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Towards a Radically Relational Post-Grotowskian Performance Paradigm

Abstract

Jerzy Grotowski chose to name his Collège de France lecture series *La „lignée organique” au théâtre et dans le rituel* (*The „Organic Lineage” in Theatre and Ritual*), and the author, who attended and documented these final public talks, contends in this article that organicity constitutes a through-line connecting Grotowski's theatrical and post-theatrical research. The author draws from these talks, as well as from her Grotowski-based training, including her work with Rena Mirecka, and her research collaborations with Indigenous artists and scholars from Turtle Island (North America), including Floyd Favel, who worked with both Grotowski and Mirecka. The author points out that in diverse traditional cultural practices whose role it is to enhance, restore, and sustain balance between human and non-human forms of life, organicity is understood as a living force endowing performative

processes with energy, power, and efficacy. The post-Grotowskian performance paradigm envisioned by the author hinges upon a non-anthropocentric perspective informed by the ecological and spiritual dimensions of relationality articulated by several generations of Indigenous scholars. She contends that such a paradigm shift, which challenges artistic practices glorifying human creative agency, can provide a viable alternative to the dominance of (Eurocentric) new materialist/posthumanist theories of non-human agency.

Keywords

Jerzy Grotowski, Rena Mirecka, Indigenous epistemologies, non-anthropocentric performance, relationality

Abstrakt

Ku radykalnie relacyjnemu paradygmatowi performatywności

Jerzy Grotowski zatytułował swój cykl wykładów w Collège de France *La „lignée organique” au théâtre et dans le rituel* („Linia organiczna” teatrze i rytuale). Autorka, która dokumentowała te ostatnie publiczne wystąpienia, stawia tezę, że organiczność stanowi linię łączącą teatralne i postteatralne badania Grotowskiego. Odwołuje się do tych wykładów i do własnego treningu opartego na praktykach Grotowskiego, w tym do pracy z Reną Mirecką, a także do współpracy badawczej z rdzennymi artystami i badaczami z Turtle Island (Ameryka Północna), między innymi z Floydem Favelem, który praktykował z Grotowskim i z Mirecką. Autorka wskazuje, że w różnorodnych tradycyjnych praktykach kulturowych, których rolą jest wzmacnianie, przywracanie i podtrzymywanie równowagi między ludzkimi i nie-ludzkimi formami życia, organiczność jest rozumiana jako żywa siła nadająca procesom performatywnym energię, moc i skuteczność. Post-Grotowski paradygmat performatywności zaproponowany przez autorkę opiera się na nieantropocentrycznej perspektywie inspirowanej ekologicznym i duchowym wymiarem relacyjności podkreślanym przez kilka pokoleń rdzennych badaczy. Autorka twierdzi, że taka zmiana paradygmatu, która rzuca wyzwanie praktykom artystycznym gloryfikującym ludzką kreatywność, może stanowić realną alternatywę dla dominacji (eurocentrycznych) nowomaterialistycznych/posthumanistycznych teorii nie-ludzkiej sprawczości.

Słowa kluczowe

Jerzy Grotowski, Rena Mirecka, indygenne epistemologie, nieantropocentryczna performatywność, relacyjność

While Grotowski's decision to abandon theatre in the 1970s to focus exclusively on experimental performance research remains controversial among a number of theatre scholars and practitioners, including his close collaborator Eugenio Barba, I contend that the title of Grotowski's Collège de France lecture series, namely, *La "lignée organique" au théâtre et dans le rituel*, (The "Organic Lineage" in Theatre and Ritual), highlights the primacy of organicity, thereby pointing to a through-line connecting his theatrical and post-theatrical research.¹ My documentation of these final public talks, along with my Grotowski-based training, including my work with Rena Mirecka,² and my research collaborations with Indigenous artists and scholars from Turtle Island (North America) have led me to understand organicity as radically relational. Conceiving of organicity as a living force that endows performative processes with energy, power, and efficacy is pivotal to diverse traditional cultural practices that sustain health and well-being, experienced as an ecosystemic balance between all forms of life. Building on this dynamic conception of organicity, the post-Grotowskian performance paradigm that I envision here hinges upon a non-anthropocentric perspective informed by the ecological and spiritual dimensions of relationality articulated by several generations of Indigenous scholars whose work has become increasingly influential in Canada, in part as a consequence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (2015).³ I argue that this paradigm shift, which challenges artistic practices that foreground, uphold, and glorify human (often masculine) creative agency, provides a viable alternative

¹ Grotowski's nine Collège de France lectures took place between March 1997 and January 1998 (1997: March 24, June 2, June 16, June 23, October 6, October 13, October 20; 1998: January 12 and 26). I documented the first seven Collège de France lectures in the Polish theatre journal *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, and am currently working on the documentation of the final two lectures for the *Journal of Theatre Anthropology*.

² See the chapters "Practice: Mapping Out Interconnections" and "Towards an Ecology of the Body-in-Life" in Virginie Magnat, *Grotowski, Women, and Contemporary Performance: Meetings with Remarkable Women* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 57–156, as well as the film for my *Meetings with Remarkable Women* documentary film series featured on the Routledge Performance Archive, *The Dream: Rena Mirecka's Laboratory of Paratheatrical Research in Brzezinka*, video, The Routledge Performance Archive (Taylor and Francis, 2016), <https://www.routledgeperformancearchive.com/multimedia/video/the-dream-rena-mireckas-laboratory-of-paratheatrical-research-in-brzezinka>.

³ "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created through a legal settlement between Residential Schools Survivors, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives and the parties responsible for creation and operation of the schools: the federal government and the church bodies. ... The TRC prepared a comprehensive report on the policies and operations of the schools and their lasting impacts. The final report included Ten Principles for Reconciliation and 94 Calls to Action that speak to all sectors of Canadian society." Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website, <https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/>.

to the dominance of (Eurocentric) new materialist/posthumanist theories of non-human agency.

Beyond Theatre

Grotowski's quest for "what is alive" and for "what is most essential," as stated in his 1970 talk "Holiday (*Święto*),"⁴ compelled him to leave theatre productions behind and carry out a series of post-theatrical performance experiments during the periods known as Paratheatre, or Active Culture, the Theatre of Sources, Objective Drama, and Art as Vehicle, or Ritual Arts.⁵ Significantly, Paratheatre, or Active Culture, often took place outdoors and fostered experiences of connection, attunement, and kinship with the natural environment: "man-bird, man-colt, man-wind, man-sun, man-brother. . . . The brother of earth, the brother of senses, the brother of sun, the brother of touch, the brother of Milky Way, the brother of grass, the brother of river."⁶ I suggest that this unconventional conception of relationality links all the phases of Grotowski's post-theatrical research, including Theatre of Sources, Objective Drama, and Art as Vehicle, or Ritual Arts, the final three periods during which Grotowski considered that the vibratory qualities of traditional songs could (re)connect the singer to those who sang these songs for the first time, a process of attunement to the ancestors as well as to the place, environment, territory, and/or land in which these songs first resonated.⁷

The presence and agency of the natural environment is foregrounded by Grotowski in "Holiday" when he remarks: "We have a saying in Poland: *We were not there—the forest was there; we shan't be there—the forest will be there.*"⁸ He seems to suggest that it might be possible to emulate organic ways of being and knowing pertaining to other/more-than-human life when he asks: "And so, how to be, how to live, how to give birth as the forest does?" and remarks: "I can also say to myself: I am water, pure, which flows, living water; and then the source is *he, she*, not *I*: he whom I am going forward to meet, before whom

⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, "Holiday," in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner (London: Routledge, 1997), 215, 220.

⁵ See "Towards an Ecology of the Body-in-Life," the third chapter, in Magnat, *Grotowski, Women, and Contemporary Performance*, 113–156.

⁶ Grotowski, "Holiday," 221.

⁷ Jerzy Grotowski, "Tu es le fils de quelqu'un," trans. James Slowiak and Jerzy Grotowski, in Wolford and Schechner, *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, 294–305.

⁸ Grotowski, "Holiday," 217.

I do not defend myself. Only if *he* is the source can *I* be the living water.⁹ He then evokes the desire to fulfill a vital need: “To be ‘looked at’ (yes, ‘looked at’ and not ‘seen’); to be looked at, like a tree, a flower, a river, the fish in that river.”¹⁰ He stresses that these are not metaphors, not a philosophy, but something tangible and practical that one does: “This has to be taken literally, this is experience.”¹¹ He goes on to specify:

In the fulfilling of essential experiences we know: something is happening with me. And is happening in a most concrete way: in the senses, in the skin, in the tissues. We are not taking possession of it, but it takes possession of us, and then all our being quivers and vibrates. We are a living stream, a river of reactions, a torrent of impulses, which embraces our senses and the entire body.¹²

The notion of organicity can be traced to the period of theatre productions, during which Grotowski investigated performance processes in which impulses give birth to organic physical actions which, in turn, cause free associations of ideas, images, memories, and emotions to surface. The Laboratory Theatre actors hence developed a physically-based training designed to enable them to build a precise, repeatable physical score of organic actions fueled each time by a new flow of impulses and associations occurring in a non-predetermined, non-premeditated manner, thereby ensuring that their work was always alive. Grotowski was especially interested in performance processes that induced a transformation of energy generating a different quality of perception, beyond realistic representations of life on stage, and, ultimately, beyond theatre. Furthermore, in the paratheatrical research conducted outdoors, the performer’s psychophysical relationship to nature may be said to have supplanted the relationship to the performance space inhabited by other performers and spectator-witnesses that was central to the theatrical period. Borrowing Grotowski’s way of speaking about artistic experimentation, I would contend that it was *as if* nature had become both a partner and a witness, a double function also pertaining to human beings as partner-witnesses of nature. The notions of actor and spectator thus became irrelevant simply because the exchange taking place between partner-witnesses no longer belonged to the realm of theatre.

⁹ Grotowski.

¹⁰ Grotowski, 218.

¹¹ Grotowski, 219.

¹² Grotowski, 222.

Experiencing Organicity as Human and More-than-Human

I was fortunate to attend Grotowski's nine Collège de France lectures given in French and hosted by various Parisian theatres between March 1997 and January 1998. These were Grotowski's final public talks prior to his death a year later, and I documented the first seven lectures in the Polish theatre journal *Didaskalia*. In his inaugural Collège de France lecture, Grotowski provided the example of the movement of trees swaying in the wind, or the ebb and flow of the ocean on the shore. He remarked that the expressiveness that can be perceived in nature by the viewer appears without the purpose of illustrating, representing, or expressing anything: without the presence of the viewer, these natural phenomena keep occurring and recurring, unnoticed. He went on to explain that, for him, two opposite but complementary poles were always present in the creative act: the pole of "organicity" and the pole of "artificiality," in the "noble sense" (first, second, and third Collège de France lectures). Organicity hence refers to the existence of the living process which, according to Grotowski, characterizes an expression not elaborated in advance, whereas artificiality is characteristic of human efforts to shape, structure, and compose materials in order to represent something destined to be perceived. The Polish director stressed that all artworks were, by definition, art/ificial, and that both realistic and non-realistic means of creating theatre relied, at least partly, on artificiality. The notion of "montage," for instance, which is especially relevant to Grotowski's directorial work, belongs to the pole of artificiality. In the 1993 interview "C'était une sorte de volcan" (A Kind of Volcano), Grotowski establishes a connection between the human and the animal qualities of organicity and asserts that organicity implies, at a primal level, "living in agreement with natural laws," inferring from this definition that "the child is almost always organic." The Polish director links organicity to the impulse-based process which gives life to the performer's physical actions, stating that, when structuring these actions into a physical score, "the form should be preceded by what must precede it, that is, preceded by a process which leads to the form."¹³

Rena Mirecka, the leading actress of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, independently developed her own paratheatrical research after the Polish director moved away from paratheatre to focus on the Theatre of Sources in the late seventies. Mirecka transmitted in her teaching non-anthropocentric performance training that entailed becoming a conduit, or channel, for human and

¹³ Jerzy Grotowski, "A Kind of Volcano," interview by Michel de Salzman, in *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, ed. Jacob Needleman et al. (New York: Continuum, 1996), 91.

other/more-than-human sources of energy, and actively cultivating embodied connections with both human and non-human partners. Relationship to nature was central to her approach, and between 2007 and 2012 I worked with her at various natural sites, from the verdant campus grounds of the University of Kent in Canterbury to the Sardinian wilderness, as well as the forest of Brzezinka in Poland. The training fostered performance processes open to change and transformation, inducing the performer to experience an interconnection between the organicity of the human body and the organicity of the natural world. Mirecka's paratheatrical approach entailed cultivating organic processes that mirror in both a metaphorical and material way the organic circulation of energy within natural ecosystems. In my conversations with her, she explained that after many years of work on herself she understood her inner creative process to be a river: she was aware of the power of that river and familiar with the different stones, plants, and animals within. During her work sessions, she encouraged participants to take the time to be with and listen to nature, which she noted speaks without words. She stressed that everything around us is made of the same energy—forest, ocean, sun, wind, and sky—hence the importance of working within the embrace of nature. Mirecka related this vast natural ecosystem to the inner garden of our organism and suggested that we are in this world to try to understand how to fulfill all of our potentialities so that our whole being may exist in relationship with all other forms of life.

This embodied conception of relationality also applies to the body-voice connection, and Mirecka explained that experiencing the organic connection between body and voice, movement and sound, physical action and vocal vibration, is like stepping lightly into a canoe—only after developing a friendship with the water can we navigate the river. She emphasized that, as with the physical training, working with the voice is an inner process that is both passive and active, enabling us to be open and to create a relation, a meeting with others, through a continuous flow of the voice, of the breath, which also has to do with involving the heart, with not being cold. The voice can thus help to establish an interconnection between the inner and the outer, between self and other, and between human energy and the energy of the natural world. Mirecka envisioned the voice as an extension of movement, that is to say, of physical actions rooted in the flux of impulses and connected to personal associations, and she often evoked non-human forms of movement by referring to natural elements through the use of imagery, thereby inviting performers to experience sound and movement as the source of organic life.

Grotowski's and Mirecka's respective post-theatrical approaches to performance practice therefore open up alternative notions of relationality and agency,

the latter consisting in a form of active receptivity that can be described as “a state in which one does not ‘want to do that’ but rather ‘resigns from not doing it.’”¹⁴ This seemingly paradoxical conception of agency is also related to *wu wei*, the Taoist notion of non-doing, which does not signify “not doing anything” but rather allowing what can be accomplished to occur (Grotowski’s third Collège de France lecture), thereby privileging disarmament over confrontation, vulnerability over virtuosity, and a vigilant form of letting go over a will to know, own, and control. In his seventh Collège de France lecture, Grotowski observed that when we will our mind to direct, to find out how to achieve something, we commit the perpetual error that epitomizes a manipulative culture: wanting to know first and then applying that knowledge. He maintained that this doesn’t work because, in the arts, one must take another route where doing is knowing (*faire c’est savoir*), instead of knowing and then doing. As specified by Ryszard Cieślak in the 1975 documentary film *The Body Speaks*, the ultimate goal of the training is to enable the performer to relinquish control in order to experience the kind of freedom that comes from release through an active form of *lâcher-prise* (letting go). In my book *Grotowski, Women, and Contemporary Performance: Meetings with Remarkable Women*, I suggest that *lâcher-prise* might be more of a challenge for men brought up in cultures that associate will, control, and physical power with masculinity, and where women are discouraged from being assertive, forceful, and decisive. Hence, it is ironic that Grotowski relied on very few women leaders in this training, given that women would seem to be culturally predisposed to disarmament, vulnerability, fluidity, and openness to change.

An Ecosystemic Conception of Performance

The primacy of organicity which I experienced in Mirecka’s teaching has led me to conceive of an alternative performance paradigm grounded in what I define as an ecosystemic conception of organicity linked to the scientific hypothesis according to which human life and natural ecosystems share fundamental features. Environmental biologist Daniel A. Fiscus formulates this hypothesis in his attempt to define ecological health. Fiscus responds to the question “what is life?” by suggesting that “a reciprocal relation with environment is arguably

¹⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, “Towards a Poor Theatre,” in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (New York: Routledge, 2002), 17.

as important for understanding life as it is for understanding ecosystems.”¹⁵ He points out that scientists who posit an ecosystemic origin of life propose to adopt a holistic treatment of life and its environment as a single evolving system.¹⁶ He goes on to suggest that if life is characterized by two integrated functions, namely metabolism and repair, which he links to the composer–decomposer functions in ecosystems, then “the ecosystemic organization of life from its origin onward is more fundamental than the cellular or organismic forms of organization.”¹⁷ He builds on this argument to develop the hypothesis that the ecosystem is “the general, self-perpetuating form of life, and cells and organisms are special-case subunits of life that cannot persist in isolation.”¹⁸ He infers that such a hypothesis provides insights into “life’s capacity for open-ended evolution,” and concludes that the ecosystemic organization of energy flow is key to understanding life itself.¹⁹ Fiscus’s ecosystemic life paradigm thus hinges upon the principle according to which life and natural systems possess a comparable capacity to restore themselves, a perspective which resonates with Indigenous ontologies upholding the interconnectedness of all forms of life.²⁰

The ecological and spiritual dimensions of this radically inclusive relationality are articulated by several generations of North American Indigenous scholars who foreground the ethical principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility that bind human and other/more-than-human agents. I infer that an ecosystemic approach to performance informed by an inherently relational organicity supports an ecological understanding of performance that challenges both anthropocentric and gendered conceptions of agency. Moreover, the non-anthropocentric conception of agency posited by Indigenous epistemologies may be said to offer a truly radical, if not “new,” eco-critical approach to the crucial questions raised by the relatively recent new materialism and posthumanism paradigm shift.²¹ While the latter explores other/more-than-human conceptions of agency, its claim to doing something “new” fails to acknowledge Indigenous

¹⁵ Daniel A. Fiscus, “The Ecosystemic Life Hypothesis I: Introduction and Definitions,” *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 82, no. 4 (2001): 250, [https://doi.org/10.1890/0012-9623\(2001\)082\[0235:SACN\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1890/0012-9623(2001)082[0235:SACN]2.0.CO;2).

¹⁶ Daniel A. Fiscus, “The Ecosystemic Life Hypothesis II: Four Connected Concepts,” *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 83, no. 1 (2002): 94–96 [https://doi.org/10.1890/0012-9623\(2002\)083\[0077:C\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1890/0012-9623(2002)083[0077:C]2.0.CO;2).

¹⁷ Daniel A. Fiscus, “The Ecosystemic Life Hypothesis III: The Hypothesis and Its Implications,” *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 83, no. 2 (2002): 147, [https://doi.org/10.1890/0012-9623\(2002\)083\[0131:C\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1890/0012-9623(2002)083[0131:C]2.0.CO;2).

¹⁸ Fiscus, “The Ecosystemic Life Hypothesis III,” 147.

¹⁹ Fiscus.

²⁰ See the chapter “Towards an Ecology of the Body-in-Life,” in Magnat, Grotowski, *Women, and Contemporary Performance*, 113–156.

²¹ See the chapter “Exploring (K)new Paradigms,” in Virginie Magnat, *The Performative Power of Vocality* (London: Routledge 2019), 124–186, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429340338-3>.

ways of knowing and being that have a particularly long history of accounting for and valuing non-human agency, including that of culturally-specific stories, songs, music, and dance, whose role it is to activate the world, restore balance, and provide a source of healing within the complex ecology of human and non-human life. Indigenous people from Turtle Island express the sacred nature of this ecology through the phrase “All Our Relations.”

From such a perspective, organicity may also be said to have its own agency since it animates the performative processes of diverse cultural, traditional, and ritual practices that significantly contribute to sustaining health or well-being experienced as an ecosystemic balance between all forms of life. The spiritual dimension underlying this holistic conception of performance may be equated to a deeply felt experience of life as precarious equilibrium, to borrow Barba’s terminology, and the current ecological crisis may thus be interpreted as a spiritual crisis due to a lack of balance between human and non-human forms of life resulting from industrial and technological development in service of capitalist productivity. As Kenneth J. Gergen observes in *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, a sustainable relationship between human beings and the natural world is critical to the survival of all forms of life on earth:

To understand the world in which we live as constituted by independent species, forms, types, or entities is to threaten the well-being of the planet. . . . Whatever value we place upon ourselves and others, and whatever hope we may have for the future, depends on the welfare of relationship.²²

This compelling notion of welfare as relational, which Gergen associates with the well-being of the planet, supports an ecosystemic view of our relationship to the environment which has become increasingly informed by Indigenous ecological knowledge.

Land and Ceremony as Teachers

As with Grotowski, Mirecka’s interest in ritual performance practices was wide-ranging, and she came into contact with North American Indigenous traditions through her encounter with Floyd Favel, a Cree director, actor, and writer who worked with Grotowski at the outset of *Art as Vehicle* and who also

²² Kenneth J. Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 396, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199846269.001.0001>.

participated in Mirecka's early paratheatrical research. In my conversation with him,²³ Favel acknowledged his indebtedness to Grotowski and Mirecka, while observing that he was the first "Indian" these Polish artists encountered. Favel recalled Mirecka as a particularly inspiring teacher and noted that her knowledge of techniques came from a wide range of sources. He told me that he always fully participated in Mirecka's work and had wonderful human experiences, which he said had been healing for him. I shared with him that I witnessed tangible traces of the influence of Indigenous cultural practices in Mirecka's teaching, such as the invitation to honor with her the four directions and four colors of the Medicine Wheel, which conveys the ethical form of reciprocal relationality between human and non-human life that is pivotal to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. He suggested that Mirecka's integration of basic elements from North American Indigenous traditions was designed to assuage European people's fear of living, which he linked to the malaise of their civilization. In his view, it could be productive for experienced artists such as Mirecka to draw from a wide range of sources and use basic elements from these traditions to heal people from the harmful effects of modern society.

Favel hence provided the example of walking in the woods at night, which had become an integral part of Grotowski's paratheatrical experiments and is still practiced today by some of those who worked with him. As in all the other exercises where verbal communication is used neither by the leader nor by the participants, this walking always occurs in silence. Commenting on this kind of practice, Favel explained that in Northern Saskatchewan, he had come into contact with an elderly hunter-trapper medicine man who walked in the forest at night as if in daylight. This skill was linked to his intimate knowledge of the land, and Favel stressed that in this region hunters still walk at night in the forest and guide their boats through the water over vast areas that can span up to fifty square miles. He observed, however, that the difference between Northern Saskatchewan hunters and the guides who took participants in the forest at night during Grotowski's paratheatrical experiments was that the former had developed a "soft presence" that made them invisible, as if melting into their surroundings. The latter, on the other hand, were so focused on being present and aware that their walking could sometimes take on a dominating quality.

Favel emphasized that Grotowski and Mirecka were attempting to respond to a need in their society. He said that he had nothing against adapting a particular technique to specific needs, such as Mirecka's integration of the Medicine

²³ Floyd Favel, personal interview, January 28, 2011.

Wheel into her paratheatrical approach, as long as the teacher had the proper sensitivity to guide people through it. If it felt good for them to walk in the woods, for instance, then they should do so. He recalled that the healing process he had experienced when working with Mirecka had helped him when he was very young and very far from home, and acknowledged that her approach had made him feel fulfilled, intrigued, and deeply engaged. He inferred from this personal experience that Mirecka, like Grotowski, was a good teacher. He observed, however, that the privilege of learning from a master-teacher comes with the responsibility of searching for one's own way, pursuing one's own creative work, and transmitting it to others.

Favel returned to Canada to conduct his own research, and he developed a contemporary theatre method and process for Indigenous theatre based on Cree ritual, social structures, and epistemology. This approach, named "Native Performance Culture" (NPC), is expressed by Favel through the equation $(Fa[H(Tr \times Pr)] = Th^2)$, where "Fa" refers to family or community, "H" stands for healing, "Tr" stands for tradition, and "Pr" stands for process. The result, "Th²," is theatre squared, inspired by Antonin Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double*: for Favel, the double is the Spirit World and functions in his theatre as a spiritual and healing experience related to ceremony.²⁴ He infers that NPC is "a spiritual method" relying on techniques "derived from Indigenous ritual structures," and specifies that, for Indigenous people, ceremony is irremediably linked to the history of colonialism in Canada:

In the pre contact times, the purpose of ceremony was for humans to be in balance with nature. After colonisation, healing oneself from residential schools, abuse, wars, genocide, family breakdown and so on, became the main purpose of ceremony. It always reminds the participants that they are a spiritual being and part of Creation.²⁵

He stresses that from a Cree perspective, this means that one's spirit is "in non-intellectual communication with all Spirit forces," so that one's words and actions become endowed with more power, requiring one to be more conscious of what one is doing.²⁶

²⁴ Sabina Sweta Sen-Podstawska and Floyd Favel, "Performance Training as Healing: Reflecting on Workshops Leading to Indigenous Theatre Process Native Performance Culture (NPC)," in "Performance Training and Well-Being" ed. Virginie Magnat and Nathalie Gauthard, special issue, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 13, no. 2, (2022): 200, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2066333>.

²⁵ Sen-Podstawska and Favel, "Performance Training as Healing" 209.

²⁶ Sen-Podstawska and Favel.

Favel's collaborator, Sabina Sweta Sen-Podstawska, an Odissi dancer and performance scholar at the University of Silesia in Poland, writes about engaging in NPC training while working on an Indigenous adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* at the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan:

As we kept learning the NPC method through a series of exercises, conversations and exchange of touch, sight, hearing, movement, laughter and tears, the land remained the nourisher, the guide, the silent observer, teacher and friend. . . . Our entire work, both the training and the final performance, took place on the land by an enchanted lake inhabited by a benevolent spirit. In a dream, Floyd's deceased ancestors showed him this place as a sacred and creative space for the revival of Indigenous theatre.²⁷

Sen-Podstawska recalls working on Sonya's monologue in a ceremonial tipi after Favel had shared with her that in Cree culture it is a sacred space that belongs to women, since the tipi stands for the body of a woman (*iskw^ew*) with the fire (*iskot^ew*) at the centre as her heart (*otêh*). She describes how this sacred space shaped her experience of land and ceremony:

When as Sonya, I entered the very centre of the tipi, which was the ceremonial altar the previous night, I experienced a kind of fear mixed with uncertainty. Continuing Sonya's monologue, I felt the gentle warmth and softness of ash mixed with sand and earth. . . . When I got used to the sand under my bare feet, I knelt, sat down and touched the ground, I felt a pleasant smoothness and softness of the earth. . . . I felt the warmth of my mother's embrace.²⁸

She observes that she had entered

a liminal space between ceremony and performance, from where the energy, impulse and direction of the performance arose. . . . The mother's blessings and teachings that Sonya lacked in her life are found in the warmth of the ceremonial fire, which guides her through a healing process that enables her to come to terms with her feelings and thoughts.²⁹

²⁷ Sen-Podstawska and Favel, 202.

²⁸ Sen-Podstawska and Favel, 207.

²⁹ Sen-Podstawska and Favel.

Sen-Podstawska concludes her testimony with the observation that her work with Favel offers “a space for decolonization and healing,”³⁰ and I would suggest that the land, the lake, and the ceremonial tipi of the Poundmaker Reserve may be credited as key collaborators whose other/more-than-human creative agency entailed effectively hosting and curating a successful intercultural encounter between Cree traditional cultural practice and the Indian performance tradition of Odissi.

Importantly, what distinguishes Indigenous conceptions of non-human agency from Karen Barad’s agential realism, which has been particularly influential in new materialist/posthumanist theory, is the non-separability of matter and spirit.³¹ Gregory Cajete, a Tewa citizen of the Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, hence asserts that Indigenous cosmologies offer “profound insights for cultivating a sustainable relationship to place and a spiritually integrated perception of Nature,” insights that are particularly valuable “in the face of the rapid transformation of the Earth by Western science and technology and the ecological crisis that is unfolding at the same time.”³² Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli-Meyer relates Indigenous ways of knowing to concepts of dynamic interdependence, non-separability, self-organizing systems, mutual causality, complementarity, and entanglements, pointing to a “(k)new world epistemology [put forth by] Indigenous people and allied scholars.”³³ She describes a holistic healing process that requires “faith in wholeness and interconnection,” as expressed by the phrase “*the whole is contained in all its parts*.”³⁴ The interrelation of human and ecological welfare is addressed by Oglala Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. when he evokes our intuitive experience of the energy and power of the natural world linked to our personal involvement in the processes of nature through the great bond bringing together all forms of life within the complex whole of the cosmos (*The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*).³⁵ Accordingly, Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, the author of *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, foregrounds in this influential book the Indigenous ethical principle

³⁰ Sen-Podstawska and Favel, 209.

³¹ See Magnat, “Exploring (K)new Paradigms,” 124–186. Cf. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

³² Four Arrows, Greg Cajete, and Jongmin Lee, *Critical Neurophilosophy and Indigenous Wisdom* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010), 102.

³³ Manulani Aluli-Meyer, “Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense,” *China Media Research* 9, no. 2, (2013): 94.

³⁴ Aluli-Meyer, “Holographic Epistemology,” 94 (emphasis in original).

³⁵ Vine Deloria Jr., *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

of relational accountability informed by the knowledge that “everything that we do shares in the ongoing creation of our universe.”³⁶

From Active Culture to Ritual Arts

During his sixth Collège de France lecture, Grotowski provocatively declared that it was absurd to describe the Theatre Laboratory’s work in terms of physical theatre, insisting that it was “an eternal legend” mistakenly associated with his company since the body itself had never been its focus. Having asserted that the physically-based training he had developed with the Laboratory Theatre actors was designed to eliminate *blocages* (blockages) within the body in order to allow the flux of impulses to take place, unimpeded, he referred to the Polish term *duchowe* to describe this process and specified that the literal translation for this word was “a visible spiritual process” (*un processus spirituel visible*). Speaking about the final phase of his research, which focused on ritual arts, Grotowski evokes in his 1987 talk “Performer” what he defines as the “I–I,” namely, a performative process which involves being simultaneously “passive in action and active in the seeing (reversing the habit).”³⁷ This implies that presence and perception are interrelated within the double task of the performer: “Passive: to be receptive. Active: to be present.” Grotowski refers to an ancient parable expressing this interaction between receptive action and active receptivity:

*We are two. The bird who picks and the bird who looks on. The one will die, the one will live. . . . To feel looked upon by this other part of yourself (the part which is as if outside time) gives another dimension. There is an I–I. The second I is quasi virtual; it is not—in you—the look of the others, nor any judgement; it’s like an immobile look: a silent presence, like the sun which illuminates the things—and that’s all. The process can be accomplished only in the context of this still presence. I–I: in experience, the couple doesn’t appear as separate, but as full, unique. . . . I–I does not mean to be cut in two but to be double. . . . To nourish the life of the I–I, Performer must develop not an organism-mass, an organism of muscles, athletic, but an organism channel through which the energies circulate, the energies transform, the subtle is touched.*³⁸

³⁶ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point: Fernwood, 2008), 138.

³⁷ Jerzy Grotowski, “Performer,” trans. Thomas Richards, in Wolford and Schechner, *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, 378.

³⁸ Grotowski, “Performer,” 378.

Grotowski conveys through the second “I,” whose non-judgemental gaze illuminates the actions of the first “I,” what he means by presence. He links this silent presence to a type of work on oneself which, although it is embodied, does not hinge upon the kind of muscular strength required from athletes, but on the ability to become a conduit, hence the importance of receptivity, which Grotowski posits as a fundamental aspect of action. From such a perspective, the performer’s presence may be understood as a form of embodied awareness that is also a way of knowing through doing.

The Polish director relates presence and awareness in “From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle,” published in Thomas Richards’s 1995 book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, when he states: “Awareness means the consciousness which is not linked to language (the machine for thinking), but to Presence.”³⁹ This form of embodied awareness is “a matter of doing,” a perspective that Grotowski associates with his investigation of ritual actions when stating in “Performer”: “Ritual is performance, an accomplished action, an act.”⁴⁰ When addressing ritual during his Collège de France lectures, Grotowski pointed to a relationship between aesthetic and ritual performance based on the live process that they share and that he described as a transformation of energy generating a different quality of perception. He had previously discussed this process in his 1985 talk “Tu es le fils de quelqu’un” (You Are Someone’s Son), suggesting that embodied perceptivity generated by ritual performance practice can be traced to an ancient position of the body in which “the spine is slightly inclined, the knees slightly bent, a position held at the base of the body by the sacrum-pelvis complex.”⁴¹ Associating this position not only with *Homo sapiens* but also with *Homo erectus* because it “seems to fade out of sight in the night of the ages,” Grotowski links it to the reptilian brain, “which is the oldest and which begins in the posterior part of the brain and descends the whole length of the spinal column.”⁴² Having specified: “I speak of all this through images, without any scientific pretensions,” he suggests that “we have in our body an ancient body, a reptile body,” and points to the techniques developed by various traditions to access “the primary energy” within that body.⁴³ He observes that when moving and vocalizing in a way that is both organic and structured, rhythm emerges

³⁹ Jerzy Grotowski, “From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle,” trans. Thomas Richards et al., in Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 125.

⁴⁰ Grotowski, “Performer,” 376.

⁴¹ Grotowski, “Tu es le fils de quelqu’un,” 297.

⁴² Grotowski, 297–298.

⁴³ Grotowski, 298.

from “the waves of the ‘old body’ in the actual body.”⁴⁴ When the performer engages in this process, the body’s vertical axis becomes connected to “two different poles: that of instinct and that of consciousness,” so that in traditional techniques “one holds these two extreme poles at the same time.”⁴⁵ For the performer, this entails “standing in the beginning,” the latter being defined by Grotowski as “all of our original nature, with all of its aspects: divine or animal, instinctual, passionate,” which are “present now, here,” in the performer’s way of standing and keeping watch with her/his consciousness.⁴⁶ He evokes “a quality of vigilance,” a heightened embodied awareness producing a presence hinging upon acute perceptivity, and “it is this tension between the two poles that gives a contradictory and mysterious plenitude,” which he contrasts with “our everyday tepidity” when we are “neither fully animal nor fully human.”⁴⁷ He refers to dances and songs that are “the outcome of very long practices” whose purpose is “to reach a totality, a fullness.”⁴⁸ From this perspective, “the dance and song which should be executed in a structured and organic manner, and at the same time kept up with alertness,” enable the performer to experience a non-representational performative process whose potency has to do with “the circulation of energy,” a primary energy whose source is found within the reptile body.⁴⁹

Grotowski’s cogent intuitions about the relevance of ancient ritual arts for his practice-based performance research can be traced back as far as his 1969 talk “Réponse à Stanislavski” (A Reply to Stanislavsky), in which he states that he is interested in “a way of life and cognition” that is “a very old way.”⁵⁰ He provides the example of Late Paleolithic paintings and engravings dating to 14,000 years ago and located on the walls of the deep interior chamber of the Trois Frères cave in southwestern France. The most famous figure, which is both painted and engraved, is a hybrid being that looks like a dancing human wearing antlers and a stallion’s tail. It is known as the Horned God, or the Sorcerer (according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica). Grotowski questions conventional interpretations of these ancient paintings:

⁴⁴ Grotowski, 299.

⁴⁵ Grotowski, 300.

⁴⁶ Grotowski.

⁴⁷ Grotowski.

⁴⁸ Grotowski, 301.

⁴⁹ Grotowski, 301.

⁵⁰ Jerzy Grotowski, “Odpowiedź Stanisławskiemu,” *Dialog* 25, no. 5 (1980): 119, quoted in Zbigniew Osiński, “Grotowski Blazes the Trail: From Objective Drama to Art as Vehicle,” trans. Halina Filipowicz et al., in Wolford and Schechner, *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, 400.

I am not sure whether those who painted on the walls of the Trois Frères cave sought merely to exorcise their fears. Perhaps but not only. And I think that the painting was not the goal. The painting was the way. In this regard I feel much closer to that cave painter than to artists who think that they create the avant-garde of the new theatre.⁵¹

In *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, Cajete also refers to this rock art site when defining creativity as a holistic process in his discussion of “art as means of ceremony and transformation”:

The emphasis in the creation of traditional art is upon getting to the heart, the spirit, of an event or entity. . . . [T]he process and context of art-making [are] infinitely more important than the product. . . . There is a conscious effort to simplify, to become aware, to sharpen the senses, to concentrate, to revitalize the whole being. The idea here is to develop the ability to imbue an artifact with pure and simple vitality and to have the clarity of mind and stamina required to undertake a very difficult and sometimes dangerous task, such as the initiatory paintings of the caves of Lascaux and Les Trois Frères, France. There is a guiding spirit, or . . . the notion of applying one’s will to concentrate one’s whole being into a task, a creation, a song, a dance, a painting, an event, a ceremony, a ritual.⁵²

In light of Grotowski’s and Cajete’s insights into the transformative dimension of creativity, it is therefore possible to envision the ritual practices developed by our earliest ancestors not merely as an affective coping mechanism, but as a way of entering a performative process through which a transformation of energy takes place and a heightened quality of perception is experienced—a process, which, according to Grotowski, our reptile body still remembers today.⁵³ Moreover, in *Critical Neurophilosophy and Indigenous Wisdom*, Cajete and Don Trent Jacobs (Four Arrows) observe that, from an Indigenous perspective, artistic practice

⁵¹ Grotowski, “Odpowiedź Stanisławskiemu,” quoted in Osiński, “Grotowski Blazes the Trail,” 400.

⁵² Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 48.

⁵³ In the fourth chapter of *The Performative Power of Vocality*, I argue that Grotowski’s intuitive understanding of the connection between presence and consciousness achieved through doing is central to philosopher Alva Noë’s phenomenological analysis of the interrelation of presence, embodied experience, and consciousness, compelling Noë to envision “experience itself as a kind of dance – a dynamic of involvement and engagement with the world around us,” which leads him to infer: “To study the experience, we must study the dance,” Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 130. I infer that Noë’s definition of “the aesthetic stance: a critical awareness of and sensitivity to what you are doing” (Noë, *Varieties of Presence*, 131), along with his phenomenological reclamation of presence as a vital aspect of non-representational modalities of knowledge by which we gain access to the world, are particularly relevant to Grotowski’s post-theatrical investigation of performance.

necessarily implies engaging with the natural world. It is both processual and transformative since “the goal of Indigenous art is to reconnect with the source of life,” and its function is to convey a “sense of harmony and spiritual awareness that reminds us how deeply we are related.”⁵⁴ Such a processual, relational, healing, and transformative understanding of artistic practice therefore points to alternative conceptions of creativity that challenge anthropocentric understandings of aesthetic experience focused on human artistic productivity.

I have argued that in Grotowski’s own investigation of creativity, a relational form of organicity constitutes the through-line connecting the periods of Theatre Productions, Paratheatre, or Active Culture, the Theatre of Sources, Objective Drama, and Ritual Arts, or Art as Vehicle, thereby providing a sense of continuity that I relate to a quest for what is alive and for what is most essential, beyond human-centered conceptions of creative agency. In conclusion, I would suggest that exploring the liminal space between performance and ceremony—experienced by Sen-Podstawska as simultaneously embodied and land-based, freeing and grounding, alive and revitalizing—may transform performance research and practice by opening up hitherto unforeseen possibilities for the development of radically relational, inclusive, collaborative, decolonial, restorative, and sustainable ways of knowing, being, and doing.



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⁵⁴ Four Arrows et al., *Critical Neurophilosophy and Indigenous Wisdom*, 88, 92.

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