

Rhonda Blair

**“HOW MUCH IS A LOAF OF BREAD?”:
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Moment no. 1: It’s the mid-1970s. I’m in graduate school at the University of Kansas. Ron Willis, a student of Brock’s at Iowa in the 1960s and a brilliant, wise man, is teaching his class “The History of the Theatrical Event”; the required texts include *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg* (the midseventies were more or less the tail end of the sixties).¹ We begin with the Greeks, and Ron asks, “How much was entry into the theatre?” Of course I’m prepared and know the answer. I jump in: “Two obols.” Then he says, “How much was a loaf of bread?” My head explodes. This was a moment when I got something about not just the economies of theatre, but about its ecology as well—its situatedness. I know my realization is a no-brainer rather than a mind-blower, but for me, given the year and my background, it was germinal.

Moment no. 2: It’s August 2011. I’m in Dallas and I can’t let my dog run in the neighborhood park. The heat and the drought have broken all-time records. There are cracks in the ground that are nine inches across and who knows how deep, and I don’t want Lettie to break her leg. The Parks and Rec department cancels Little League games to keep the kids safe.

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I really can't think about economies without thinking about ecologies. I'm a chronic bring-my-own-bags person—even when I'm shopping for clothes. I'm congenitally pragmatic—a survival mode from childhood, or maybe it's just inborn, or both. So I wonder about “economy” and “ecology” and their shared root, “eco,” from the Greek for “house” or “household,” and about how “logy,” from “logos,” is about speaking or mapping, and about how “nomy,” from “nomos,” can mean either “to allot” or “to take.” So you could say that “ecology” is about the logic of the household, while “economy” basically means “household management”—economies are about how we manage our ecologies, which I'd probably call given circumstances when I'm in my Stanislavskian mode, or our situations when I'm in my situated cognition mode. But more about that later.

My pragmatic, holistic bent was reinforced by my studies at Kansas; the faculty (well, all but one) didn't just permit but encouraged doctoral students to keep acting or directing, even as they prepared us to be scholars. It turned out to be intellectually important for me to put my body into the work regularly, whether as a director or a performer, living in performance space and time with the bodies of other theatre and performance makers and audiences. One of the first articles I wrote, “Shakespeare and the Feminist Actor,”² was about playing Desdemona and Isabella for Louisville's Shakespeare in Central Park one summer after my third year as a baby professor. I said we shouldn't do these plays until we could concretely deal with the sorry ways both of these characters end up. This wasn't abstract for me; it grew out of the truly painful experience night after night of having to perform Desdemona's and Isabella's descents from vital agent to dead or silenced woman, respectively, without any feminist contextualization.

Theatre practice still keeps me in touch. It engages me with myself, with other artists and the audience, and with our environments in ways that are simultaneously intensely public and intimate. Theatre practice makes my interdependence with others undeniable and enriches my understanding of theory and history. It also made it easier for me to find a job that allowed me to put bread on the table: my praxis-inflected education had economic benefits, because I could apply for jobs that needed not just a scholar and teacher but also a director. From what I can see, the proportion of jobs in the United States for theatre scholar-practitioners in comparison to jobs for scholars who don't work in a studio isn't much different today from what it was in 1980, when I hit the market.

My grad school epiphany about the cost of entry into the theatre was just one source of my interest in what it costs to buy a loaf of bread. I'm the daughter of rural, working-class, military people. My Tennessee hill-country father got a GED while he was in the service. My Canadian-Ukrainian farm-girl mother completed grade six. When I was little, money was made tighter by alcohol problems; I have a memory of walking down the road with my mother and younger brother, collecting empty soda bottles for the refund they would provide so we could buy a loaf of Wonder Bread (the bread we had in the house was almost always sliced and white). A family conversion to Christian fundamentalism ended the alcoholism, and this trading of the bottle for Jesus increased financial stability but instituted a rigid economy of gender just as I was hitting puberty. After I was baptized (immersed, like Vera Farmiga in *Higher Ground*) and then baptized again a few

months later at age eleven (I was afraid it didn't “take” because I still had sinful thoughts and did sinful things), I took the bread and body of Christ every Sunday at the Lord's supper, and still I'd lie in bed at night, heart palpitating, palms sweating, because I couldn't be *sure* I was saved—I couldn't *see* it or *touch* it. Later, my father's postmilitary job as a security guard with Chrysler in Detroit gave me access to a summer job when I was in college as a stockman-picker at a parts depot in Hamtramck. I was a card-carrying member of the UAW who filled punch-card orders for car parts by moving down big aisles of shelving in an immense warehouse, pushing a huge cart, tossing into it everything from side-view mirrors to rotors to car seats. I think I made about \$12 an hour (roughly \$50 in today's terms)—an amazing wage in the early 1970s for a working-class kid, particularly a girl. I put myself through school with that money. My parents indeed reinforced the value of education, but they're heartbroken not only that I chose theatre, a morally “iffy” field for sure, but also that I got overeducated; theatre and scholarship took me away from Jesus and assured my place in hell. I came out of undergraduate school in 1973 with a \$600 debt (about \$3,000 today), and graduate school (three degrees) in the early 1980s with a \$6,000 debt (about \$13,000 today) in government-sponsored loans that had, if I remember correctly, a 3 percent interest rate—a godsend, for want of a better term. The economic realities for many working- and middle-class graduate students today are very different, and not in a good way.

It was the experience of my body with its particular history and its particular messy, painful feelings and desires that led me to leave my parents' faith for the communal, spiritual home that theatre provided, eventually to embrace what I call a basically Buddhist perspective. My engagement with these philosophies was the third phase of a move from psychotherapy—triggered by having been enthusiastically reappointed but gently turned down for the moment for promotion at a past job—to twelve-step work to meditation. I have not been as serious as Eve Sedgwick was in the last decade of her life, when she embraced Buddhism as a way of negotiating what she called the “bardo that extends from diagnosis until death,”³ but like her I was drawn to its practicality and its resistance to binaries of any kind. Its practices, on a good day, help me feel connected to the things around me.

In the latish 1990s I was drawn to cognitive science for similar reasons. It provided a holistic way of understanding my intellectual and artistic experience, which couldn't be accounted for by the binaries embraced by some of my gifted colleagues in acting, who had an anti-intellectual and short-sighted fear that theory couldn't coexist with creativity or feeling, and some of my colleagues in feminist theory, who talked brilliantly about a theorized Body with a capital “B” but who marginalized feelings and the experiential (which is now front and center in some affect theory), sometimes reluctant to engage the full range of the body's complexity and messiness in the acting studio. I only wish the research had been available in the mid-1980s to help shape a holistic framework for negotiating the tensions, rifts, and fights at the Women and Theatre Program preconference when I was its president and we were embroiled in conflicts about theory, practice, sexuality, and race, among other things: women were crying, women were angry, angry women

were crying, crying women were angry, women were pacing up and down hotel rooms, women were sobbing in hallways.⁴ As a child whose first decade was spent in an alcoholic family, some parts of this chaotic dynamic weren't unfamiliar to me, and it did remind me a bit of one time when I was seven and tried to separate my parents while they were fighting because my dad was drunk, and he knocked me up against a wall to get to my mother. I have often been the mediator . . . and I was also the bossy smart girl, traits that would've been praised when I was younger had I been a boy and that I'm still careful to moderate in some settings. This women's work isn't done.

My path has not been original. The connection between cognitive science and Buddhism has been mined at least since the 1980s, when the Dalai Lama began meeting with neuroscientists to talk about, among other things, what happens when we meditate, what the sources of compassion are, and how we are connected to each other. In the 1990s, phenomenology was folded into this mix because of the way it helped thread these two fields together. Since then neuroscientists, philosophers, and Buddhist practitioners have written dozens of books on the topic. Cognitive science and Buddhism help me think not only about theatre and performance but also about the world and the way everything in it, including each of us, is connected in both abstract and material ways. (This echoes Stanislavsky, who applied research in reflexology—an early form of behaviorism—and Hatha and Raja Yoga practices to his explorations of the actor's process.)

In the fifteen or so years that I've been reading cognitive science, I've moved from early popular works on language and behavior to research in situated cognition, which views cognition as embodied, embedded, and extended; that is, cognition depends not just on the brain but also on the body, exploiting structures in our environments and extending beyond the boundaries of individual organisms.⁵ Situated approaches explore how thought and sensing and acting—or feeling and doing—are inextricably linked. As Evan Thompson says, mind is an “embodied dynamic system in the world,” not a “neural network in the head.”⁶ Or, as William J. Clancey notes, “we cannot locate meaning in the text, life in the cell, the person in the body, knowledge in the brain, a memory in a neuron. [For] these are all active, dynamic processes.”⁷ It's hard for me to imagine a better way of viewing theatre than as embodied, embedded, and extended. The body is a site of and a participant in both ecologies and economies, moment by moment, breath by breath. Situated cognition's framework resonates with the analyses of social systems being done so well by Shannon Jackson and others, and, in addition to the analogical echoes that exist between cognitive science and other disciplines, some scholars are directly applying cognitive science research to thinking about society and politics. I want to examine one instance of this to consider the possibilities and pitfalls.

Marxist philosopher Paolo Virno, about whom I would be completely clueless had Nick Ridout not told me about him, draws on neural mirroring research for his theory of the multitude to rethink resistance to late capitalism and neoliberalism. I like the word “multitude” a lot, because it's from Spinoza, a granddaddy of monistic views of the human being that are precursors of cognitive science. Briefly: Spinoza's “multitude” was juxtaposed to Hobbes's “people,” and

Hobbes, of course, prevailed, in much the same way that Descartes’s dualism trumped Spinoza’s monism. The multitude helps us rethink how to maintain plurality in collective action, rather than reducing it to a monolithic One.⁸ This concept validates multiplicity and contingency in public action, embracing difference rather than suppressing it in the service of political or corporate power. (This to me is one of the great strengths of the Occupy Wall Street movement.) Virno’s principle resonates at least metaphorically with situated cognition’s view that we function collectively in a dynamic and contingent way. It also resonates with Buddhist views that all is impermanence, that we are all connected, that separateness is an illusion, and that we err when we mistakenly see ourselves as separate from everything else. I won’t go farther down this path, because it’s philosophically complex and beyond my expertise, but for me it echoes with some aspects of the multitude.

Virno uses neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese’s writings on mirror neurons and intersubjectivity to consider how, in the dynamics of the multitude, language can function to keep us separate from each other. Like Saussure,⁹ Virno argues that language is an institution, and he further says that language can negate our natural connection to each other because it can “destructively interfere with a ‘sub-personal’ biological device such as neural co-feeling,” which results from our mirror neurons.¹⁰ He states that “in the early years of life [we experience] the grafting of verbal language upon previous forms of thought,” so that “verbal thought destabilizes intraspecies empathy,” keeping us from recognizing each other as specied kin.¹¹ Virno also says that language is the antidote to this poison, but (a) I’m not equipped to engage his dense argument about the *katechon* and (b) I’m most interested in how we understand the relationship between empathy and language.

Virno is absolutely right about our inborn coviability; it’s a fact. Prior to developing a sense of a separate self, we are physically mimicking each other (within twenty-four hours of birth, in fact), mirroring each other, imagining ourselves into others, which eventually leads to creating that sense of a separate self.¹² However, Gallese makes a big leap from the discovery of mirror neurons in macaque monkeys to positing a neural mirroring system in humans that is the source of a kind of “natural” and nurturing empathy. The links among neural mirroring, empathy, behavior, imitation, and language are complex and subject to serious debate. There’s little evidence to date for specific human mirror neurons, though we do have neural simulation or mirroring systems; that is, similar *parts* of my brain light up when I watch you reaching for a glass of wine. But this is different from a specific neuron in my brain mirroring a specific neuron in your brain. And the fact that a similar part of my brain lights up doesn’t necessarily mean I am empathetic with you, in the sense of being positively predisposed toward you as a fellow *Homo sapiens*. And language isn’t necessarily the thing that might predispose me negatively toward you. There is something sentimental (in the eighteenth-century sense) in the binaristic view of an innate, compassionate biological human co-feeling that’s subverted by a cultural, “grafted on” language. (For some reason, Artaud and Adam Smith both come to mind here.)

Social neuroscientists ask two really basic, very different questions about empathy: “How can one know what another person is thinking and feeling?”

and “What leads one person to respond with sensitivity and care to the suffering of another?”¹³ Some evolutionary neuroscientists hypothesize that the former—“What is he thinking? What is he getting ready to do?”—is the source of empathy. This is value neutral, an evolutionary survival mechanism that helps us know whether to fight, flee, feed, or fuck. (No, seriously, “the four Fs”—it’s a term of art.) To stir the pot further, “empathy” refers to at least eight different things:

1. knowing someone’s internal state;
2. matching someone’s posture or neural responses (neural simulation falls in here);
3. feeling as someone else feels;
4. projecting yourself into someone else’s situation;
5. *imagining* how someone else is thinking and feeling;
6. *imagining* how you would think and feel in the other person’s place;
7. feeling distress at witnessing someone else’s suffering; and
8. feeling for someone who is suffering.¹⁴

In short, empathy is a generic term applied to a whole array of neural, cognitive, and kinesthetic responses that are evoked in us by an other, who can be real or *imagined*. (What rich territory this is for someone who thinks about acting!)

Then there’s cognitive linguistics, which treats language as a manifestation of our being bodies, and neuroscience has been exploring connections between neural mirroring and language.¹⁵ We have areas in our brains close to Broca’s area that are homologous to the monkey’s mirror neuron system; this area is crucial for language production *and* for language comprehension *and* for perceiving the intention of physical actions such as grasping and manipulation.¹⁶ So, rather than being a “grafted on” artifact of culture, language may have evolved from a “grokking” (I know, I’m seriously dating myself) of gestural intention and performance—an understanding of action based in neural mirroring systems. One scientist, writing in the journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, talks about how “studies have shown that the *sensorimotor* cortices are crucial to *semantic* understanding of bodily action terms and sentences”; that is, bodily and linguistic understanding are neurally linked.¹⁷ One study shows that some brain areas initially assumed to be solely about spatial and proprioceptive orientation are also activated by language: “The neural activation detected when one picks up a box is largely isomorphic with the activation stimulated by the command to ‘pick up that box.’”¹⁸ If there are physical links among neural mirroring, language, and action anticipation, as there seem to be, we need to rethink the juxtaposition of language and empathy, and reengage what it means “to do things with words.” Everything ultimately comes from the body.

Affect theories are also grappling with the dynamic nature of human interactions, focusing on what some in the field call the visceral or nonconscious forces that “drive us toward movement.”¹⁹ This interest in the nonconscious is apt, since at least 98 percent of what the brain does “is outside of conscious awareness.”²⁰ But Lawrence Grossberg, a pioneer in affect theory (and also a fan of Spinoza),²¹ is concerned about the lack of specificity in some work in the field,

finding that affect “has come to serve, now, too often as a ‘magical’ term” and that “there is a lot of theorizing that does not do the harder work of specifying modalities and apparatuses of affect.”²² This is similar to the magical and generalized use of “mirror neurons” as a term to explain our connection to each other. In line with situated cognition, Grossberg also calls for an understanding that the discursive and the material (or semantic and the bodily) are not separate but operate together.²³

For me, Grossberg’s statement that “Yes, capitalism is commodifying life . . . but capital has always been biocapital” connects economies with ecologies. Economies work within “the totality of a conjuncture.”²⁴ It is not just about the cost of a loaf of bread or about how the loaf gets produced. I take this to mean it is also about how the wheat gets grown and the biological fact of the body’s need for bread in order to have even the possibility for social action . . . or for making or theorizing about theatre and performance. There are basic facts about bodies and about being bodies; we are material things that, without technological support, operate within surprisingly limited ranges of biological and ecological possibilities.

In her last book, *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick begins to connect affect theory and situated cognitive science; she writes, “What [touching and feeling] have in common is that *at whatever scale they are attended to*, both are irreducibly phenomenological.” To attend to psychology and materiality at the level of affect and texture is “to enter a *conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of means versus ends.*”²⁵ Sedgwick’s acknowledgement of the “*finitely many* values or dimensions” of affect accurately reflects the finitude, radical contingency, and nonbinarism of how we function. Her early-1990s critique of poststructuralist theory’s “reflexive antibiologism”²⁶ is echoed by feminist neuroscientist Elizabeth Wilson’s 1998 critique of some feminist theory’s essentialist antiessentialism.²⁷ I am hopeful that my standing here, occupying this office, is one sign that we’ve moved beyond automatic resistance to using research from scientific fields, for the *reductive* approach required by science in order for it to *be* science, with its bodies of contested and challenged evidence, is not at all the same thing as the social, cultural, and theoretical *reductionisms* that we rightly reject.

Eve was putting her book together while she was mightily involved with the very real limitations of her own body. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991 that reoccurred in 1996; she died from it in 2009. I got to meet her once around 1990, and she was charming, brilliant, and warm. From early in her career she was dealing with bodies and dying, particularly in her meditations on AIDS and queer identity—a practical, messy project. Perhaps I like Eve’s work because her theories point toward something I can touch.

Bodies are born. Bodies die. We are mortal. We need bread. We need bread before we can write theory or history or make art or think beyond the thought, “I’m hungry.” So how, in this precarious time in which we live, in which literally as well as metaphorically the ground can open up beneath us in great, gaping cracks as we try to walk across it, how can we use our profound and even neural connectedness to each other, as human beings, certainly, but specifically as scholars, artists, and educators who are called, right at this moment as we are breathing and dying, to

theatre and performance studies? How can we feed each other, literally as well as metaphorically? I am grateful, honored, and humbled to be here, but the irony of this moment is not lost on me—that I'm speaking about the cost of a loaf of bread and the stressed economies and ecologies in which we find ourselves, and doing it from this podium in this lovely hotel, with our great accommodations, which many of us got to by spending hundreds of dollars on an airline ticket. Some could not come because of the expense, and most of us who could were on flights that damaged an already greatly stressed atmosphere. My own airline ticket would have paid for more than 250 loaves of bread at \$2.99 each.

Moment no. 3: Right now. We are gathered here to tell each other stories, stories about how we make stories in the theatre and in a whole array of other arenas, and why these stories matter. And they do. Listening to each other, witnessing each other, acting together over the next few days and after we leave here is how we might play our parts in helping to heal the cracks in our institutions and economies and in the earth, and in being sure each one of us and all of those we encounter are fed. And perhaps, in a few moments at the reception, we'll all even have a glass of wine with some bread.

ENDNOTES

1. See Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg: Challenging Constructs of Mind and Reality* (New York: Julian Press, 1971); and Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York: William Morrow, 1974).

2. Rhonda Blair, "Shakespeare and the Feminist Actor," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 2.2 (1985): 18–26.

3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 173.

4. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 4.2 (1989) recounts the history of the WTP in the late 1980s.

5. Philip Robbins and Murat Aydede, "A Short Primer on Situated Cognition," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*, ed. Robbins and Aydede (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3–10.

6. Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

7. William J. Clancey, "Scientific Antecedents of Situated Cognition," in *Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*, ed. Robbins and Aydede, 11–34, at 28.

8. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 21–2.

9. Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 46.

10. *Ibid.*, 183.

11. *Ibid.*, 185–6, 184.

12. See, e.g., Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 179.

13. C. Daniel Batson, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena," in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, eds. Jean Decety and William Ickes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 3–15, at 3.

14. *Ibid.*, 4–8.

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15. See, e.g., George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

16. Luciano Fadiga, Laila Craighero, Maddalena Fabbri Destro, Livio Finos, Nathalie Cotillon-Williams, Andrew T. Smith, and Umberto Castiello, “Language in Shadow,” *Social Neuroscience* 1.2 (2006): 77–89.

17. John Kaag, “The Neurological Dynamics of the Imagination,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8.2 (2009), 183–204, at 186, my italics.

18. Ibid.

19. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in Gregg and Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–25, at 1.

20. Michael Gazzaniga, *The Mind's Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21.

21. Lawrence Grossberg, “Affect's Future: Discovering the Virtual in the Actual,” in *Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth, 309–38, at 319.

22. Ibid., 315.

23. Ibid., 323.

24. Ibid., 329–30.

25. Sedgwick, 21; her italics in the first quotation, mine in the second.

26. Ibid., 108–9.

27. Elizabeth Wilson, *Neural Geographies: Feminism and the Microstructure of Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 15–18.