Thinking Through the Body in 'Action Anthropology'

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Abstract: *I write this paper in a spirit of exploration inspired by Richard Shusterman's work on somaesthetics to give language to what I have always known or, more precisely, felt yet struggled to adequately express about my practice as an 'action anthropologist'. Bringing somaesthetic theory and philosophy to bear on Sol Tax's proposal for action-oriented praxis in anthropology, I suggest that Tax's description of action – as "a program of probing, listening, learning, giving in" – shows how the possibility of change in action research arises from, and returns us to, the somatic conditions of people's self-empowerment and social agency.*

Keywords: *action anthropology, Sol Tax, participatory research, embodied change, somaesthetics of action, somapower*

1. Claiming one's condition

What I refer to as "action" in this article is the intention on the part of anthropologists to put the project of research in the service of "ordinary people" (Baba 2009, Price 2019). While today's discipline accommodates a spectrum of applied or collaborative approaches, the difference that an "action" or "participatory action" approach is said to make derives from the focus on providing human participants with the opportunity to use the tools of research to transform their reality on their own terms. How far back the turn to this participatory model of action goes in anthropology is still debated, but it was the Chicago anthropologist Sol Tax who first coined the term "action anthropologist" in 1959. For Tax, "action anthropology" referred to:

> an activity in which an anthropologist has two coordinate goals, to neither one of which he will delegate an inferior position. He wants to help a group of people to solve a problem, *and* he wants to learn something in the process. He refuses ever to think or to say that the people involved are for him a means of advancing his knowledge; and he refuses to think or to say that he is simply applying science to the solution of those people's problems. (original italics; 1975[1959], p. 515).

Reflecting on a ten-year project with Meskwaki peoples in Iowa, Tax described the 'action anthropologist' as an "experimentalist" who was "willing to make things happen, or to help them along, or at least to be catalysts" (1975, p. 515). For Tax, fieldwork was an ethical endeavor. "People are not rats and ought not be treated like them," Tax would write; "[c]ommunity research is thus justifiable only to the degree that the results are imminently useful to the community and easily outweigh the disturbance to it" (Tax 1959 quoted in Tax, 1975, p. 515).

Although disciplinary interest in Tax's specific proposal for an 'action anthropology' waned come the 1960s (Bennett 1996), his work lingered in the background serving, at different times, as a point of reference or as a counterpoint for a new grouping anthropologists around the world who were setting out to recast inquiry, and the idea of ethnographic fieldwork, as a radically political and liberatory tool.[1] Working in, and closely *with*, peasant and Indigenous communities connected in various ways to the swathe of anti-colonial and land reform movements during the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists like Orlando Fals-Borda (in Columbia) and Marja-Liisa Swantz (in Tanzania) were contributing to a paradigmatic shift borne from a clear rejection of the "false objectivism of positivist social science" (Swantz, 2008, p. 32). People were no longer the "objects" of inquiry but "human persons" and historical protagonists of their own lives (Reason & Torbert 2001). Fieldworkers now needed to justify their presence in communities and demonstrate how, given the conditions of poverty and structural inequality that people suffered under, any proposed project could help individuals move along by changing how they could see *their* world and thus transform it.

The vision of this new kind of research practice was participatory and action-oriented; it was transformational not foundational. By situating the poor, oppressed or marginalized at the center of projects, the purpose of research was to become an "agent of transformation" (Swantz, 2008, p. 33). For the Colombian sociologist/anthropologist, Orlando Fals-Borda (1991, p. 9), for example, the purpose was to "remake knowledge" so that people could eventually overcome their "limiting situations" (Freire 1969) and "progressively transform their environment by their own praxis" (Rahman, 1991, p. 13). Importantly, as the Bangladeshi intellectual Mohammad Anisur Rahman would write, the possibility for liberation through participatory action research relies on empowering people to "build their self-knowledge" and enhance their "self-awareness" (1991, pp. 15-18).

Rahman's words are telling. From the outset, Fals-Borda and others understood that radical social change was predicated on people's capacity for autonomous self-reflection. Autonomy was the key. By supporting marginalized communities to criticize and problematize their "problem situation" (Tax 1975), community facilitators assumed that people would come to see and find ways to realize a different future. Transformation then was about people "claiming their condition" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 213), an insight that, I suggest, turned action into a meliorative project driven by a desire to encourage people to trust in their experience but without being dictated by it.[2]

It was for similar reasons to these that in the 1990s two influential British scholars, John Heron and Peter Reason (e.g. 1997; also see, Heron, 1996), were inspired to bring the field of "action research" into conversation with the writings on personalism by the early-twentieth Scottish philosopher and public intellectual John Macmurray. For Macmurray (1970), the human capacity for intentional action makes clear the possibilities and conditions that the

1 The "participatory action" approach that Orlando Fals-Borda and Marja-Liisa Swantz became principal proponents of is but one approach that exists alongside but also, at times, in tension with a host of engaged, applied, activist-oriented and/or community-based approaches in anthropology. For a history of the interplay between so-called "pure" and "applied" approaches in the discipline, see Baba, 2009; Chambers, 1987; Lamphere, 2004.

2 Recognizing PAR as driven by a commitment to realizing people's 'autonomous self-reflection' is, I find, not so much poorly understood as overlooked. Fals-Borda (1991, p. 4), for example, conceived of his participatory action approach in response to his reading of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset's existentialist position on Man as "the novelist of himself," a Being, that is, who can transform their circumstances based on the understanding that they are neither natural nor fixed but a historical and therefore changeable set of conditions of one's existence. One finds connections here – indirect perhaps but nevertheless significant – to Paulo Freire's Marxist inspired notion of conscientization (of bringing people into awareness of the histories of their own oppressive situations so as to change them) and back to Tax's (1956) more liberal idea of freedom as action derived from people's right to self-determination, i.e. in the freedom of people to make mistakes. More work, I find, needs to complicate the idea of autonomy in PAR and assess the utility of other understandings such as "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), this could also extend to looking at how PAR overlaps with Emerson's ideas of moral perfectionism and those of personal renewal as found in the work of John Dewey and Stanley Cavell (see Granger, 2001; also see, Pedwell, 2021; Woodland, 2021).

world imposes on us. Yet, at the same time, our capacity for action also demonstrates that far from fixed, the world is contingent, particular and changeable. In light of such unpredictability, Macmurray argued, we have to be able to trust ourselves and other people with whom we are always in relation (Godway, 2010, p.5). As Eleanor Godway eloquently puts it in her writings on Macmurray: "[w]hat we do affects the future, indeed, inaugurates *this* future instead of any alternative, and this will be a future we all have to share" (original italics; Godway, 2010, p. 5).

Macmurray's metaphysics strongly resonate with the action turn. He makes it clear that agents are only such by virtue of being one among (many) Others. It is in our *encounter* with Others that we realize we are, irreducibly, "persons in relation" (Macmurray 1961). Macmurray's "Self" then is, as he writes, "constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal" (1970, p. 17). Macmurray would go on to name the primary condition of such relations, *friendship*. "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship" (1970, p. 15). With this, human flourishing is necessarily attained by intending the flourishing of Others. In the same vein, the action turn rejects any attempt to tell people 'how life should be'; rather, its force is to show people differences, posing the question of the kind 'how might things look and *feel* for you and others *if* you were to explore previously unnoticed openings to change aspects of how you go on in everyday life?'

Embodied Encounters

My point is that if action is the means of "claiming one's condition" then, in contrast to Paulo Frerie's position on the matter (1970), action is not an epistemological project. Instead, its work rests on bringing people into "an embodied sense of empowerment and agency which is *then* directed towards active self-and-world making" (my italics; Woodland, 2021, p. 5; also see Shusterman, 2014, p. 8). Speaking somaesthetically, the project of participatory action research aims for "improved experience" over "originary truth," flourishing and personal renewal over fixity and stasis; it is, then, a project of self-cultivation: "experience, growth … communication, consciousness-raising, ethical social action and transformation" (in Woodland, 2021, p. 5). Its modus operandi is to *orient* people to get out from under the schemes imposed on them by external regimes of power, by helping them see the world differently (Shotter, 2003, p. 296). Feeling empowered, feeling that faced with a specific problem or issue there is something to be done, people can choose to take their own decisions over what to do next. Ultimately, if the aim of the action turn is about allowing people to gain control of their own experience then its project is bodily; it is the encounter between people (and the world) that animates the anthropological project of action, an encounter that we can gain a better sense for by not thinking around or past the body but, rather, *through* it (Granger, 2010, p. 120, Shusterman 2012; also see Jackson, 1989).

2. Disembodied activism?

Given this internal connection between embodied agents and action and research, I have struggled with why it is that anthropological accounts of action are so somatically impoverished? If everything, as Wittgenstein (1959) reminds us, is right in front of our eyes, is bad eyesight an anthropological affliction? Obviously, the body is missing in these accounts (including my own – e.g., Watson, 2019, 2022), but why? Why are descriptions of the efforts of people to change their circumstances so …. disembodied?

For myself, a first, tentative step towards an answer has to do with the anthropological concept of 'voice.' Voice is now synonymous with the project of action: e.g. photovoice, storywork,

community voice method etc. Most projects aim "to give people a voice." This is considered a way of amplifying their concerns. However, the upshot of this move is that, consciously or otherwise, structural inequality is more often than not recast as a problem of self-expression (Couldry 2010). This is a key point I want to highlight because today one finds researchers investing significant political and symbolic capital in providing people with the space or opportunity to 'speak up' or to 'speak their truth.' This act is supposedly liberatory. It derives from an understanding that any individual or social group's direct experience of a particular lifeworld carries a privileged (epistemic) authority and (phenomenological) insight into that situation.

For action anthropologists, the power of voicing cannot be understated especially for the ways in which it helps practitioners draw on and mobilize other key concepts. For example, a principal method to help people 'find one's voice' is dialoguing *with* Others – a method that reaches back to Paulo Freire's proposal of critical pedagogy. For Freire, dialogue is an "existential necessity" for liberation (2017 [1970], p. 69). Dialogue is not "monologue, slogans, and communiqués" (2017 [1970], p. 47) but "the encounter between [persons], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (2017 [1970], p. 69). In this picture of inquiry, newness is equated with the spontaneously creative and social force of collaboration through language. As Joseph Dunne succinctly puts it: "when viewpoints are brought together in conversation then, like the rubbing together of fire sticks (to use Plato's image), they can sometimes produce the illuminative spark that no one of them can quite produce on its own" (1993, p. 21).

Conversation or dialogue is the basic framework of participation in which anthropologists most often place their trust when seeking to make people's voices matter. The anthropologist Davydd Greenwood and co-author Morten Levin, for example, draw on Richard Rorty to resdescribe action research as an "ongoing conversation" that can bring people to "a state of communicative clarity" (2006, p. 71). As they write:

> [Action research] is, first and foremost, a way of "keeping the conversation going." [Its] methods aim to open horizons of discussion, to create spaces for collective reflection in which new descriptions and analyses of important situations may be developed as the basis for new actions. This is what we mean by *cogenerative learning.* (original italics; 2006, p. 72)

Although evocative of the spirit of action anthropology and in spite of appeals to "solidarity," I think it still unclear how Rorty's philosophy connects with the project of action research, especially given the fact Rorty had little to actually say about the nature of such agreement informing change. Furthermore, as Peter Reason has written, it is not clear how encouraging people to voice "imaginative stories of new possibilities" clarifies the claims of action research to connect an individual's sense of their autonomy with social or collective action (1999, p. 111).

Moreover, the spectre of Habermas and communicative action suffuses most contemporary claims to dialogical models of action research. I am not minded to thresh out the implications of this here except to point out that while actionists have clamored over what Habermas read into Wittgenstein, that language is a transformative and hopeful activity of rational communicative exchange (e.g. Carr & Kemmis 1983), they have conveniently ignored what Habermas read out of Wittgenstein: the irreducible complexities of everyday life challenged by the standing possibility of irreconcilable difference with an Other (Rienstra & Hook, 2007, p. 335, Hammer 2002, also see Cavell 1979).

This is important. I have argued elsewhere that any action project necessarily returns us to the "rough ground" of everyday life and to the vagaries of learning that happen within and between bodies and which give words life (Watson 2022). Shusterman anticipates this. His somaesthetics

implores us to not only dwell in but think through the "body's silent role as creative ground and intensifying background" (2002, p. 102). Shusterman, I feel, sees anthropology's blindspot and points to a different path to move along by means of a simple summons: why separate our actions from our bodies? Why, indeed, "separate words and voice from the body from which they issue and in which they resonate" (Shusterman 1997, p. 219n.21)?

3. The Somaesthetics of Action

To assuage the suspicions of anthropologists, the somaesthetic project does not set itself apart from, or situate itself above, the world. Admittedly, many of its points of reference may circulate in the rarefied air of (capital 'p') Philosophy, but in my reading, its heart and spirit, its attitude if you will, exemplified by Shusterman's work on rap music or in his performative Man of Gold series, is constitutive of its descent into the body's "crucial and complex role in aesthetic experience" (1999, p. 299). Critical commentary on the broader field of Action Research and its participatory method has long highlighted its rejection of Fordist models of academic production in birthing a new, person-centered and consensual ethical practice; but not enough attention has been given over to how the work of action is driven by aesthetic concerns, even functioning one might say according to an aesthetic logic (Koster, 2023, p. 25, 151).

Coming out of writings on the intersection of participation and "activist art" (Bishop 2006, Kester 2013), Claire Bishop identifies "an aesthetic of participation" as deriving legitimacy "from a (desired) causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency" (2006, p. 12). For Bishop, a sense for the aesthetics of action surfaces when thinking of action as animated by its original desire, reiterated in every instance of its performance, to "create an active subject" – a new empowered citizen "who will find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality" (Bishop 2006, p. 12).

It is, however, the supposed causality between participation and the achievement of individual/collective agency that misleads. With Gilbert Ryle (2000 [1949]), I prefer to think of it as a kind of "category mistake." What I mean by this is that researchers, caught up in the language game of action research, are inclined to use the verb 'participate' as an "achievement verb" or what Ryle called "verbs of success" (Ryle, 2000 [1949], p. 125). These verbs, Ryle observed, "signify not merely that some experience has been gone through, but also that something has been brought off by the agent going through it" (Ryle, 2000 [1949], p. 125). So, in this instance, it appears common sense to assume that participation leads to agency.

But to pay attention to what it is people *actually* do and undergo in the midst of making something happen is to assume that people take responsibility for their performances. For this to happen, "people must be ready to fit their efforts to obtain their goals into the "requirements" of their surroundings, to move this way and that in accordance with the changed circumstances they themselves produce as a result of each step they take" (Shotter, 2012, p. 138). The focus is no longer on achievements but on one's *tryings*; in this way, participating is a "task verb" or a trying to do things (Ryle 2000 [1949]).

Aesthetics of Action

The aesthetics of action is not so much about a structurally coherent feeling for the union of the alienated individual and the socially nurturing collective. Instead, action's aesthetic appeal is very much about the perceived *effort* to augment an individual's capabilities (Shusterman 2014). On this, "what matters is not the act itself but act*ing* …. the result of an action is less important than the feeling it generates" (my italics; Koster, 2023, p. 148). This is to say that there is something

compelling about the perplexity and uncertainty of human flourishing and personal renewal that "includes habits of action and styles of … conduct which imply behavior that embodies admirable virtues" (Shusterman, 2014, p. 15). People usually admire the efforts of Other people to come into 'self-knowledge' or greater 'self-awareness.' Regardless if the overarching project is shown to have worked or not, *trying* to change is what matters (Watson 2022).

In an impact savvy modern profession, it is perhaps easy enough for researchers to connect people's reported "feelings" to demonstrably instrumental ends, i.e. improved self-confidence (= a *better* person), a new sense of civic pride (= a *better* citizen), a commitment to support Others struggling in community (= a *better* neighbor). Yet it is unclear how, to an action anthropologist at least, "feelings" can be so easily isolated. Shusterman picks this up in discussing Wittgenstein's position on the use and articulation of emotions, feelings and sensations in our lives. "Voluntary action, like emotion," Shusterman writes, "can only be explained in terms of a whole surrounding context of life, aims, and practices" (1997, p. 96): what Wittgenstein called the "whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action" (Wittgenstein 1959). Iris Murdoch (1997[1956]) famously raised a similar concern. She worried that the aspect of human life where we are free to choose is now the picture of human being which, without having merit, nevertheless "strips the human of her reality" (Forsberg, 2011, p. 15). Given the complicated "texture of man's being" as Murdoch (1997 [1956], p. 39) described it, "we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over" (Murdoch, 1997 [1956], p. 329 quoted in Forsberg, 2011, p. 15).

This is also the somaesthetic point that the self is a locus of (personal) responsibility yet essentially formed by society - we are, after all, as William James wrote, "bundles of habits." Due to this condition, much of our life is lived spontaneously, unconsciously. Indeed, in returning to Shusterman's summons, why would we separate words and voices from speaker's bodies? This includes the body of the acting anthropologist. Thinking somaesthetically, the skills of the action anthropologist return to a fieldworker's bodily and spontaneously responsive relations to Others in the course of their ordinary and everyday lives. The ethics and aesthetics of undertaking action research is in the social and bodily efforts of a person – a fieldworker or likewise a participant – to try (over and over, for the next first time) to find their feet with Others.

Anticipating but also overlapping with certain tendencies in anthropological thought (see Desjarlais 1992), Shusterman's position is that the body is not just the site of the oppressive workings of power but also the vehicle for emancipation and liberation (Koczanowicz, 2023, p. x). If the "soma" – that is, "the lived, perceptive, sentient body" – plays such a formative role in mediating every facet of our ordinary existence, then it follows, Shusterman argues, that the "quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement," (the values I identify as energizing the action turn), "should thus involve somatic self-cultivation" (2014, p. 5).

But what does "somatic self-cultivation" look like? What does it involve? Indeed, what is its relevance in a social and political context? To his credit, Shusterman (2014) clearly states that he does not conceive of "somaesthetic cultivation" as a replacement for political or socially activist engagement. Instead, he conceives of it "as a means of strengthening our somatic capacities (which include our capacities for courage, endurance, empathetic social perception and nurturing care) so that we are better equipped to engage in social and political struggles" (2014, p. 8). This is a keen distinction. Yet it is not all that new. Of course, Shusterman (2012) himself reaches back into Confucianist thought to contextualize his claims but, I would argue, Sol Tax also showed a sense for the somaesthetic in his writings.

On "Probing, Listening, Learning, Giving In"

Come the late 1950s, Tax struggled with wording his break from the discipline's dominant scientific paradigm. In one particularly striking passage, however, he declared: "[o]ur program is positive, not negative, it is a program of action not inaction; but it is a program of probing, listening, learning, giving in" (1975, p. 516). Tax's 'but' here is, much like the paradigmatic break he was trying to get at, awkward and unrefined but it is significant. He was establishing a professional distance from the "planning-based approach" to solving social - so-called "tribal" - problems that colonial governments of the time employed anthropologists to work on (Smith 2010). In contrast, Tax was introducing a different kind of program; one now oriented around a distinctly embodied skillset – he identified these as: *probing, listening, learning, giving in.* Talking is not named here. Instead, Tax chooses to emphasize these more interpersonal facets of relating to an Other.

Tax's move is important. It steers the locus of action away from the idea of a self-contained and self-conscious agent acting in accordance to a prior plan and towards a new kind of anthropological practice undertaken in a relational (cultural) space in which people (or persons) are responding – mostly spontaneously and unthinkingly – to events occurring around them (Shotter, 2004, p. 449). The internal but also collective voice that this new action-oriented practitioner relies on for professional guidance then shifts: no longer asking what should I do? But, how do I act in response?

I take Tax as pointing to something new about seeing action *this* way. Just as we, as human beings, necessarily *learn* (throughout our lives) how to probe, how to listen, and how to give in, we also - as Wittgenstein (1959) is at pains to remind us - *learn* how to learn. To call these and other such facets of human behavior "skills" is not to disregard their culturally formative role in human social development, but neither is it to preclude the possibility of their cultivation or improvement. Taken thus, Tax's program of action anthropology points to difficulties not of the problem-solving, rational 'intellect' but of a different kind – just what kind?

Difficulties of the will

Put it this way: any action project presupposes a problem. If all problems are *human* problems then it follows that they must arise in the ordinary and everyday lives of *actual* people (Das, 2012, p. 133). As above, this means that they can neither be abstracted from the everyday mundane circumstances people inhabit nor from the contexts of ordinary life which, as JL Austin, Stanley Cavell and anthropologists like Veena Das and Michael Lambek have shown, is much more fragile and vulnerable to disagreements, ruptures and failures than most social sciences care to entertain.

To get at a "problem" is to understand, or get a feel for, its qualities, for the connections it inspires, for the emotions it evokes and for the words that people afford it (Saito & Standish 2009), or as Tax put it, what the fieldworker "must" do is "guess and improvise, and in some degree always play by feel" (1975, p. 516). This returns to Tax's insistence that fieldwork is the context in which action is best pursued because it requires anthropologists to live with and alongside people in order to try to grasp a sense of people's attitudes towards the world (Tax 1975). The character of this difficulty is social not logical. It is a question of orienting oneself in an Other world. It is what Wittgenstein called 'difficulties of the will'.

As John Shotter puts it, 'difficulties of the will':

> are to do with how we might orient ourselves *bodily* towards events occurring around us, how we can relate ourselves to them, and to get ourselves ready for seeing, hearing, experiencing, and valuing what we encounter as we move forward with our lives—for these are the ways

> that will organize our lookings and listenings, our sense-makings and judgments of value, and thus ultimately, determine the lines of action we resolve on carrying out further. (my italics; 2013, p. 142)

As anthropologists are acutely aware, orienting oneself in the lifeworld of other peoples is less a cognitive or interpretive task than a bodily undertaking, one that intimately involves "*reciprocal* activities and *inter*experiences" (Jackson, 1989, p. 3). The implication is that there is no stable or substantial self. Instead, the self becomes a site of experimentation, an experiential locus from which, in the case of anthropology, the fieldworker "test[s] and explor[es] the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart" (Jackson, 1989, p. 4). In some fundamental but not foundational way, the task of anthropology is to get a bodily sense for how things cohere (aesthetically) in people's lives, "to apprehend and experience their style, tone, texture and overall mood and spirit" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 1116).

The Art of Action Anthropology

Obviously, I am playing loose in this paper with the boundaries between different kinds of action inquiry within, but also external to, the discipline: i.e. "action research" (AR). Yet much learning in AR is, I find, anthropologically informed. So I pay attention when, for instance, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001) in the introductory chapter to their immensely popular *Sage Handbook on Action Research* state that: "action research cannot be programmatic and cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods, but is, in Lyotard's (1979) sense, a work of art" (2001, p. 2). They choose not to elaborate on exactly what Lyotard's "sense" is but I can quickly fill in the gap. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard was preoccupied by an emergent "split", as he saw it, in the production of art. On the one hand, he argued, there was art that satisfied the "mass conformism" of the rule-following market (i.e. the standard of beautiful and desirable art). On the other hand, however, were emergent and experimentalist works that interrogated their own claim to artistic value through the production of their own criteria for (public) evaluation (Lyotard, 1979, p. 75).

The parallel is one of orthodoxy versus a counter-hegemonic ethic. In the former, the researcher follows strict protocols and fixed procedures which simultaneously serve as the method to evaluate the quality and validity of the researcher's work and outcomes. An action approach strikes a different path. It privileges the autonomy of individuals to take control of the change-focused research process but in an open-ended way that avoids closure, or the narrowing of self-inquiry, to a particular outcome. This kind of change, as Adam Phillips astutely observes, "can be evaluated only prospectively and retrospectively, but never finally or definitively" meaning that "the only evaluation is an ongoing evaluation" (2021, p. 95). Allowing ordinary people – the participants – to create the criteria by which to judge and appreciate their own process is, in Lyotard's terms, a progressively experimentalist and aesthetic process.

Intuitively, I am reminded here of Nancy Lurie, a former collaborator of Tax's, who noted that what she had learned from her years of working for and with Indigenous communities across the US was that "[a]ction anthropology requires a finely tuned ear that is always tuned in" (Lurie, 1973, p. 7). What she was grasping at was the experience of being in a room where things are being said without being said in an entangled and complicated and implicit context of interpersonal relations, (colonizing) histories and political rivalries. Words matter as do the bodies from which they issue and within which they resonate. It is not only what is said but the context in which people are using words; people's voices, after all, are filled with "human breath" (Laugier 2020). Attention to people's voices therefore always return to the everyday scenarios

and situations in which people are figuring out how to go on by *probing, listening, learning, giving in* and so on.

How to go on in the next moment in *this* situation is what is at stake for any person in the context of an action project – acknowledging or, avoiding, their connections to Others. Anthropologists recognize that it is the *this* which matters for people; *this* practice, thought, word, ritual, moment, way of doing things. How this affects action anthropology might appear tangential, particularly in light of the links I make above between the action project and "self-knowledge". I do not think that a concern. It only turns on what we mean by "self-knowledge" in the context of transformation. Usefully, and to this very point, Shusterman refers to self-knowledge as "probing one's present limits so as to grasp the needed dimensions and directions of change" (1997, p. 40). This surfaces a useful connection between self-knowledge and the task of 'voicing one's condition' because, as orienting activities, they inevitably refer to the same fragility and depth of claims a person makes to community, about who *I* am in relation to *us*, about how *my* need is also *our* need (Cavell 1999[1979]).

In anthropological practice, the concept of action does not provoke philosophical questions of causes but attends, instead, to the particular (local) ways, styles and forms of expression people use to make themselves intelligible. Mutual intelligibility – the driving force of the action process – is not a logical process but a social and somaesthetic activity. It is reliant on how people orient themselves within a "complex of values, resonances and sensibilities" (Desjarlais 1992) that not only shape the rhythms of ordinary experience but also determine the stakes and possibilities of 'what could happen if…'.

This is why, for me at least, Wittgenstein's 'difficulties of the will' are in a matter of fact way the somaesthetic concerns and anxieties of fieldworking. The very possibility of the social encounter returns to how we "orient ourselves bodily" – and it *is* 'bodily'; it is our somatic life which ultimately qualifies how we figure out how to "move forward with our lives" (Shotter 2013). For what organizes our "lookings and listenings" and "our sense-makings and judgements of value" is our somatic experience in accordance to an "aesthetics of everyday life" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 1106).

4. Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, I re-emphasize the experimental and exploratory character of this paper yet more than a mere creative exercise, the value of the intersection, as I see it, between somaesthetics and anthropology is as a reminder to fieldworkers of the somatic capacities and bodily conditions which underpin and suffuse the efforts of people to bring about change in their lives. This moves beyond Foucauldian fascination with the social production of individuals through the shaping of their bodies and embodied habits to open up, instead, the emancipatory potential of the body to transform social relations: what Leszek Koczanowicz (2023) has recently called *somapower*.

Anthropologically speaking, I cannot help but be struck by the *descent* into people's everyday that the somaesthetics project requires. It is a descent into the cultural schema(s) intrinsic to human life, for as Koczanowicz characterizes it, "the impulses to develop the body and to advance its consciousness are deeply anchored in culture, and this is where the ever-renewing emancipatory impulse of corporeality comes from" (2023, p. 39). Our existence, in other words, is not irreducibly linguistic but bodied forth (Boss 1994).

Tax, I think, intuitively *felt* this and some of his students went on to develop similar thoughts in their professional lives even if they didn't fully elaborate on it in their writings. For Tax (1975), action anthropology was irremediably social and, therefore, clinical in its capacity

to work with others in diagnosing and intervening in a "problem situation." For me, in recasting it as a contemporary approach, the potential is its practicality but such possibility should not come at the expense of "learning something in the process" (Tax 1975). What form this learning takes will obviously differ from one project to the next. But, for obvious reasons to do with why one is involved in an action approach in the first place, this learning cannot be undertaken in spite of what happens. Rather, the effort to change a situation is inextricably linked to better understanding what is at stake for all involved – for people and non-human beings – in that undertaking.

In short, the possibility of action anthropology is premised on the social encounter, the site where the self and world collide. Action anthropology will always provoke, and move along in response to, an *anthropology of action*. For what is this 'site' I speak of other than the encounter between self and world, where the self-cultivation of "somatic capacities" – i.e. courage, humility, nurturing care – signifies a person's response to the most exacting and relentless question of (human) community: "Can I bear to make myself known?" (Das, 2020, p. 17).

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