

CHAPTER 9

BREATH-BODY-SELF: A PRACTICE-LED JOURNEY

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on my PhD study that was completed in 2016. The thesis investigated the body as a site for generating images for purposes of performance-making. It was a study that drew from various traditions, methods and somatic practices, such as yoga, Fitzmaurice Voicework®, the Sanskrit system of rasa, body mapping and free writing.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the study was a hybrid of embodied practice and case study,²³ which, in the first instance, involved a series of five small experiments that took place over three years. The series of small experiments refined and developed various aspects of the tools and practices that make up the method of performance-making that the study proposes. A culminating workshop interrogated the application of this method in a creative process that combined all the tools and practices and formed the main case study of the research.



Figure 9.1: Namisa Mdlalose and Qondiswa James free speaking in main case study project.

Photograph by Sara Matchett.

The choice to include embodied creative processes as part of the study, in the form

²³ Embodied practice was at the core of the method of performance-making the study proposed and as such was key to the overall practice-led research methodology employed by the research. Embodied practice as methodology involves researching with and through the body. Case study as methodology involves the inclusion of a case study to support the research claims. In the instance of the thesis, I chose not to include the culminating embodied/creative workshop, which took place over a two-week period, as an examinable component (as would have been the case if I had chosen to do a PhD by creative project). Instead, the case study supported my findings. Video footage, audio recordings, blog posts and images housed in a website, were available to the examiners as an addendum to the thesis.

of case studies, alludes to the synergetic relationship between theory and practice. My thinking is that the relationship is one that is cyclical in that the practice gives rise to theory that is fed back into the practice. The cyclicity of it speaks directly to the method of image generation for purposes of performance-making which the study proposes, where the route between breath, body, emotion and image, maps a circular trajectory.

The study employed a practice-led, qualitative research design that drew from ethnographic and autobiographical approaches to research. It made use of grounded theory in that it utilised methods and practices to investigate lived and embodied experiences of the people it engaged, using the interaction and communication between people as the basis for research material and the subsequent generation of theorised practice in the form of a method for/of performance-making (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Coleman & O'Connor, 2008).

In my study I explored the idea of collaborative autobiography as a form of autoethnography which, according to Judith Lapadat (2009:955-956), engages collaborative approaches to writing, sharing, and analysing personal stories and experiences. The methodology involved me, in the first instance, employing an autoethnographic practice-led approach. To this end, I completed training in Fitzmaurice Voicework[®],²⁴ which included the making of an autobiographical performance (Small Experiment Three) that was developed into a 20-minute performance piece entitled *Breath-Bones-Ancestors*, first performed on 1 August 2012 at the *Freedom and Focus* Conference in Vancouver, Canada. While developing *Breath-Bones-Ancestors* at the beginning of 2012, I concurrently worked with a South African performer interning with The Mothertongue Project²⁵ to create a work entitled *Ngangelizwe*²⁶ (Small Experiment Four). The performer expressed an interest in making an autobiographical work and was curious to employ the tools I was using to make *Breath-Bones-Ancestors*. In addition, a workshop around autobiographical performance-making resulting from these experiments was conducted at the National School of Drama in New Delhi in September 2012 (Small Experiment Five).

These projects, which I titled 'Small Experiments' were incorporated as mini case studies into the thesis. Included in these Small Experiments were two additional investigations that preceded Small Experiments Three, Four and Five. Small Experiment One was with second year UCT students of Theatre and Performance, where I experimented with combining body mapping and Nawarasa Breath Patterns (see textboxes below) in character and textual analysis. Small Experiment Two was a class project undertaken with first year UCT Theatre and Performance students where I attempted to investigate the relationship between the Fitzmaurice Deconstructing Sequence (FDS), breath, body, emotions and meaning. These Small Experiments led me to understand exactly what

24 <https://www.fitzmauriceinstitute.org/fitzmaurice-voicework>.

25 A women's arts collective which I co-founded in South Africa in 2000 (www.mothertongue.co.za).

26 Xhosa for 'of the nation'.

this study investigated, and ultimately fashioned the two-week creative project/process that formed the main case study. I documented the practice chronologically as a timeline documentation. This was informed by the iterative nature of the embodied experiments that culminated in the main case study.

FITZMAURICE VOICEWORK®

Fitzmaurice Voicework® works with tremoring, which is the body's way of bringing itself back to a state of balance. The tremor encourages breath to flow through the body in such a way as to release energetic blockages and habitual patterns that may have formed in the muscles of the body. This frees the body and voice from tension and enables a more spontaneous breath, allowing space for imaginative expression. The Deconstructing Sequence comprises particular postures/efforts that form the sequence.

NAWARASA BREATH PATTERNS

The system of *Nawarasa*, is associated with the over 2000-year-old Sanskrit treatise on acting, namely the *Natyasastra*, in that it is the core premise of the aesthetic theory presented in the text. The goal is for the performer to evoke the *rasa* in the bodies of the audience. *Nawa* means nine, and *rasa* is the felt sensation or essence of emotions. The nine *rasas* are *Shringara* (love/eroticism), *Hasya* (joy/laughter), *Adbhuta* (wonder), *Veerya* (courage/bravery), *Raudra* (anger/fury), *Karuna* (sadness/melancholy), *Bhayanaka* (fear), *Vibhatsa* (disgust), *Shanta* (calmness/peace). An engagement with the system of *nawarasa*, encourages emotional agility and dexterity on the part of the performer.

Small Experiments One and Two engaged first and second year students. The Third Small Experiment was an exploration that focused on myself. I felt the need to consolidate my findings in my own body before progressing with further experiments. This self-exploration was pivotal in developing the method the study proposes. The Fourth and Fifth Small Experiments involved more experienced performers and thus enabled a more in-depth exploration. This allowed more time to focus on the tools the research proposes, whereas with the junior-year students, I had to be mindful of the balance between their learning and my research. Each experiment built on and informed the next. These experiments culminated in the main case study that involved senior students of theatre working alongside two graduates: one recent graduate and one experienced professional. The main case study allowed space to revisit the findings from the small experiments. It provided a focused laboratory-like space in which the findings the small experiments had raised could be investigated in more detail.



Figure 9.2: Namisa Mdlalose free-writing as part of the main case study project. Photograph by Sara Matchett.

In my experience, practice-led research as a methodology is about “meshworking” and “wayfaring” (Ingold, 2011:63), where the research reveals itself along “paths of movement” (2011:143), and as it does so, it meshes itself into a performance, or a method of performance-making, as was the case with this study. When I set out on the PhD journey, I knew I wanted to explore breath and its relation to performance-making with women who live in violent contexts. That was all I knew. The specific questions, however, revealed themselves to me through practice. Additionally, the insights gleaned from the practice informed a set of theories that underpin the study. Data was collected, out of which theories were defined, which in turn were woven back into the data, leading to what could be termed a grounded practice methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Coleman & O’Connor, 2008). The set of theories, based both on my own practice experience and that of other people, gave rise to the method for making a particular kind of performance which engages women’s experiences in particular kinds of ways to speak back to a specific social context, to assist them to develop a sense of self that enables them to become more visible to themselves, and to relate to the world they inhabit.

METHODS

Some of the key qualitative methods I employed in data collection were interviews, observations, reflexive journaling, focus groups and digital documentation and blogging. The first four methods were used in the small experiments phase of this study, and the last four for the main case study.

Interviews

The small experiments involved various forms of interviews. The interviews for each of the experiments were a combination of structured and unstructured questions. The first experiment involved face-to-face interviews with a sample of four participants. Each interviewee was interviewed alone. I structured a set of questions but allowed further questions to emerge from each participant’s responses. These unstructured questions contributed to a conversational tone that characterised the interviews. I audio

recorded and transcribed each interview. The data helped shape the research questions that emerged. The second experiment involved a class task made up of two key open-ended essay questions that were posted on *Vula*, UCT's online collaboration and learning platform. These questions, although open-ended, were structured. Experiment Four involved a face-to-face interview as well as a set of questions that were emailed to the research participant. As with Experiment One, I structured a set of questions, and allowed for unstructured questions to arise out of the participant's responses, which resulted in a conversational tone. I audio recorded the face-to-face interviews and after transcribing the responses, identified key questions. These questions were structured and emailed to the participant for further deliberation. The participant's responses gave rise to further key questions.

Observation

Elaine Aston's notion of "embodied practice" as opposed to "disembodied observation" (2007:12), led me to understand the observational role of facilitator/ performance-maker/ researcher as one that is embodied, that works in relation to the performers being facilitated and that is continually being shaped by the engagement with, and responses to, the work the facilitator/ performance-maker/ researcher brings to the rehearsal room. In this way a conversation is set up between the facilitator/ performance-maker/ researcher and the performers. Arguably, this conversation is where the research lies. The research in turn becomes embodied. Embodied implies a sense of immediacy, a sense of the unknown becoming known from moment to moment, and in this process, changing from moment to moment. Ingold refers to participant observation as "a way of knowing *from the inside*" (2013:5, italics in original). This is aligned with Aston's assertion that embodied knowledge, "points to modes of exchange and sharing of knowledge and of understanding orientated towards the experiential, the physical and the material" (2013:12). The disembodied observer, on the other hand, implies a research method that relies predominantly on retrospective academic reflection. This is not to say that I did not retrospectively reflect academically on the research that was produced in practice-oriented focus group sessions, workshops and in rehearsals. It is, however, to say that the process of generating material in the moment informed, from moment to moment, the knowledge this study produced.

All the small experiments and the main case study involved an aspect of embodied observation. In all of them, bar one, I occupied the role of facilitator. In some, I occupied the role of performance-maker and director and in one, the role of maker and performer. Observation occurred over a period and worked in tandem with self-reflexive journaling on my part. Experiment One involved a four-week process, during which I met with students daily during the week to rehearse a production. The research occurred during the rehearsal sessions. Experiment Two involved facilitating, and by implication, observing, a semester-long theatre-voice course, which comprised two 90-minute classes a week over a period of 13 weeks. Experiment Three involved a considerable amount of self-observation as I developed a performance using various tools (and combinations of tools). I engaged with this experiment as performance-maker and performer. My observations in

this experiment gave rise to key features of the method of performance-making proposed by this study. Experiment Four engaged me in the role of facilitator, performance-maker and director. I was able to explore several questions that arose during Experiment Three, which subsequently led to further refinement of the proposed method. Experiment Five involved facilitating a group of 25 actors over a period of five days for three hours a day. The main case study involved working with five research participants for seven hours a day over a two-week period (Monday to Friday).

Reflexive journaling

Over the course of this study, I attempted to document my discoveries through Kaye Shumack's notion of the "conversational self". Shumack proposes that "[t]hrough a structured approach using journal entries, experiences of the ... process are introduced as reflective internal talkback" (2010:1). She adds that in this approach,

... decision points and perspectives are negotiated and potentially contested through a series of voices of self as I, Me, You, and We. These voices are intertwined within the journal narrative. (2010:1)

The decision to use this method was an attempt to explore ways of capturing the multifarious experiences and discoveries made during the various experiments. Robert Mizzi's ideas around multivocality in research writing, resonated with Shumack's notions of the "conversational self". Mizzi advocates for:

Multivocality as an autoethnographic method to: (a) illustrate that there is no single and temporally-fixed voice that a researcher possesses, (b) unfix identity in a way that exposes the fluid nature of identity as it moves through particular contexts, and (c) deconstruct competing tensions within the autoethnographer as s/he connects the personal self to the social context. (2010:1)

The choice to use these approaches in processes of reflexive journaling resonated with the choice to use practice-led research as a methodology. The "conversational self" and "multivocality" imply a mesh of ideas and perspectives. I found that journaling with the intention to converse with the multiple roles I occupied in this study – in other words that of researcher, facilitator, performance-maker, director, and performer – offered discoveries that informed subsequent experiments. In this way the research revealed itself to me along "paths of movement" (Ingold, 2011:143). The conversations I had (with myself) through reflexive journaling, unearthed dynamic pathways that gave rise to pivotal discoveries and ensuing experiments.

Focus groups

Small Experiments One, Two, and Five, and the main case study, involved working with different groups over varying periods. Experiment One engaged a group of ten

students in a four-week rehearsal process. A major component of this process involved group discussions at various points during the rehearsal sessions. These discussions served to inform the way I structured the following day's rehearsal. Additionally, they contributed to shaping the method of performance-making that the study proposes. Similarly, Experiment Two involved a class of 30 students in structured classes over a 13-week period. The classes were interspersed with group discussions and reflections that informed research into the relationship between the FDS, breath, body, emotions, and meaning. Experiment Five entailed working with 25 actors over a period of five days. The sessions were punctuated with regular group discussions. With verbal consent from the participants, these discussions were audio recorded and informed the research material. The main case study of this research engaged a group of six research participants, including myself, over a two-week period. Verbal discussions and reflections were audio recorded and informed the findings and analyses thereof.

Case Study: digital documentation and blogging

Challenges that surfaced at intervals during this study included methods of documenting and capturing the ephemeral moments that constitute the main case study of this research. To this end, I decided to document the two-week creative project through a private WordPress site²⁷ that I set up prior to commencement of the project. The site functioned as a repository for participant reflections, my reflections, video and audio footage, still images, and images that were generated during the process. It held the traces that emerged and were generated over the course of the two-week project. The site contained seven pages:

- **Introduction to research**

This page provided an overall introduction to the research undertaken in the study.

- **Blog**

I posted questions daily to which I invited the participants to respond. I chose to use the format of a blog to allow space for interaction and reflection between participants. The blog served as a digital journal for the participants. My intention in setting up the blog in this way was to encourage a collaborative approach to journaling, and it was a means of extending the exploration of collaborative autobiography as a form of autoethnography into the main case study. I began with some idea of the broad blog questions with which I wanted to engage the participants. The specific questions, however, emerged out of the practice. The experiences and reflections of the participants each day informed the planning for the following day's work.

- **Media gallery**

This page housed video as well as audio footage captured over the two-week process. I uploaded the audio and video footage as private YouTube clips to protect the privacy of the participants.

²⁷ I kept the site private to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. They however all agreed to make it available to my supervisor, external examiners, and academic scholars.

- **Researchers' notes, reflections and insights**

I used this page to journal my reflections and observations as well as to plan and outline the structure of each day.

- **Free writing**

The participants were invited to upload selections from the various free writing exercises undertaken over the two-week period.

- **Research participants**

This page provided brief introductions to each of the research participants (including myself). I chose not to dictate how they should present themselves and allowed them to include whatever information they wanted to share about themselves. Some of the introductions took the shape of more formal biographies, while others were sketchier and more playful.

- **Generated images**

This page contained samples of the images that were generated through the method of performance-making that the study proposes.

The WordPress site proved to be an effective way of collecting, capturing, and analysing the data that emerged over the two-week project/process. It saved hours of transcribing audio recordings and handwritten journal entries. In this way, a conversation was set up between the actual research in practice and the analysis of the practice. In other words, the structure of the two-week process informed the way the material was analysed and recorded in the thesis. Additionally, the structure of the two-week process emerged as the process progressed, with each day informing the next.



Figure 9.3: Nwabisa Plaatjie and Rehane Abrahams making poetry as part of the case study project. Photograph by Sara Matchett.

CONCLUSION

The initial title for the study was “Mapping breath-body-self”. My exposure to Ingold’s notion of “wayfaring” opened a series of questions around whether the study engaged

me in processes of mapping or whether the fabric of the method revealed itself to me through the experience of “wayfaring”. In considering the features of a map and mapping, it became apparent that I was not following a pre-ordained path, which had been clearly written or mapped out for me, but was rather making discoveries along the journey, and that these discoveries culminated in a mesh of ideas that I have called a method of performance-making.

This practice-led study arguably utilised an anthropological approach in that as a researcher I studied with the people with whom I worked. Additionally, it utilised a case study method to collect data, which allowed space for different kinds of case studies that had different purposes. For example, the small experiments could be viewed as mini case studies that helped refine the research questions I was asking about the practice. The small experiments aided me in coming to a clearer understanding of what it was I was interested in developing through the study. The second kind of case study I utilised was one that puts the understandings gleaned from the first kind of case study into practice, as a way of testing something rather than opening up or refining a territory. This is what I set out to do in the main case study. The study engaged me in a process of working forwards through practising on myself and on others as a way of developing my ideas before refining them. Thereafter, I engaged in a process of testing the ideas in a more concentrated way. The aspect of testing shifted the way of working and engaged more of a documentary element. The combination of these two kinds of case studies enabled me to combine Ingold’s notions of “wayfaring” and “meshworking” (2011:63) with ethnographic approaches that are concerned with data collection.

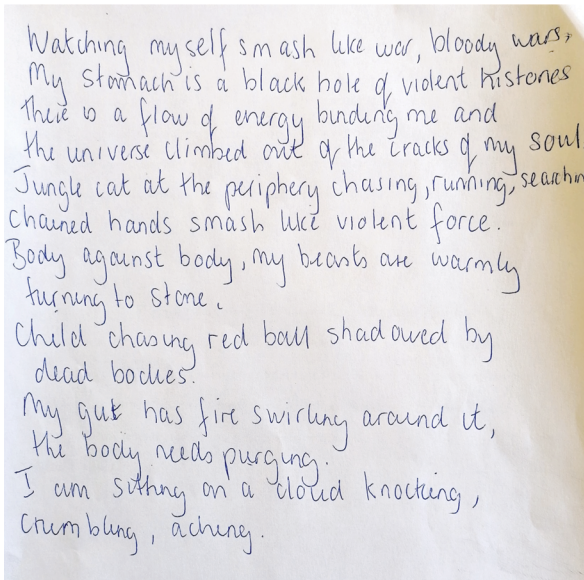


Figure 9.4: Collective poem created as part of the main case study project. Photograph by Sara Matchett.

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