the entangled more than human-animal relations

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In this paper I engage somatic experience with/in the animal-human dialectic to narrate the relationality of embodiment, subjectivity and encounter. I inquire, through autoethnographic reflection, on the presence of breath sensation, with cross-sensory [synæsthetic] modes of perception. I situate the inclusion of the more than animal-human dialectic into philosophical consideration to write into spaces of uncertainty and query the ways encounters and entanglements with the more than human can reinvigorate dialectical questioning about the self and social wellbeing. Drawing on the concepts of mindbodying (Ferrando, & Rozzoni, (2024) and interbeing (Thích Nhất Hạnh (1987), I give attention to breath sensation response as an onto-ethical- epistemic re-lating-ship. I situate the use of ordinary moments as a resource for interrogating continuously contestable relational agency and for rethinking my ability to be affected by breath sensation in animal-human entanglements.

Keywords: Breath Sensation, Animal-Human Entanglements, Limbic system

Not a beginning more of an intertwining.

The storyteller is deep inside every one of us. The story-maker is always with us.

Let us suppose our world is attacked by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise ... but the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative (Lessing, 2007, 6).

I am a storyteller. For over the past twenty years I have been engaged in writing performative and evocative narratives as academic practice, and for some time now I have found myself cognitively meandering and lingering about departure points for entering into a conceptual dialogue with embodiment and encounter. Leigh and Brown (2021,1) have proposed that:

Embodied Inquiry encourages us to use different methods and lenses in order to collect data and analyse embodied, lived experiences. It is not tied to any one theoretical approach and yet, it is not atheoretical.

How can the human body, as a soulful perceiving and thinking being, be relationally read? Found in the work of theorists such as Butler (1993) and Irigaray (2002) is a psychophysical questioning of perception through embodiment and an acknowledgement that the limbic system shapes and is a shaping relationship of how one inhabits place and space with the world (Carozzi, 2005, Butler 1993, Bourdieu, 1990, Mackie 1985). Lewis et al (2001,103) has suggested how:

First a memory is not a thing. Cardiac muscle fibers are objects but the heartbeat they generate is a physiologic event, a collective flutter that propels life but nevertheless has no mass and occupies no space. ...Memories are the heartbeats of the nervous system.

The human is always imbricated in the data: it is in the relational space of (re)presenting and (re)storying our experiences that the Ancient Greek concept of aisth sis, understood here as the primary perceptual-sensory basis of aesthetic experience demanding an expanded psychic physiological imaginary.

Taylor (1989, 47) suggests:

This link between heart and the organs of sense is not simple mechanical sensationalism; it is aesthetic. That is, the activity of perception or sensation in Greek is aisthesis which means at root "taking in" and "breathing in" – a "gasp" that primary aesthetic response.

... "sense perception" cannot be understood without taking into account ...the root in the word – that sniffing, gasping, breathing in of the world. What is it to 'take in' or breathe in the world? First, it means aspiring and inspiring the literal presentation of things by gasping.

This idea suggests how in the writing of the self-there is an after resonance of affective sensation and presence and that writing is initiated by and grounded in an inherently corporeal/ onto-epistemic enterprise. Lorraine (1999, 13) postulates how when

...writing theory [as] a practice brings – or should bring – the writer into more intense immediate contact with her-self and the affective materiality of her existence, which feeds and motivates her words. Writing and reading is affective insofar as it is able to intensify the sense that one's experience is meaningful in a fully somatic sense of the word.

A literature review around the terms 'breath,' 'sensation,' and 'presence' in recent philosophical and theoretical writings reveals little about their possible interrelation. 'Breath' is notable for its absence in contemporary philosophy in general with a few exceptions. Luce Irigaray (2002) addresses this absence in a chapter 'The Way of Breath' in her recent work *Between east and west* and in *The forgetting of air* in Martin Heidegger (1999). The recent work of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero,(2005) in for more than one voice encompasses this territory of breath at least implicitly with its subtitle 'Toward a philosophy of vocal expression' that remains focused on a rereading of Plato through in relation to sensation and presence that holds the possibility of a further reconsideration of the

relationship of thought and language to the embodied breathing subject. The work of American philosopher Dianne Perpich (2003), linking Cavarero and Irigaray is relevant here. Her work on ethics, especially in regard to the work of Levinas contributes to the breath dialogues as a phenomenological investigation of experiences of embodiment, encounter and relationality of Self and Other. The work of philosopher Martin Buber in I and thou (1958) is also especially important because Buber has implicitly a heightened understanding of breath as a central dimension of embodiment, self and other that have formed the underpinning of dialogues that stay with transdisciplinary troubling.

Breathing in (an)other-kin

Articulating counter narratives that contest and critique have produced in the academy specific genres of research and writing that are in themselves acts of deconstructive problematization (Molla, 2021; Savage 2021). Such approaches often draw from genealogical post-structuralist approaches and are driven by a willingness to 'stay with the trouble' – whatever that might be (Haraway, 2016; Saari & Mullen 2020). Lorraine (1999, 6-7) interpolates:

Irigaray and Deleuze in conceiving of philosophizing as a practice [whereby] one that does not necessarily give clear-cut results, but sets us on a path of experimentation and receptivity to the unknown... Investigating these processes enables us to rethink our engagement with them and instigate new experiences in embodied living.

However, as Allen (2023) has noted:

Academic thought is constrained to work within, and sometimes against, all manner of tacit prohibitions which govern its connections—you cannot make that unexpected jump, you cannot make that unusual association, or at least you will do so only if what you do is fully justified, which is to say explained, or returned to the predictable order of things

I have committed myself in my scholarship to not become too deeply cooked in the academic pot, and have resisted giving up my flesh to be marinated in and by disciplinary signifiers. In pursuing a Queer scholarship I have focused my gaze on how the primary source of agency, engagement, and sensory contact focuses on the sensation not the sign. I am grasping onto understandings of how affect drives intertwined intra-actions; that they are an important episteme from which to cultivate rich, creative and hybrid understanding of 'I'. Lewis et al (2001,144) has noted how for it is when:

In a relationship [with an other], one mind revises another; one heart changes its partner. This astounding legacy of our combined status as mammals and neural being is limbic revision: the power to remodel the emotional parts of the people [and animals] we love, as our attractors activate certain limbic pathways, and the brain's inexorable memory mechanism reinforces them. Who we are and who we become depends, in part on whom we love.

I deliberately jump and jive with the prism of an ontological perception (Dupont 2014:12-14) and I do so in this paper to situate breath sensation, or the attention to breath sensation as a focal point to cultivate awareness and presence, as producing a process whereby, 'self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and as a result of, existing for another; that is, it exists only in being recognised' (Hegel et al 1999,178). Breath sensation not merely as a physiological function but as a transformative process, that sees an individual's sense of self-awareness and identity linked to how others perceive and recognize them. That is the acknowledgment and recognition from others play a vital role in the formation and validation of one's self-consciousness. When we connect this concept to

Haraway's post-humanist philosophy, we find a resonance in her emphasis on the interconnectedness and social nature of human existence. Haraway's (2003) post-humanist philosophical work takes a relativist and somewhat situationist view of the world when she reflects on the multitude of embedded meanings we encounter in our everyday experience of materiality. Haraway (2016) is ultimately identifying a force of social connection which binds us to the material world and uses the concept of Symbiogenesis (becoming by being together) to talk about the idea of 'making-with' as a framework for viewing the existence of human life. Thus reinforcing, the idea that human existence is not a solitary endeavour but a collaborative and mutually dependent process, where social connections and mutual dependencies play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of self and existence.

Making meaning with the more than human

My father had prohibited the 'ownership' of a dog in my childhood, calling them "SHIT MACHINES!" I yearned for something of my own...it was an ache that took away my breath. Between childhood and adolescence I couldn't articulate how my desire for an animal companion was to be an instrument of confession and for a familial kinship I never had. To put it simply I wanted something to love and to love me back; to help me self-regulate having encountered the disappointment that was etched in the raspy awkward and undulating breath of my parents on my announcement of my becoming Queer. After a period of time, intermittent anxiety, depression, a loneliness descended; a change came over me and I became an inert heap. Large gestural movements were replaced by focusing in on the loci of micro movements of breathing in and in exhaling hope a happening occurred. Carried away by the sensation of my breath I was in "...a mood [which] is a state of enhanced readiness to experience a certain emotion. Where an emotion is a single note, clearly struck, hanging for a moment in the still air, a mood is the extended, nearly inaudible echo that follow[ed]." (Lewis et al 2001, 45). Limbically I somersaulted in breath sensation of : apprehension...fear...doubt...distrust...hesitation...dread...confusion...doubt...anxiety...anger...sadness...outrage...loss...trepidation... grief...rejection ...abjection ...frustration...despair...bewilderment...insecurity.

Unaware that I was being formed as a sensate subject, which Martel (2003,8) suggested 'often happens that [when] we do not remember the first time we did something, or even any one particular time but remember only the repetition, the idea that we did the thing over and over and over again. Affective intensities can guide, dis/connect, excite, divert, inspire, distract, startle, surprise, re-orient or even interrupt thinking, and enable us to tentatively narrate a story of our history into the present.

Many years later with the passing of my parents' I became the sole inhabitant of the family home: the site and setting of numerous disappointments derived from unfulfilled expectations. Sitting alone at the kitchen table a different kind of silence now enveloped me. Inhaling deep cigarette smoke amplified my affective re-rememberings and I recalled how years before my mother had questioned "don't you ever want to be happy?" "Why have you chosen this life for yourself?" Exhaling I reflected on my practices of resistance, resilience, care and common survival that had emerged out of my peripheral location in their orderly home. Holding my breath each night whilst waiting for the tirade of questions as they 'bewept my outcast state' became indelibly inked on bone, muscle and in connective tissue. Many years later sitting at the scene and setting of those interrogative events I would scan the local newspaper 'pets for Sale' and four weeks later I felt for the first time puppy breath on my cheek – see Figure 1.

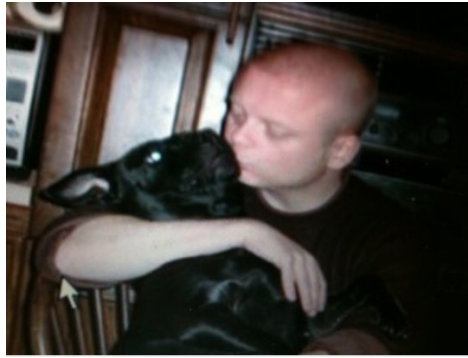


Figure 1: Tallulah and me kissing.

Merleau-Ponty (1968, 133) suggests I am both the seer and the seen, and I now draw on my breath encounters with Tallulah to think with/in a more authentic somatic dwelling place. Lorraine (1999,13) has suggested how:

“authentic” encounters ...speak to something of genuine significance rather than simply engage in empty play....for both becomes not simply a form of communication but a practice that asks basic questions about life and reality and breaks down dualisms in order to intensify the experience of living and bring us back in touch with what most strongly moves us.

Whilst the sense of the dumb animal body still prevails within a Cartesian logic, Lewis et al (2001, 12) suggests how “One must balance a respect for proof with a fondness for the unproven and the improvable. Common sense must combine in equal measure imaginative flight and an aversion to orthodoxy”. Taylor (2011, 198) notes that “it is impossible to ignore the immense amount of evidence that shows that the animals ... are sentient” and draws on Nussbaum’s (2006) work on the social contract to argue how we “must include other, more complex reasons for human cooperation ...such as love, compassion, and respect” and how “ it would be impossible, considering the vastness of the animal kingdom and its deep entanglement with our environments, to try to sum up in a few sentences what nonhuman animals can offer human beings (ibid 213).

In the following telling I put to work the dialectic of intimacy/detachment and draw on the epistemology of proximity to raise generative questions about how expressions of the social contract in animal-human re-lating-ships. How they have a capacity of agitating and critiquing normative discourses as they involve intra-action of social environment and identities across time and place calling for new technologies of understanding within the broader more than human ecologies in which we are embedded. “Intra-action” emphasizes the inseparability and mutual constitution of entities involved in a phenomenon. We simply, do not exist independently but are continuously shaping and being shaped by relationships and interactions within a specific context. Intra-action highlights the interconnectedness and co-constitution of entities, challenging a more traditional view of interaction that implies pre-existing, independent entities coming together.

In preparing a costume for Tallulah for the annual Pride March many years later, a friend journaled about me showing the outfit I had bought Tallulah to wear at Pride had induced in her memories of being connected to worldmaking. and how “What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a

dwelling place (Ahmed, 2015, 11).

It will be fun,' he said as he removed a large pair of pink sparkly wings from the backseat of his car. I cringed. Tallulah Sparkles,' he called. 'Come to daddy. 'Tallulah Sparkles, his black English Staffordshire, wagged her tail and obediently approached. It was all part of day's work for her. 'That's my little girl,' he cooed. 'Sit down. Daddy wants to put your wings on'. 'Where are we going?' I asked. Down the street,' he replied as he clipped sparkly pink wings into place . I offered him a thin smile. 'Ok,' I said, trying to appear as though it was no big deal. Inside, I was squirming. I did not want to walk down my local street with a dog in pink wings. I looked at my watch. It was half past two, which meant that there would be a lull in the foot traffic. Perhaps we will not be seen, I thought. 'What's wrong?' he asked. 'Nothing,' I answered dishonestly.' Are you embarrassed?' 'Why do you care what other people think?' he asked. 'I don't,' I said untruthfully. He was right. I did care. A familiar feeling of shame washed over me. It was the past revisited. When he left, later in the afternoon, I slumped on the couch to think and remember. I drifted back to the past events that were circling in my head. There were glossy memories that were easy to recover ,and then there were some that made me shudder. It was not that I had forgotten them; it was that I had chosen to lock them away. But it was time to open the box and reinvigorate the past in the present in my on-going dis/ease with the incoherence of normalcy (Vicars 2000,9). I took a breath and started to sift through my memories, to (re)member and evoke critical consciousness

Van Toledo, 2022, 121)



Figure 2: Tallulah and me at Pride

Lewis et al (2001, 119) note “The perceptual body is not the anatomical body so where do terms such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘meaning’ have a place? In the language of contemporary neuroscience, ‘somatic markers’ are formed and are formative of a felt sense of identity. In re/membering her puppy breath upon my skin imbues me with a fleshy trace of lightness, an ease, a permeable movement felt as a sensate lucidity and as noted by Merleau-Ponty, (1968, 133):

The touch of breath is a fleshy encounter the look, [that] envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things.

The chiasm

The day came that I knew it would...when she had to leave me. I carried her in my arms in a shit-stained blanket, placed her in the passenger seat and manoeuvred the car with one hand as I caressed her worn out body. I laid down beside her on the veterinarians floor and as I gasped and choked our breath conjoined in final uneven gasps and whimpers. She slipped into silence and left me fragmented, alone: the only communication the broken breath between us. Our ‘breath dialogue’ was over. Placing my hands on her still body, there remained a trace of encounter, a dialogue that could only be felt and sensed. I was brought closer to a new reality as I reached out for one last caress, I kiss her closed eyes, her mouth, her ears, her still soft underbelly. Lewis et al (2001,p. 73) have noted how:

People hug each other on departures and arrivals – an act so familiar we might think it nothing more than a custom. But this style of embrace contains silent evidence of attachment; an imposed separation, or the threat of one, reflexively makes people want to re-establish skin-to-skin contact

Sobs of despair and wails of loss and longing punctured the air. In the quietened chatter of the waiting room chatter it had been understood what had just taken place; what was taking place. I walked back to the car, my limbic system in full force my dysregulated breath proved to be a mindbodying subsuming activity. Clutching her collar and lead, unaware of how “The sensory experience flashes to the limbic brain, which will sift the event for its significance and prepare physiology to meet that singular moment.” (Lewis et al 2001, 53) or how “...in response to limbic stimulation, small muscles on the mammalian face contract in precise configurations. The face is the only place in the body where muscles connect directly to skin.” (ibid 52). Mine was crumpled by defeat and limbically overwhelmed I drove home enveloped with/in what the Welsh call Hiraeth- that sensation which denotes a deep, nostalgic longing to return to something or somewhere now gone. My staccato breath enunciated how without breath sensation of having Tallulah by my side... I was unravelling, I was entering the threshold of my (un)becoming. (Tavares, 2016) has suggested that:

if we understand bodies as defined, for example, by their sociality, their interdependency, that means that this body – this one – cannot really exist without another body, without another world of bodies. The I – this I – requires a you in order to survive, and even to flourish. We are bound to one another socially in important ways. I cannot live without living together with some set of people.

Mysomatic interrogative utilized the concept of aisth sis, as a primary perceptual-sensory experience produced and circulated by the limbic system as a location that has entangled histories, and that in breath sensation continue to

haunt the small stories that constitute my social, affective, cultural and material worlds. Small-stories are authentic natural interactions, conversations and social connections that are “closer to the action and enmeshed within the interactive, dynamics of social life” (Freeman, 2007,156). For a small-story researcher, the focus is on informal daily interactions as a source of meaning-making (Georgakopoulou & Bamberg, 2005) that are “inextricably bound up with ideas about subjectivity” (McCallum, 1999, 3).

All that remains are

The intention in this paper was to peel back layers, to open out some in speculative writerly acts the territory of the interplay of breath sensation of the animal- human re-lating- ship into a written articulation. I have had to move beyond the reflective surfaces of academic knowledge which excludes the animal human breathing from form into formlessness. I started with what Lessing (2007) refers to as that empty space that surrounds what knowledge is considered and to question the means by which knowledge is recognized and considered. However as it has been noted by Lewis et al (2001,86) “self-sufficiency turns out to be a daydream whose bubble is burst by the sharp edge of the limbic brain. Stability means finding people [and animals] who regulate you well and staying near them” They go on to note that:

Limbic resonance, regulation, and revision define our emotional existence; they are the walls and towers of the neural edifice evolution has built for mammals to live in. Our intellect is largely blind to them. Within the heart's true edifice, those who allow themselves to be guided by reason blunder into walls and stumble over sills. They are savants who can see too little of love to escape painful collisions with its unforgiving architecture. (ibid,229)

I have sought to write under the influence of limbic invention and have utilised breath sensation as the prism from which to peer beyond what I thought I knew. Affect, I suggest agitates for changes when re-addressing generative expressions of/alternative ways in which to know, to feel and to imagine otherwise. In my exploration of the more than human dyadic, the thinking with breath sensation is replete with complexities, contradictions and unruliness. Memories exist and rebound in non-teleological ways and are beyond the mere representation of ‘what happened.... breath movements can traverse the territory of memory: they become a declarative affirmation of “I was there”. It is in the configurations of intimacy/detachment from the social contract that breath relations invoke what Sesta and Vicars (2023,15) suggested are ways of:

...knowing as embodiment- knowing through our body- the hunger, tastes, discomforts and pains; knowing as emotion- opening us up to worlds of passions, intuition, fears and betrayals; knowing through deliberate imposition- thinking with ideas about the world and ourselves that are slippery and indistinct; knowing as situated inquiry- thinking about thinking- how far is knowledge able to ravel and does it still make sense in other locations and lives?

A tacit aim of this paper I set myself was to problematize the “anthropological arrogance” and “philosophical universalisms” as a prevailing component of methodological practice when approaching, the constituted worlds of the more than human in breath sensation. I have endeavoured to consider how claims can be made about knowing within the academe and the ways in which the knowledge constructed out of a centre/ periphery relation is troubling or made difficult by psychophysiological affects. Allen (2023) has articulated one of the difficulties is how ‘Knowledge tends to the assertion of a connectedness between things, or at least, where knowledge can connect one thing to another, it is seen to be doing well.’

Bochner (2014, 303) references another set of difficulties in his book *Coming to Narrative* in which he wrote of the force of methodological disciplinarity:

You wanted readers to imagine writing with soul. You wanted to get across the point that humans are flawed, messy and complicated beings who live with contradictions, have ideas and emotions, think and think about thinking...You wanted your stories to show that we humans frequently don't know what we're doing; that we sometimes feel vulnerable; bare our souls; keep secrets, feel ashamed, afraid, humiliated and heartbroken. You worry that...people won't appreciate that kind of writing. It's not scientific... and that you're starting to sound like a threat to the discipline.

This connects to my aim of engaging with the concept of *aisth sis*, as a primary perceptual-sensory experience produced and circulated by the limbic system in breath sensation. Law and Urry (2004, 401) have suggested: 'Social science has problems in understanding non-linear relationships and flows' but in my situating the notion of breath encounter as a pedagogical process of becoming and unbecoming Koeltzsch (2021,5) has spoken of how "We are our body and active introspection creates consciousness in a broad sense, above all, understanding of the self and others".

Contextualised by the postexperimental 6th moment (1995-2000) of qualitative enquiry which has paved the way for the advent of post foundational research biographical research has long been known for its for creative innovations and applications for recording experiences of individuals using a variety of technologies and telling stories is nothing new. Drawing on methodological mythopoesis that does not adhere to a rigid and predetermined structure that guarantees specific outcomes, rather a legitimization through story. I have attempted a translation of the corporeal assemblage of breath sensation into a textual representation. The post qualitative notion that any translation of human experience cannot be guided by a predetermined process but is a "pedagogy of interruption" (Biesta, 2010, 91) nurtures the diversity of ways of seeing and knowing the world. The porous aesthetics in narrating breath sensation can problematise the perpetuation of procedural narratives of normalcy of how identity, power and social being are contoured and curated with the more than human. In the onto-epistemic flux and fluidity of the Anthropocene, the post human affective influences interactions and advocates for new ways of knowing, understanding and framing the empirical world (Evans & Fern andez, 2018). Through the epistemic prism of posthumanism I am purposefully positioning how the social world can be explained, described and written. Situating breath capital, as something that gets done in relation to others, it is, I suggest a performative presence. Narrating breath sensation as a perlocutionary limbic location, can contribute to a lacunae of contextual analysis, to envision a different connection and perspective of kinship, care, love and loss in the entangled more than human-animal relations. Breath sensation has carried me to the threshold of my story and mindbody mattering. As I come closer to concluding this narrative, I am however, cautioned by Lewis et al (2021, 14) to remind you, the reader, that:

No multilettered neuroanatomical diagrams lurk within these pages. [I] have set out not to map the mind in numbing detail, but to lead an agile reconnaissance over landscapes that lie hidden within the human soul

In thinking with the more than human through the interpolations of affect and presence I turn back to the sensory and the emotional to acknowledge how limbic wellbeing and Tallulah were/are intra-connected and how at times



Figure 3: Tallulah

there are no words but only sensate breath from which to make meaning - see Figure 3

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