

Python



We had spent the afternoon up at the viewpoint in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. Our tents were pitched and we were ready to settle in for the evening. But then we changed our mind and decided to camp at a different site in the forest because the wind was too strong up there. Our guide Willie Ng'anda said it would take us at least an hour to get to the other camping spot. Darkness was already falling. It was clear we would have to drive down the steep, rough road in the dark and then also spend about an hour driving through the forest in the dark. I was excited but also scared. There are about 200 elephants in the forest and they take advantage of the cool dark night to move undisturbed between the various waterholes in the forest. They are active and can be aggressive.

We started on our journey nonetheless. The steep, rough road down the hill was not a problem and we proceeded on the sandy roads of the forest towards our destination. The forest was thick, dense and seemed impenetrable on both sides of the road. The trees even appeared to grow over us, forming a tunnel which was lit only by the car headlights. We proceeded at what seemed like quite a fast pace. Although there were three of us in the car nobody spoke. It was silent and we all stared at the road. I was hyper-focused, my senses felt

accelerated and sharpened. We sped along the tracks, occasionally seeing fresh elephant dung in the middle of the road and the paths that they had forced in the undergrowth as they moved their bodies through the thicket.

Suddenly I saw something in the beam of the car headlights which stretched the entire width of the road in front of us. It looked like a branch, so I shouted out to stop the car, although I was terrified that I would have to go out into hostile elephant land to remove it. We skidded to a halt right in front of it.

On the road was a python, as thick as a log, and about three metres long. It seemed fairly unimpressed by its audience. In fact, it totally ignored us as we waited in awe for its massive body to slowly slither across the road. We switched off the engine but it took a while until the droning noise of the car had left my ears. I heard the familiar pungent sawing of the crickets. We all stared in fascination at the reptile. How with muscles alone, the green diamond patterned body moved its weight forward. How the skin gets jammed a bit before it is moved along. It was hypnotic and fascinating. Time seemed to stand still for a moment, and so did my fear and emotions.

When the reptile had disappeared into the grass, we started the engine again and my state of anxiety came flooding back, as if queued in by the sound of the mission to get through the forest. Only after I experienced that standstill I could realize the state I was in. My whole body was crying out to get away as fast as possible from a kind of invisible danger which I perceived all around us. My heart was racing, my palms were sweaty, and my eyes had produced a tunnel vision.

Steven Feld speaks of a reciprocity in how we understand a place: „Places are sensed and senses are placed“.<sup>1</sup> We experience a place through our bodily senses. These sensations in turn shape our mind. And through our mind, which is shaped by senses, we understand a place and also ourselves in it. Therefore perceptual engagements are critical in the construction of a place. How did I construct the forest and through which senses?

How we move through a place draws on information from the interplay of tactile, sonic, visual and olfactory senses. Hence we do not focus on all senses in the same way. When we experience, we constantly shift between different modes of sensing: while some are in focus others are in the background, while some are dominant, others give way. At some points we focus on sight, in other moments we sharpen our sense of hearing, sometimes our sense of smell is dominant. No one sense gives us orientation in a space, we shift fluidly between them and cross-reference the different sensual experiences. We perform something like a multi-sensory scan of the place we are in. The senses correspond and interact with each other. We employ them selectively, and place them in relation to one another so it makes the most “sense” for our mind to understand a place. Our mind, which processes and makes conclusions based on the data provided by our senses, in return shapes how we perceive a place. This means the entire organism of our body reacts to how we move through a place.<sup>2</sup>

Driving through the dark in the car, my vision had been impaired. The headlights of the car had produced a cone of light within which things were visible, but everything out of it was obscured. The forest appeared like a wall of

darkness around the light. I think I focussed on my sense of sight because it is what I am used to relying on.

This experience of seeing imperfectly in turn fuelled my fear, as it brought up memories of stories about aggressive elephants. In addition to immediate and present sensations, our perception draws on past experiences. We filter the the data we get from our bodily senses through past experiences to make meaning of the place we are in. Perception is full of memory.

A simple and practical example: It is not possible for us to constantly produce the basic pillars of orientation such as direction, level and distance.<sup>3</sup> We draw from our memory to know how to read these signals and find our bearings. The body imports its own past into its present experience when moving through a given place. These real, or imagined, memories combine with our immediate present sensations to shape how we sense, hear, see, feel, smell. It is a constant back and forth between mind and body, a constant cross-referencing of senses, memories and imaginations. Emplacement implies the intertwined nature of sensing and perceiving.

My experience was shaped by the “real and imagined” fear of all the hidden dangers that I sensed in the thicket of the forest, all the imagined wild animals attacking from the periphery of my vision. The most concrete imagination was of an elephant. Personally I have never had a dangerous experience with an elephant although I did once witness a very angry elephant charging a car. He did not physically attack it, but nonetheless it was extremely intimidating. My other fears were more shaped by the unknown. The high and penetrant chirping of the crickets, together with the drone of the car engine appeared like

hostile buzz in my ears that got louder and louder and tried to creep into the car. This strengthened and accelerated my emotions. As this was nothing that I had personal experience of, my only frame of reference was the memory of films and other media that I had seen.<sup>4</sup> These tend to portray the African forest as a hostile place where typically white tourists get killed or have to fight their way out of danger. These media memories corresponded with my impaired vision and the forest sounds that I was hearing, to influence my body. My body physically tensed and tried to be as silent as possible, it scanned the place for signs of danger. It made my hands wet and my heart beat accelerate.

The connection between body and mind seems essential to me in my experience. There is a history in the mind-body relationship however which was established by the thoughts of Descartes, that wants to understand the mind and the body as two separate substances. The mind is the space of thought and the body the space of extension. It suggests that the mind does not need the body to think and be conscious and the body does not necessarily have to contain a mind, like a dead corpus.<sup>5</sup> The mind body dualism seems to be an intrinsic and problematic issue in the way that it establishes binaries which result from this separation. Often discussed is this dualism in feminist theories of the body.<sup>6</sup> The woman is often cast as the body in this relationship, whilst the man is “disembodied”. The women’s thinking is burdened with the particularities and subjectivity of the body it will never reach an neutral and objective position, like the masculine one. Women’s thinking is discredited and bound to her body while the man’s abstract thought is undisturbed. Therefor rationality is assigned to the man while the woman is associated with

irrationality, vagueness and weakness. The separation of the body and mind has created more binaries that subjugate women, like “man/woman, culture/nature, universal/particular, reason/emotion, objective/subjective, order/chaos, independent/dependent”.<sup>7</sup> These categories propose hierarchies with the former being associated positive and masculine and the latter feminine and negative.

In my experience in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest I can see clearly how my body shaped my experience but is that really a problem? I could reciprocally also feel that my mind shaped my body. The philosophers and neuroscientists Francisco J. Valera, Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson engaged in a concept, called the “Embodied Mind”, that reflects the reciprocity and the complexity of the mind and body relationship beyond binaries and dualism. It states the cognition is a form of embodied action, meaning that the whole body, not only the brain is crucial in making sense of one’s surrounding. To explain it clearly Thompson says: “Cognition is an expression of our bodily agency. We inhabit a meaningful world because we bring forth or enact meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Body and mind cannot be separated from each other. The mind interprets local conditions through senses of the body, it also draws on experienced sensation which it has already understood and which it claims to know from the past, but also maybe imagines. The body seems central to the sensory experience because it is actively situates the subject in a world of human culture In this larger space around us, consistant of shared bodily perception and culture it is where we find meaning and make sense of the world around us. Our mind can not be separated from our body.



Because the body seems such a central part of our experience, it is often overlooked as a defining factor in how we understand a place. The body, with its different abilities and disabilities, varying strengths and weaknesses, changing preferences and dislikes and its different ways of sensing is crucial in how the mind perceives.<sup>9</sup> Through reflecting on how the body shapes the way we situate ourselves in the world we can become conscious of ourselves, our characteristics and our idiosyncrasies.

When the car stopped and the engine was switched off my senses had to readjust. My focus shifted to the python. Being stationary I could better assess the place around us. I could see further into the distance and without the noise of the engine I could hear clearer. Because I was fascinated with the python, my tense body could relax. But when then the car was switched on again and I fell back into the previous state of sensing and perceiving I became conscious that this tense state was a construction. This shift in sensations, from calm fascination to tense fear made me question my whole experience. It made me reflect on how I had produced my sensations and the place around me.

Understanding the body and the culture around the body being responsible for shaping our minds we can reflect on the binaries that were established in the separation of the two and also reflect on ourselves as a subject that is actively shaping the surrounding. Being conscious of oneself in a space means also to become conscious of the other bodies around. When we understand a place or a situation as a result of our senses we have to understand the other as a mirror of our senses. Our bodies are different and multiple, so are our minds and resulting from that the way we see the world around us. Others

exist how they are because we are how we are. Perceiver and perceived are not separate entities, they blur into each other as a result of how we place senses, and make meaning. This means we are part of the others and the others are a part of us.

- 1 Feld, Steven. „Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Towards a Sensuous Epistemology of Environment.“ In: *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. Hrsg. T. Howes. London: Bloomsbury. 2005. pp 179-191
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Examples of Films and books that remind me of that fear are for example „Ghost in the Darkness“ (1996, film), „The African Queen“ (1951, film), „The Vorrh“ by Brian Catling (2007, book)
- 5 Agius, Sean. *Materialism and the Mind and Body Problem: A Critical Analysis*. The University of Malta.org. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/20937/Materialism%20and%20the%20Mind%20and%20Body%20Problem-A%20Critical%20Analysis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y97-103>. (accessed March 2019)
- 6 Compare here Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Cape Town: Taylor & Francis. 2011, Grosz, Elisabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1994 and Haraway, Donna. „Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.“ In: *Feminist studies* 14 (3). 1988. pp 575-599.
- 7 Brett, Gordan. *Feminist Theory and Embodied Cognition: Connecting Interests and Bridging the Empirical Gap*. Researchgate.net. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312042530\\_Feminist\\_Theory\\_and\\_Embodied\\_Cognition\\_Connecting\\_Interests\\_and\\_Bridging\\_the\\_Empirical\\_Gap](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312042530_Feminist_Theory_and_Embodied_Cognition_Connecting_Interests_and_Bridging_the_Empirical_Gap). (Accessed March 2019)
- 8 Heuman, Lisa. *The Embodied Mind. An Interview with the Philosopher Evan Thompson*. Tricycle.org. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/embodied-mind/> (Accessed March 2019)
- 9 Feld Steven. „Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Towards a Sensuous Epistemology of Environment.“ In: *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. Hrsg. T. Howes. London: Bloomsbury. 2005. pp 179-191

