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It begins with us:
On why our embodied experiences matter in the dis/appearance of worlds

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"To 'de-passion' knowledge", writes Vinciane Despret, "does not give us a more objective world, it just gives us a world 'without us'"(2004, p. 131). In producing 'knowledge-in-practice' about our/the 'body-in-action' (Mol and Law, 2004, p. 51),"having fun, doing something we do well for the sheer pleasure of doing it" (Graeber, 2014) figures as a form of 're-attuning' and 're-sensitising' ourselves, to re-passion' our bodies and knowledges. In this short piece, I would like to write about us, STS researchers. I would like to discuss our embodied "significance and agency in the emergence/occlusion of worlds. Usually concealed in the sphere of the 'private', 'quotidian' and 'mundane', I hope to persuade you that your embodied experiences, – always already situated within specific spatio-temporal frames –, matters –, first of all, to you/us, being then crucial for the relationships we establish with our colleagues, ''epistemic partners' (i.e. informants) and, ultimately, for our discipline(s).

In all its complexities and demands, our academic labour involves examining, analysing, theorising, writing, explaining, lecturing about scientists, scientific theories, technologies, its policy and innovation frameworks as well as biomolecules, microbes, patients, bodies, non-humans, non-western practices and many *other* elements. That is, these are only a few of the vast and heterogeneous array of elements that populate our work life. Where are 'we' in such a populous list of (*other*) agents, matter, meaning, and worlds in which we dedicate such a significant part of our lives?

While we deeply study processes of re- and des- naturalisation between science and society, processes of our own bodily des-/re-naturalisations remain largely unspoken. Our own body, particularly at its physical and affective levels, has been what Chris Chilling calls an 'absent present' (2012) in the humanities and social sciences. This is a striking aspect, especially taking into account that the (gendered, racialised, (dis)able) body is a key concern of what we study, namely contemporary biomedicine and (western) societies. The 'absent presence' of our bodies is not only striking. It is also a paradoxical trait of our academic persona considering the general consensus against Cartesian dichotomies (subject/object, material/immaterial, nature/culture, rational/irrational). We use the prevalent notions of 'entanglements', 'biosocial', 'naturecultures' and similar material-semiotic companionships as a response to the western precept of the mastery of the mind (read Euro American imperialism and colonialism) over the body (read also non-whites, women, microbes).

Yet, in spite of our epistemological registers, I believe that there clearly is a mismatch between our theories and how we enact them or, to be more precise, why we rarely enact them by bringing them back to our bodies and lives. In other words, our individual and collective bodies as academic workers, our 'carnal knowing' (Sobchack, 2004), are systematically elicited and concealed in our research. A more unpleasant explanation could be that our bodies and embodied experiences have never been there. Drew Leder (1990) refers to this phenomenon as the 'absent body', by which bodies and related motor abilities disappear from conscious awareness and reside in the 'background' of experience. Ignored and silenced, we seclude our bodies into our 'academic (rational) minds'; as if in a proficient 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) of disembodiment (mind from body) we had transcended them, as if we were… 'transhumans'? What are the consequences of concealing or even ignoring our own bodies from the knowledge-practices we co-create?

Accumulating exhaustion from the many tasks and increasing demands of academic life, we are now reclaiming slower modes of knowledge-practices making (Stengers, 2018). Yet, together with our 'disembodied habitus', the structural perversity of the web of productivity and success makes it hardly possible to decelerate (for the many, I believe). This, of course, excludes those able to take time (e.g. to publish…fast!). In an inspiring plenary session at the joint EASST/4S Conference 2020, Ulrike Felt addressed this great divide between 'those who can make time and those who are out of time' as the 'real expression of power' (Felt, 2020). Exclusions, she argued,

> "are no longer brought about by depriving people of material resources or denying access to specific places or placing them at the periphery. Rather, exclusion occurs tacitly, to simply making it difficult to hardly possible to be an active part of the same temporal-regime; to be able to synchronise and imposing- emergence of specific technoscientific worlds and not others"

This quote accurately captures a reality experienced by many of us. In my case, having my child during my doctoral years in a foreign country with the most expensive childcare of the world and without shared responsibilities or support network, took a huge toll into my postdoctoral prospects. As for the majority of women with family responsibilities, time, dedication, can only be fragmentary. Childcare, housework, funding applications, teaching, a bit of research, and back again. A bitter consequence of discontinuous time is deceiving those colleagues and mentors who support you and your work. Missing deadlines, conferences, missing 'opportunities'... In brief, not being able to 'synchronise'. These vicissitudes, along with an unfortunate episode of abuse of power and appropriation in the race for success, has turned my own ('success') into a 'mere' or 'virtual' potentiality. That is, a potentiality deprived of 'real' possibilities. Soon after: the pandemic, contagion, and long Covid.

Despite my research being about the entanglements between microbes, embodiment and inequalities, I have succumbed to the Cartesian matrix. Stretched to its limits, my body shut down. Defying multispecies efforts at deconstructing immunitary rhetoric, quintessential in Corona times, my body was perhaps protecting itself from precarity and exploitation, for all the mistreatment it endured for a long while. Rushing transformed into stillness. Unable to talk or walk much for months, my physical body reappeared back into consciousness, as often occurs when we experience illness (Leder, 1990). Theory, writes Sara Ahmed, 'can do more the closer it gets to skin' (2017, p. 10). My embodied experiences of long Covid have given me the opportunity to slow down, to be in convalescence, to be conscious again of 'bodily borders' and 'vulnerabilities' (Shildrick, 2002).

Using lived experiences as the basis on which to challenge scientific objectivity and positivism (Hesse-Biber, 2008, p. 336), illness narratives and embodied knowledge have been fruitful feminist methods of research for decades (Barad, 2007; Blackman, 2012; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Smith, 1999). Embodied biographies are in fact an indispensable part of the efficacy of more conventional medical treatments (Anderson and Mackay, 2014). Since the pandemic started at the beginning of 2020, medical and illness narratives have acquired an unprecedented public and scientific relevance. Likewise, the embodied experiences of bacterial and viral infections have been underexplored aspects of social science work on multispecies ethnographies (Núñez Casal, 2019) until recently.

Among those hundreds of thousands infected with SARS-CoV2– medically categorized as 'mild' (Callard, 2020) and thus mostly recovering at home – their vast myriad of mutable and debilitating symptoms often last for several weeks or even months. In confinement, emerging online communities of patients with long-term Covid-19 are established in Spain, Italy, South Korea, the UK, the US, France, and Finland, providing online support groups and broad networks of collective action around the disease. As occurs with other 'recalcitrant infections' (e.g. UTIs), in the absence of appropriate (health)care, dietary changes along with supplements from various medical traditions have become crucial as the only available ways to address the multiple vulnerabilities and inequalities (i.e. healthcare, employment and childcare in convalescence) experienced at home by those with persistent Covid-19. Here, Western biomedicine is very ill-equipped compared to the integral or holistic ways of seeing health and disease in traditional and complementary medicine (Mathpati et al, forthcoming). These

embodied narratives –, informal personal and collective pharmacopoeias of domestic management of persistent and relapsing microbes (e.g. *E.coli*, SARS-CoV2) – offer rich data on how to understand and approach recalcitrant infections differently (Núñez Casal, 2020, forthcoming).

Importantly, if, as Felt reminds us, "we experience time mostly through narratives", then attending and listening to embodied experiences is a way through which to "render time visible" (i.e. disease progression, recovery, etc). Against the erasure of data that truncates the linear and seemingly 'objective' scientific knowledge production, our role as *connoisseurs*, that is, as 'agents of resistance against a scientific knowledge that pretends it has general authority' (Stengers, 2018, p. 9), is crucial. Resonating with the argument of Harro Van Lente (2020) in relation to sustainable academia counter movements, *connoisseurs* as an alternative mode of 'expertise' regain public relevance (see Savransky, 2016) along with patients, – listening to, interpreting, and analysing embodied experiences. They become the medium through which these private individual experiences become socialised. It is through this socialisation of embodied bodily experiences that, I believe, it is possible to offer sensible or—using Haraway's term—'Chthulucenic' alternatives (Haraway, 2016) to biomedicalisation and biome depletion (Núñez Casal, 2018, 2019).

Our embodied being is "not just a location for society and culture" but "f*orms a basis for* and *shapes* our relationships and creations" (Chilling, 2012, p. 15). Bringing embodied experiences to the forefront of our critical analysis (either implicitly or explicitly in our research) would (1) make STS research relevant to wider academic and non-academic publics as well as (2) open up alternative spaces and paces towards 'sensible' (read also sustainable and ethical) knowledge-practices in our disciplinary domains, towards the emergence of (inclusive) worlds, worlds that begin with us.

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