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Reflection: Affect and Interdisciplinarity – Got Rhythm?

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It can often feel strange being a literary scholar working on affect. We spend our time grappling with theories of emotion and embodiment, the senses and the somatic. We immerse ourselves in the formal intricacies of narrative, description, meter: tracing the patterns through which feeling finds its social and cultural shapes through language and metaphor. The work we do is physical in its own way—our books are stacked beside us as we write—yet our methods can often seem far removed from the situated, material practices of our colleagues in other disciplines. Our training (at least traditionally) is quite distinct, say, from the place-based ethnographical methods of anthropologists or the fieldwork of cultural geographers. We 'grapple', we 'trace', we 'immerse ourselves'—but not quite like a wrestler in hand-to-hand combat, an architect at the drawing board, or a diver taking the plunge. The philosopher Michel Serres, for instance, views the scholar as a figure 'drugged by knowledge', who needs to return to the 'vital quality' of 'things themselves' (103, 112). Affect theory has taught us, of course, to be wary of any dualism that divides 'representation' from 'reality': the words that are our focus of study have their own particular affective, material modes of agency. Yet there nevertheless remains a niggling sense that we might be missing out on capacities of experience beyond the printed page.

Today, I co-lead the Affective Experience Lab at Durham University, an interdisciplinary collaborative space for medical humanities research which investigates the significance of emotional and sensory experience in health and wellbeing. I work regularly with scholars whose techniques for investigating emotion are very different to my own—psychologists, sport scientists, sociologists, and dance therapists. We frame our work around the 'affective' because it signals a shared interest in exploring experiences that are often nebulous, ephemeral or difficult to express. Although such states can be central to people's sense of wellbeing, they often remain illegible to conventional biomedicine, not least because they are typically impossible to capture using the objective measurements of conventional scientific tools. Researchers in our lab often turn instead to the usefulness of the creative arts for

exploring aspects of health and illness. My own starting point as a literary scholar has always been with the written word. But increasingly my collaborators register the value of non-representational art forms, such as music and dance, for articulating those emotional states that resist verbal articulation, not least through their complex embodied engagement with sound, touch and gesture.

One of our aims in the Affective Experience Lab is to nurture methodological experiment in the medical humanities. In this spirit, I recently integrated a Dalcroze Eurythmics workshop as part of an interdisciplinary symposium on 'Rhythm and the Body' in May 2024, involving many of my regular collaborators. Eurythmics is a body-based approach to music education, which develops students' awareness of rhythm, structure, and musical expression through movement. It was developed by the Swiss musician Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) and continues to inform musical education today, particularly for younger children (Bachmann, 1991). My own experience with Dalcroze Eurythmics began in a workshop organised by a choir with which I sing. We had recently been rehearsing George Frederic Handel's 'Coronation Anthems', written for the crowning of George II in 1727. The focus of the session was on helping us to better internalise—at an embodied and gestural level—one short movement of the anthem 'The King Shall Rejoice', which begins with the words 'Exceeding glad' (I'd recommend the recording by The Sixteen on Spotify). The Dalcroze instructor guided us through a series of physical exercises that drew our attention to different formal aspects of the piece: phrase structure, time signature, rhythm, counterpoint, and intervals. Each of these aspects was explored through distinct movements and gestures. We bounced balls on the strong beats of the bar whilst walking freely around the room (3/4 to 6/8 to 4/4). We traced the shapes of musical phrases in the air with long colourful scarves. We mirrored the sense of tension and release in different musical intervals (a tritone, a perfect fifth), our arms splayed out at oblique angles or coming together in an embrace. It was all great fun.

The experience spoke directly to our concerns in the Affective Experience Lab, and so I decided to incorporate this exercise in our 'Rhythm and the Body' symposium. The event was principally an opportunity to celebrate the work of the literary scholar Laura Marcus, whose monograph *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measure of the Modern* was published posthumously in 2023. Building on the capacious scope of Marcus's cultural history, it explored the complex

function of metaphors of rhythm across a wide range of different disciplinary contexts. Our participants included literary scholars, musicologists, a sport scientist, psychologists and anthropologists. In terms of format, much of the day was fairly conventional. We heard a series of stimulating short papers on themes including the significance of ritual and repetition in the anthropology of religion, the representation of 'fiddling' hands in literary modernism, and how reading poetry aloud better attunes us to its metrical properties.

I was curious, though, about what impact it would have to frame this symposium around a Dalcroze workshop. Our workshop for 'Rhythm and the Body' was, necessarily, less advanced than the one I had completed with my choir. But it still involved us hopping and skipping around our seminar room in response to musical prompts played on the piano by our instructor. How would a group of scholars—all intellectually committed to understanding rhythm, at least in the abstract—respond to the demands of thinking rhythmically through the body itself? In the days following the symposium, I contacted our participants to ask for their reflections on the event. The mundane conclusion that their responses led me to was that a single two-hour workshop likely did little to reshape their pre-existing investments in their own disciplinary methodologies or to reframe their assumptions about the value of evidence generated through embodied practice. At the same time, though, it nevertheless proved a thought-provoking occasion for reflecting on the *affective dynamics* (and challenges) of working across disciplines.

Moving together in space, perhaps unsurprisingly, prompted some notable reflections on the dynamic relationship between the individual and the group. One participant was struck by how the Dalcroze method sought to resist what affect theorists such as Teresa Brennan have called 'entrainment'—the tendency of bodies to move together as they become rhythmically synchronized (68-70). 'We naturally all began to walk, by whatever obscure law or instinct, in the same direction, like fish in a shoal', she observed. '[T]he practitioner', though, 'was keen for our rhythms to be individual, rather than communal.' Another participant observed, in similar terms, the stark difference between moments when 'your movements are supported by the rhythm of other bodies', and the 'absolute frustration when your own sense of rhythm is disturbed by one or more other bodies in the space'.

This participant's sensitivity to feelings of 'absolute frustration' might be seen to pick up on the palpable (though unacknowledged) sense of awkwardness in the seminar room that day. We had, after all, brought together scholars from different disciplines who were mostly unfamiliar with each other and asked them to engage in an activity that was childish and potentially even embarrassing. Work by Felicity Callard and Des Fitzgerald has explored the challenging affective dynamics of interdisciplinary collaboration. 'It might be helpful to acknowledge', they conclude, 'how psychologically, practically, and emotionally exhausting interdisciplinarity can be' (128). Claudia Sterbini has recently registered the 'isolat[ion]' experienced by 'researchers navigating ideas of interdisciplinarity, making them feel alone in their struggles' (2023). Similar sentiments underpinned one of the most thoughtful (and phenomenologically rich) reflections I received, from a participant whose disciplinary background was in experimental psychology:

> [F]eelings of awkwardness were made immediately apparent during the Dalcroze Eurythmics workshop which kicked off the day. I felt a strong sense of literally stepping out of my comfort zone as I and eight other newly-met academics hopped and stepped and clapped along in time to the changing pitch and tempo of musical notes from the piano. It was challenging, but with continued effort and encouragement I gradually managed to right myself. […]
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> Later that day I felt similarly out of step as I heard a series of excellent talks covering (amongst other topics), the rhythmic nature of architectural choices, the changing rhythms of funeral services across history and the playful adjustment of rhythm in poetry, theatre and other artistic forms. […] [T]his experience was akin to clumsily adjusting my feet as the Dalcroze practitioner stepped us up to a higher tempo. However, I learned a great deal that would not have been possible without that nudge to push me out of my comfort zone.

Here, the account repeatedly returns to metaphors of movement, gesture and spatial orientation to characterise their feelings of 'awkwardness' in the symposium. The participant 'literally step[s] out of their comfort zone' in the Dalcroze workshop and later feels 'out of step' when speaking alongside scholars from different disciplines. 'Right[ing]' themselves combines a metaphor of bodily position (uprightness) with one of epistemological certainty (correctness). The challenge of reframing their research in the interdisciplinary symposium is compared to 'clumsily adjusting [their] feet'. The demand to enter an uncomfortable interdisciplinary space—even if it is ultimately one in which you 'learned a great deal'—is

framed in similarly physical terms as something that feels like a 'nudge' or a 'push'. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, our 'comfort zones'—whether disciplinary or domestic—are always sustained provisionally through the orientations by which our bodies come to feel at home in space: 'We learn what home means, or how we occupy space at home and as home, when we leave home' (9). The rhythms of an interdisciplinary space—where our research methods are out of sync or out of sequence—can often leave us feeling lost.

Affect theory has had much to say about the modes of sociality that might emerge through bodies moving together. Yet it has often remained wary of bodies that fall into rhythm. Michel Foucault memorably argues that the 'collective and obligatory rhythm[s]' of the timetable constitute one of modernity's 'great methods' of control (152). And falling into a steady, collective rhythm might risk becoming a deadening force of habit. More recently, though, scholars such as Caroline Levine have argued for the pragmatic value of reclaiming rhythm, repetition and routine. Confronted with the intractable challenges of addressing global climate crises, Levine looks to the value of 'comparatively durable orders and arrangements of material infrastructures [that] shape collective life over long periods' (54). These, she suggests, are best sustained by 'routines that make fairness and environmental justice easier, smoother, more unthinking, than unfairness' (63). Levine's work might direct us (at a more modest scale) towards those affective routines and rhythms that could sustain interdisciplinary collaboration. In our case, the productive, uncomfortable tensions of our Dalcroze workshop offered a starting point for thinking about alternative ways to begin the slow work of building a community of scholars from across disciplines. It alerted us to the affective challenges of methodological experimentation, whilst reinforcing a sense that literary studies still has much to gain by engaging with models of embodiment and the senses from other disciplines.

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