

Being, non-being and the in-between¹

Field notes on the paradox of presence and absence

Sukhesh Arora

What is presence really? What are we talking about when we talk about presence? For a performer, it seems such an obvious thing but the closer you look, the more elusive it becomes, like one of those optical illusions which can only be perceived sideways through the eyes; looking directly makes it immediately disappear. And the whole thing becomes even more sideways when we take presence and put it in the middle of a classroom. Is it possible that we might have been over emphasising presence in the search for the elusive-mysterious? Have we been overly focused on presence in our pursuit of the qualities that make teaching and learning truly transformative? And obviously, what sort of transformative are we talking about in the fractured times that we live in? What is the other side of the story? What can Absence tell us about its polar twin? Does the absent become present by its very absence? And what or who is it that is absent? In my talk which I've framed as a set of field notes, entirely subjective observations gathered over a period of time, I am drawing upon my experience as a performer in search of the elusive-mysterious; my experience as a teaching artist in a teacher education program at Delhi University; and as a researcher investigating teacher agency in the classroom. In interrogating the binary of presence/absence, I seek to throw some light into that liminal space where these two intersect and collide, and begin to reveal the elusive-mysterious so that pedagogical practices can be reimagined and reenacted.

1 Field note no. 0

I feel very privileged because I find myself sharing this space with people who are absolute legends. Till the day before yesterday I had only ever encountered them through their writings and their books, YouTube videos, and I never imagined that one day I would be in the same room as them, and being asked to share my thoughts. So it's definitely a fanboy moment for me, and I'm going to do my best to Instagram the hell out of this.

¹ This paper was originally presented as a keynote talk at the International Scenario Forum Conference, held from May 9-11, 2024 at Trinity College, Dublin. The theme of the conference was "Presence in performative teaching, learning & research". In preparing it for publication, I have omitted the initial welcomes, acknowledgments, and other introductory remarks that were part of the live presentation. The version that follows retains much of the conversational tone of the original presentation, as it was designed to engage a live audience. However, I have made a few minor edits to adapt the talk for this journal and to provide additional clarity where needed. The core arguments and ideas of the talk remain unchanged. My hope is that this version preserves the immediacy and accessibility of the oral presentation while offering a more readable rendition for wider discussion.

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

This has really been one of the best gatherings I've been to. I was talking to Jo (a participant in the conference) yesterday evening, and she said, “everything about this conference has been generous”. I couldn't agree more. You all have put together such an interesting constellation of people from such different backgrounds, and all the presentations, the keynotes, the workshops have been truly mind-expanding. At least the ones I could manage to get into. I can't say anything about the ones I couldn't be in.

I'm very aware that I'm coming in at the tail end of things, so you all probably have your heads full already. There's much to think about, and specially after the brilliant sessions of Professor Fischer-Lichte and Rachael Jacobs, I might not have anything really new to add to what has already been said, discussed and experienced here. I also want to thank Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley for their session yesterday; it is a truly rare gift when directors and actors open up their process to the public, so thank you for that.

What I'm going to do in the time I've been given is to approach the idea of presence through unpacking and interrogating how I've engaged with the idea of presence in my work, and I'll talk about two separate but inter-related projects I've been involved in which blur the boundaries of performance and pedagogy, and in that blurring, offer some perspectives about presence. Why the focus on personal projects? Because, as Merlin Sheldrake puts it,

the personal anecdote is a very important part of the bigger questions that we choose to spend our time investigating. It is the borderline where experience becomes evidence, and some say that if you continue to multiply anecdote then it becomes data. (St Aubyn & Sheldrake, 2021)

So what I have today are a few bits of anecdotal data, which I framed as a set of field notes – jottings, musings, observations and thoughts – which I will bounce here in the hope that they will provoke a few more questions – not many, maybe just one or two, which might resonate with you, and perhaps lead to some further interpretations of the idea of presence.

I am not an academic so I'm going to come at this from a praxis-based perspective. And, I don't have a PowerPoint presentation.

There are a number of people who've shaped and influenced my thinking, and I want to thank them all, and by thanking them, I would like to acknowledge their presence amongst us. Work and thinking do not happen in isolation; we always stand on the shoulders of giants, some of whom are in this room today.

2 Field note no. 1

My talk is titled *Being, non-being and the in-between: Field notes on the paradox of presence and absence*. Someone said to me yesterday that they looked at the abstract of my talk and it flew over their head. I take full responsibility for that. Rachael Jacobs and I were talking about this when we exchanged our titles and abstracts, and she said “titles are such funny things. You're right – they don't reveal too much, and my presentation has shifted a little since I wrote it.”

Mine shifted quite a lot. Right up until last night. I think it's an organic process for things to shift. If I am present in my environment, listening and thinking, things are bound to shift. If my ideas were to stay as they were in the past, then am I really present? But hopefully there will be some demystification today.

Do I have your permission to play a little game? It's very simple. Just settle yourself comfortably in your seat, get as comfortable as you can get, now focus on your breathing, shift your awareness to the air you're breathing in, and the sound it makes as you inhale and exhale, nothing more. Just for a few seconds. Now I'll say a word, and notice what is the first word or image that pops into your head as I say it – presence. Note this word or image. Stay a few more seconds. I'll say it again and see what word or image pops up this time. Presence.

Okay, thank you very much. Now you can rearrange yourself in your seat. Who had a different second word or image?

(Three members of the audience were then asked to describe the images they saw.)

So when I looked at the title of my talk again, I wondered if it looks as if I'm inviting you into a theology or meditation session. That's the first thing that comes to mind doesn't it?

As I was preparing for this talk, what I noticed was that religious and spiritual literature has a lot to say about presence, and that too in very certain, well defined terms. In performance and pedagogy though presence is somewhat of a mysterious/elusive quality.

Just to put all of this into context, I'll fill in some of the blanks about myself.

As Susanne Even mentioned in the introduction, I trained as an actor-teacher in a theater-in-education company in Delhi, in India. My training involved making and performing participatory theater for young people. It also involved some teaching, mostly in a workshop style format. The company where I trained was modelled very closely along the lines of a British theater-in-education company. Why and how that was so is another story which I won't get into over here.

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

But this was the beginning of my connection with the two worlds of performance and pedagogy. My professional identity has always morphed between different states - at times performing artist, at times teacher, at times, teaching-artist, and at times artist-teacher. And what I feel is that all of these different identities talk to each other. In a room full of people that didn't sound quite right. But if you say it to one person, it's okay. Well, anyway, now you know.

Erika Piazzoli and Manfred Schewe (2023, p. 73) also talk about this spectrum of identity where teaching and the arts praxis intermingle and see these experiences as belonging together. I feel that this is a very useful way to look at the work that we do, which sits between performance and pedagogy.

At around the same time as I was training in the TiE (theater-in-education) Company, in the mid 90s, Delhi University started a teacher education program which was quite unique in many ways. Please keep in mind that I'm speaking about the Indian context. I'll talk about this program in more detail a bit later but just a couple of things that made it unique:

This was a 4-year program – there had never been a dedicated 4-year program of teacher education in India before. It was inter-disciplinary. And it had theater on the curriculum. What was also unique about this program was that there was provision for practicing artists to be invited to teach the theater course, in effect setting up a space for dialogue between arts practice and pedagogy. And this was highly unusual. To work in this way across disciplines is not the norm. I happened to be one of the artists who got invited to teach, and the rest as they say, is history.

After my training in the theater in education company in Delhi, I spent a year at Royal Holloway College in London as a student on the MA Physical Theater program. I don't think the program exists any more but it was a very exciting program. It was meant to provoke more embodied approaches to devising and making theater, and we had courses in Feldenkrais, Tai chi, and Bharatnatyam, a course in choreography where dancers, actors and directors worked together to make performance. I loved the course and it changed my practice entirely.

While I was at Royal Holloway I heard about a former professor in the theater department who had travelled to India and trained in a martial art form called Kalaripayattu. Some of you might have heard of it but those of you who don't know:

Kalaripayattu is a martial art form which originates from Kerala, a state in southern India. The term Kalaripayattu is made up of two Malayalam words - *kalari*, which means a training ground or battleground, and *payattu* which means martial arts training. Roughly translated it means training in the arts of the battlefield. It is believed that Kalaripayattu warriors were also

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

the first performers of dance-theater forms like Kathakali, because of their intense and highly structured training. The training starts very early on, at the age of 6 or 7, and to become a Kalari expert requires – literally – a lifetime of dedicated practice.

That professor that had trained in Kalari was called Phillip Zarrilli, and I'll refer to him as Professor Zarrilli. He also wrote a book about it which is called *When the body becomes all eyes*. This is an ethnographic study of Kalaripayattu as a set of practices through which experience and meaning are created.

To me, as a performer, this idea was very seductive - that the body becomes all eyes and is capable of sensing and responding to everything in its environment. I decided I would also learn Kalari, and when I came back to India I enrolled myself at the same Kalari where Professor Zarrilli had spent most of his time. I was asked to commit to a minimum of 6 months of daily training. So I moved from Delhi to Trivandrum, and began living in the Kalari itself. They had a room for people like me who were interested to train as performers and further their own practice. The training was intense – to put it mildly. Quite unlike anything that I have ever experienced, before or since.

In the book, Professor Zarrilli (1998, pp. 18-19) talks about this idea of martial practice leading to

an idealized state of actualization where the bodymind is in such a concentrated state of acuity and awareness that, like Brahma, the 'thousand-eyed', the practitioner can 'see' everything around him, intuitively sensing and responding with his accomplished 'powers' to any/everything in the immediate environment.

The comparison here is to Brahma, the thousand-eyed, who is part of the trinity of gods in Hindu mythology and considered the creator of all things. The power to see everything around is developed as an intuition, and there's *sensing* as well as *responding* to whatever exists in the immediate environment.

He describes this state of superior actualization as a state which is developed *in tandem with* a notion of power or Shakti which is not absolute, but highly ambiguous, contingent and context-specific. What he is articulating here is the idea of presence as a state which has a relational quality, which is contingent upon other things. It isn't absolute and it doesn't exist on its own outside of everything else.

On the other hand, Professor Zarrilli (2007) describes the whole notion of there being something called “presence” as a contemporary pre-occupation, historically determined and, obviously, culturally determined.

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

In the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century people have often been concerned with “presence” in the west - with trying to identify something about the issue of “presence” in relation to the work of the actor. But I have tended not to use the term “presence”, because I find it so problematic. My own way of approaching it, is that, whatever it is, it’s emergent, so it’s quite difficult to get a hold of. (Giannachi & Kaye, 2007)

He says that his work is about identifying processes and procedures that mark this territory.

I don’t know that ‘presence’ is really the right word for this territory. It depends on what particular kind of practise is being undergone or undertaken. This is why I tend not to use the term. Because I am so influenced by the non-western context where the term “presence” wouldn’t necessarily be used. There’s not a translation for the term. I think it would be untranslatable. (Giannachi & Kaye, 2007)

He seems to be entirely dismissing the idea of presence as a contemporary, western, preoccupation, and his own take on it as being influenced by the non-western context.

I don't think he dismisses the notion entirely because he also talks about this quality shrouded in mystery - still hard to pin down - but its form is discernible through the action, through the doing.

I also think that the word presence is translatable in a non-western context. There are many words to describe presence in Hindi, and one of them is *Chhaya*. *Chhaya* also means shadow, or shade, or the hint of a presence. The terms that language affords us might not be wholly "accurate" but they help us to think of one thing in terms of another thing. In language it’s called a metaphor.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) wrote this wonderful book called *Metaphors we live by*, and they talk about the all-pervasiveness of metaphors in our lives. They say, that the words we choose affect how we perceive and deal with social issues and help decide what becomes publicly accepted common sense, and metaphors play a huge role in that. So the metaphors we choose matter - for our beliefs, our laws, our policies and our treatment of each other. The people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true. Knowledge (of metaphors) is power.

I'll come back to metaphors a bit later but staying with *Chhaya* for the moment - what words like *Chhaya* do is that they nudge us towards the boundaries, the liminal spaces, the emergent, the absent.

Many years ago when I first came to Dublin I saw a performance by a theater company called *Forced Entertainment*. It's one of my favourite companies and I try to see their work wherever

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

I can. Tim Etchells, the artistic director, has also written quite extensively about the idea of presence. Etchells complicates the idea of presence:

Presence is so much about reception. It's about reading. And reading is a complicated act. One of the things we do as readers of signs and situations - and of all things - is that we respond to absences - and we fill absence. (Giannachi & Kaye, 2006)

These notions of presence, power and absence, articulated in performance contexts, provide us with possible lines of inquiry in working with teachers, and in teacher education. The questions that I ask are - what is translatable, and if there is something, then how can it be translated.

3 Field note no. 2

Have any of you seen Kung Fu Panda (Stevenson & Osborne, 2008)? In 2008, Dreamworks Animation released a film called Kung Fu Panda. The film follows the adventures of a giant panda called Po, who is improbably chosen as the Dragon Warrior, who must, in a very short time, learn the secrets of kung fu, fulfil his destiny, and save the world. Shifu, who is played by Dustin Hoffman, is the designated teacher but he rejects Po outright, saying, "this flabby panda cannot be the solution to our problems".

On the surface the film is a classic story about the underdog, or underpanda in this case, but behind the surface it is also a metaphor for teaching and pedagogy. The film raises many questions - who gets taught, who decides who gets taught, who is "teachable", what should a learner look like, be like, what should teaching and learning look like.

I mentioned the B.El.Ed. teacher education program earlier where I sometimes used this film in my classes to provoke a dialogue. B.El.Ed stands for the Bachelors in Elementary Education. I had a long engagement with the program - close to 20 years now, and I think it's significant because it allowed us an opportunity, over a long-ish period of time, to see how performance and pedagogy could work together. The word that I would use for this relationship is *entangled*, how performance and pedagogy are entangled together. I use the word entangled here in the sense it is used to describe "complex symbiotic relationships which are present, but not visible to the naked eye in the natural world" (St Aubyn & Sheldrake, 2021).

The B.El.Ed program was the first well-considered, and properly thought out attempt to break free from the colonial legacy of education in India. Dr. Poonam Batra, one of the chief architects of the B.El.Ed. program, says that it demonstrated how

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

teacher education could provide 'learning spaces' which challenge popular assumptions and belief systems while paving the way for expression of multitude, modes of awareness and varied ways of constructing meaning. Student teachers learn to view knowledge problematically, not as 'given' by experts but as being constructed within the personal and social settings of learning. (Batra, 2004)

In a country like India which is so mind-bogglingly diverse, this idea of the varied and the multitude is specially important. This emphasis on the personal and social settings of learning is like a refrain which runs through the program. Dr. Batra says that the program draws

... upon the thoughts and legacies of people like Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, Ambedkar and Jotiba and Savitribai Phule, who believed that education is the key to achieve an ever-progressive society and that deep reform can happen only 'when there is a corresponding change and newness in the ideal and aim of life and society itself. (Batra, 2004)

The program concretised the idea that education is contextual, and context cannot be separated from learning. If education is to be thought of in this way, then what are the processes that emerge between the teacher and her context?

Theater appeared on this course as a practicum. Students took a course in theater in their first year, and then again in the third year of the program. Colleges were free to invite practicing artists to teach the course, which is how artists like me got invited and became involved in the program. Constant dialogue between the core faculty, the teaching artists and the students shaped the development of the program. A spectrum was created for different identities to flourish, and a space emerged for ideas to flow back and forth, and feed off and nourish each other.

When the first evaluation of the program was done, a curious thing was observed. Students picked theater as one of the most significant and transformatory courses in the program. This in itself has become the subject of another research project. In subsequent evaluations, the pattern was the same. There were a number of reasons for this but I'll highlight one of the key ones. It wasn't as if theater was the only differentiating force behind the transformations that could be seen; but it seemed to be driving the engine – as someone said in one of the workshops here on the first day – arts is what gives it steam.

Exploring the self was the major focus of the theater course in the first year of the program. According to Dr. Batra (2004), the reasoning was that

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

a teacher should have an understanding of her own strengths and weaknesses and limitations, trust herself and be able to engage with those, and to have her own vision of education before she becomes an educator. In this sense - the teacher should become present to her own self first.

This exploration of the self, or the journey of the self, became located in the theater course, and shaped its design. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006, p. 284) echo this idea of presence in their fascinating study of presence and teaching.

What does it mean to be present as a teacher, to be wide awake to one's self, to one's students and to their learning in such a way that that learning is served through skilful and compassionate analysis and access to both subject matter knowledge and pedagogical strategies. Trust is essential to presence. Teachers need to know and to trust themselves and they also need to know and trust their students and the contexts in which they work. Equally important, students need to know and trust themselves and their teachers, as well as the schools in which they learn. For teachers, this knowledge and trust are created every day by staying connected to themselves, their students, their students' learning and their communities. The connection is created: through slowing down to observe students' interactions, through observing one's own reactions to students and their learning; through dialogue with students, their parents, colleagues and community members.

John Dewey (1993, p. 275) alludes to something similar when he says,

The teacher must give full time and attention to observation and interpretation of the pupils' intellectual reactions. [She] must be alive to all forms of bodily expression of mental condition...as well as sensitive to the meaning of all expression in words.

He describes this aliveness as "an active and alert commerce with the world", in short, an aesthetic experience. Aliveness arises when one is fully in the moment, in the present, when there is complete interpenetration of self and the world.

This idea of aliveness as an active and alert commerce with the world, leads us to action and to doing, the do-er and what is do-ne and ultimately to the fundamental aims of education which are the development of agency and transformation. The self, and by extension the present self, is intricately connected with the ideas of agency and transformation. These were some of the strands of exploration which the program offered up, which then became the focus of exploration in my next project.

4 Field note no. 3

The project, which is called Counter Imaginaries, attempts to make present the narratives of marginalized voices in what we call the teaching-learning architecture of education. The marginalized voices happen to be those of the teachers, and of children, particularly children from outcaste communities. For this project we decided to focus on the voices of the teachers, to look at how teachers viewed the idea of agency, and what is the relationship between agency and the creation of a socially just and equal space in the classroom. What we wanted to map out was how and in what sort of ways did teachers exercise agency.

The project was funded by the TEF Network. TEF stands for Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures and they supported projects in four countries – Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland, South Africa and India. TEF took a systemic approach to the question of transformation of education, that is, how can education systems be transformed so that education can drive sustainable development. So through our project we looked at the question of teacher education and within that, the agentive practices of teachers and what those might tell us - in effect, to create a cartography of agency, and see what that might tell us about transforming teacher education practices.

We asked 18 teachers who were working in different types of schools, and who had all graduated from the B.El.Ed. program, to become participants in our study. In addition we also asked 6 teaching-artists who were also engaged in teacher education, to participate in our research. With this relatively small group of participants, we engaged in in-depth conversations. Each of the conversations ranges from about 2 hours to 4 hours, and we recorded the audio only. In the end, what we ended up with was a very rich, very layered archive of qualitative data.

It would be useful to know in this context that our idea of agency is framed by the notions suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 964) in their extraordinarily detailed study of agency. According to them

Social actors are embedded within many temporalities. They can be said to be oriented toward the past, the future, and the present at any given moment, although they may be primarily oriented toward one or another of these within any one emergent situation. As actors move within and among these different unfolding contexts, they switch between (or “recompose”) their temporal orientations—as constructed within and by means of those contexts—and thus are capable of changing their relationship to structure. In this view agency is not just about acting in the moment but is deeply influenced by the past and aspirations for the future. Agency, therefore, is a dynamic process that involves both the reproduction and transformation of

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

structures within which it operates. It's a continuous dialogue between past experiences, future goals, and the practical realities of the present.

I will share with you two extracts from interviews with two of our participants that highlighted a particular kind of tension in conceptualising equal and just spaces, and how this became one reference point for us in moving towards developing this cartography of agency.

One of our participants, who is a teacher educator, and a *Theater of the Oppressed* practitioner, when asked about diversity and inclusion said,

Diversity and inclusion are hard to practice when you have this kind of a structure, a socially structured kind of exclusion... education should also be a model for our communities... What can communities be like, how can we be self-supporting, how can we help people grow and reach wherever they wish to reach.

And, one of the teacher participants when asked the same question, replied:

I actually feel that society is constructed of the people. We are the building blocks, us, children and individuals. There are other structures but humans are a bigger structure which can develop or transform much more quickly. Culture doesn't change so fast but generation after generation, the way of thinking, the education level of people, standard of living, these things probably change 2 or 3 times in the course of a lifetime. So when I say we need to work on the individual, I mean that this will be the source to change things quicker.

What becomes apparent here are the web of connections that both the participants are drawing between the self, agency and transformation. Both participants in their articulation bring us back to the idea of the ultimate goal of education i.e. Transformation, the transformation of society. However, the means to achieve this transformation are different, in one case individual, in another case collective. For one participant, agency is invested in the individual, for the other it is invested in the collective.

Two recent collective social action movements in India became quite significant events of political action. One of them was named after the site where the protest took place, and the second was simply known as the "Indian farmers protest". Both protests offered up new vocabularies to frame ideas around public education. According to Sharma and Singh (2023, p. 10)

The library at Shaheen Bagh (this is the name of the protest site) subtly linked education to resistance by carving out a physical sphere of knowledge within the protest site. The appropriation of space to build a utopian world of uninhibited exchange of ideas, free expression, and revolutionary

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

philosophy within the library space was an important endeavour that communicated an alternative and idealistic vision. As a result, the library was a small effort to address this relative deprivation by emerging as a community space for learning and making education accessible. Along with giving people a space to read, the library regularly hosted movie screenings, recitals of protest poetry, political discussions, and lectures. [...]

In this sense, the library at Shaheen Bagh endorsed Ambedkar's dictum of 'Educate. Agitate. Organize' and highlighted the importance of developing critical faculties. Beyond the pluralistic and inclusive ideas of education, rights, and identity that the library sought to propagate, it also symbolised resistance and solidarity. Thus, the library also served as a tool for reclaiming lost spaces and recreating centers of learning that had been seized from the students.

The collective as a force for change and transformation offers up another set of metaphors. What collective social action does is that it changes how community or society thinks about certain things. Collective social action has the potential to change laws and policies, but more importantly it also changes consciousness.

What is apparent to me from what I've heard and seen here at this conference over the last three days, in the different papers, presentations, projects and research is, that there are various dimensions of presence. It is multifaceted, sometimes quality, sometimes process but always contextual, always relational. Perhaps what needs articulation is a theory of multiple presences, not multiple intelligences, which takes into account all or some of these various dimensions.

5 Field note no. 4

And in the last few minutes that I have remaining, I'd like to come back to metaphors. In this age that we are living through, where information is abundant and attention scarce, the power of metaphor really cannot be overstated. Metaphors are the bridge between the known and the unknown, the concrete and the abstract, the mundane and the profound. They are a way of thought long before they are a way with words.

The poet Jane Hirshfield says that

metaphors give words a way to go beyond their own meaning. They're handles on the door of what we can know, and of what we can imagine. Each door leads to some new house and some new world that only that one handle can open. What's amazing is this: by making a handle, you can make a world. (TED-Ed, 2012)

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

The world does not imply only humans, but more than human, animals and plants and rocks and sand, and all the little things too small to be seen with the naked eye. This big, varied, all-inclusive natural world is where we need to look for possible answers to our persistent questions. There are already organisms which offer clues – the humble and unregarded mushroom for example, otherwise known as fungi. In his fascinating, and mind-bending, study of mushrooms, Merlin Sheldrake says that

Fungi press hard on questions of intelligence. Fungi are the perfect examples of entanglement. They live their lives as branching, fusing networks of tubular cells known as mycelium, sprawling over hundreds of meters, constantly buzzing with a flood of sensory information. Somehow, without a brain they are able to integrate all this information, make decisions and take suitable actions. They must constantly remodel themselves, weaving their bodies into relation with their surroundings. Tug on a strand of mycelium and you'll find it hitched to something else. Fungi embody the most basic principle of ecology: that of the relationships between organisms. Fungi form literal connections between organisms and in doing so remind us that all life forms, humans included, are bound up within seething networks of relationships, some visible and some less so. (Cook, 2020)

In keeping with the metaphors theme, I want to end with this poem by Sylvia Plath (1960). It's called "Mushrooms", but like all poems it is about many other things as well

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

The most precious gift you can offer anyone is your undivided attention. I'm very grateful for yours. Thank you very much.

Bibliography

- Batra, P. (2004, December 10-13). Education for social transformation: Recognising the 'agency' of the teacher. *Indian Psychology Institute*. <https://www.ipi.org.in/texts/ipyc/ipyc-full/poonambatra.php>
- Cook, G. (2020, June 24). *A Poetic, mind-bending tour of the fungal world*. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-poetic-mind-bending-tour-of-the-fungal-world/>
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think*. Prometheus Books
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What Is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962-1023. <https://doi.org/10.1086/231294>
- Giannachi, G. and Kaye, N. (2006, February 15) *The Presence Project: Tim Etchells interviewed by the Presence Project*. http://spa.exeter.ac.uk/drama/presence/presence.stanford.edu_3455/Collaboratory/646.html

Arora: Being, non-being & the in-between

- Giannachi, G., & Kaye, N. (2007, October 02) *The Presence Project: The Presence Project Interviews Phillip Zarrilli*.
http://spa.exeter.ac.uk/drama/presence/presence.stanford.edu_3455/Collaboratory/1143.html
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. The University of Chicago Press
- Piazzoli, E., & Schewe, M. (2023). Arts Education in Ireland : Visions of a performative teaching, learning and research culture. *Journal of Research in Arts Education*, 1(2023),72-83.
<https://doi.org/10.26034/vd.jrea.2023.3586>
- Plath, S. (1960). *The colossus and other poems*. Heinemann
- Rodgers, C. R., & Raider-Roth, M. B. (2006). Presence in teaching. *Teachers and Teaching*, 12(3), 265-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500467548>
- Sharma, Y., & Singh, S. (2023). Shaheen Bagh and the politics of protest in the anti-CAA movement in India. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 7(1), 10.
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/12888>
- St Aubyn, E., & Sheldrake, M. (Hosts) (2021, March 28). Symbiosis and Psychedelics: Edward St Aubyn & Merlin Sheldrake. [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Vintage Books* [Audio Podcast].
<https://shows.acast.com/vintagepodcast/episodes/symbiosisandpsychedelics-edwardstaubyn-merlinsheldrake>
- Stevenson, J., & Osborne, M. (Directors). (2008). *Kung Fu Panda*. [Film]. Dreamworks Animation, Dragon Warrior Media.
- TED-Ed. (2012, September 24). The art of the metaphor | Jane Hirshfield [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0edKgL9EgM&t=66s>
- Zarrilli, P. B. (1998). *When the body becomes all eyes - Paradigms, discourses and practices of power in Kalarippayattu, a South Indian martial art*. Oxford University Press