



Atmospheres of Democracy

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Breath of Freedom: a Pragmatist Impulse

In *Democracy Begins Between Two*, wherein democracy is regrounded through love and ethical relationality of the two, Luce Irigaray argues about the political task of our age by stating:

It is much more a case of reorganizing the way that humanity lives and produces with a view to preserving the planet, and human life and culture. In other words, of awakening consciousness to another stage in its becoming, which will allow us to begin building new ways of existing and thinking.¹

Based on this statement by Irigaray, I will be arguing in this paper that only a radical restructuring and awakening towards a new respiratory-infused culture of democracy will enable us to respond to the both major crises we are witnessing in today's world: the global environmental crisis of the Anthropocene, and the global political crisis of democracy, or the Politicocene. The Politicocene is a newly invented term, capturing the rule – as in the essential Greek myth of Antigone – of Creons of our common world, eternally reincarnated in the form of too many masculine political leaders and their servants, and thus suppressing and annihilating the idea of democracy to an extent that democracy itself – like the planet Earth in the Anthropocene – has now become critically endangered and vulnerable to these external political condi-

¹ Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, transl. Kirsten Anderson (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 4 (first published in Italian in 1994 as *La democrazia comincia a due*).

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tions surrounding it.² As the third part of this paper is also an attempt of a dialogue with the Chinese philosophy of qi, the both crises could be related to what Tadashi Ogawa argued in his essay “Qi and phenomenology of wind,” namely, that the “qi of the world in our times is not in order but is disturbed.”³ Following this dialogic constellation between the political cultures of the West and of the East Asia, it could be affirmed that the task of today’s political philosophy could be to enkindle the humanity of different cultures, traditions and religions to join in global alliance of creativity and belonging of a new kind – to the communities or atmospheres of breathing. We must abandon the discourses of power struggles, battles and wars and enkindle our life-worlds with thinking anew about the future modes of being-together in ways that support and cherish our relational belonging, ethical affectivity, and breath of life – not only for humans, but also for other living beings, and, as it were, environment and nature.

Let me now begin with some remarks on pragmatism and democracy as I believe that the pragmatism with its *spirit* of democratic experimentalism⁴ offers a very useful platform for what I am getting at in this essay. In this context, we cannot proceed without mentioning John Dewey and his decisive contribution to the idea of democracy, underpinned by his experiential form of evolutionary naturalism, which is characterized by its effects on the lives of individuals as members of a democratic community and conceived as a movement toward new communities of hope. As a further link between Western and East Asian cultures of democracy, it is necessary to mention that in 1919, Dewey delivered a series of lectures at the Imperial University of Japan in Tokyo, which were rewritten and published as *Reconstruction in Philosophy* in 1920. After receiving an invitation to visit China, he arrived in Shanghai in May 1919 and stayed there until July 1921. In 1920 the National Peking University granted him a doctorate *honoris causa*, and he was called a “Second Confucius.”⁵ In these studies, Dewey’s idea of growth is related to *dao* as an experiential path to be taken; *de* is further understood as attractive good and is compared to Dewey’s idea of betterment; finally, the concept of *ren* is analogous to Dewey’s creation of oneself

² For more on this view of the politics see Lenart Škof, “Democracy of Breath and Fire”, *Sophia* 61(1) (2022), 117–133.

³ Tadashi Ogawa, “Qi and phenomenology of wind,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 31, Ogawa (1998, 321).

⁴ See on this *Democratic experimentalism*, ed. by B. E. Butler (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2012). For an example of democratic experimentalism as presented by Roberto Mangabeira Unger see his *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative* (London: Verso, 1998). As related to our attempt of radicalized subjectivity towards what, based on the respiratory intervention, I call “quiet democracy” (and, by comparison, a “qi democracy” in the Chinese contexts), let me add, that, similarly for Unger, the task of pragmatism “lies in reconciling the two projects,” namely of “the empowerment of the individual – that is to say, his raising up to godlike power and freedom – and the deepening of democracy – that is to say, the creation of forms of social life that recognize and nourish the godlike powers of ordinary humanity, however bound by decaying bodies and social chains.” (Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Self Awakened*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (Unger 2007), 27–28).

⁵ See on this: John Dewey, *Lectures in China, 1919–1920*, tr. by Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973); David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1999); Joseph Grange, *John Dewey, Confucius and Global Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004) and Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China; To Teach and to Learn* (New York: SUNY, 2007).

(i.e., through appropriate behaviour) into a socially responsible human being. Then there are other common features: for example, both Dewey and Confucius take that the person is person-in-context; or, the notion of individualism has as little relevance for American pragmatism as for Chinese culture, and, finally, the broader purposes of the community are always supposed to emerge from both personal and communal goals. Now, I do not wish to follow this communal part in this analysis as I am here more interested in democratic experimentalism, as related to a more radicalized form of ethical subjectivity and individual freedom. Still, let me point to one beautiful excerpt from Dewey, indicating his proximity to what I understand with respiratory philosophy. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey states that experiencing is akin to breathing – as he writes, “a rhythm of intakings and outgivings.”⁶ This thought closely relates to an experiential moment of coming-together in an ethical way, as for example explained by Shigenori Nagatomo in his comparative elaboration on Merleau-Ponty and *Ki-energy* as a third term (*un troisième terme*), a mutual interfusion of different bodily *ki-energies*.⁷ Clearly, if accomplished, a different life of the community emanates from such a process of the exchange of our vital energies. But more on this upon my reading of Irigaray’s idiosyncratic but important *A New Culture of Energy*. Finally, Nagatomo poignantly states: “Breath is a sign of life, without which the embodied *ego-cogito* cannot sustain its life. In this sense, breath is closely related to *spiritus*, a *ki-energy*.”⁸

But, apart from this statement of Dewey, what could be pragmatism’s relation to respiratory philosophy? Let me here propose an idiosyncratic, yet plausible example – as based on two remarks by Richard Rorty. As a dedicated neopragmatist and atheist (later this impulse showed more as an anti-clericalism), Rorty was not willing to give any credit to in his view more “spiritual” phenomena, such as, for example, *qi* or equally *breath*. When I first presented him my version of pragmatism based on breath, he simply replied – ironically and fully in line with his pragmatist stance – “why breathing and not rather excreting”?⁹ It seems that, as a neopragmatist, Rorty simply wanted to evade any strong denominators or essences in philosophy. We know his another remark, when, similarly to this case, in his review of *American Evasion of Philosophy*, he destroyed an attempt of his contemporary Cornel West to announce a new kind of “Christian prophetic pragmatism” – by stating:

In the first sense of pragmatism – the professorial – pragmatism is merely a way of evading the usual boring skeptical conundrums about truth, knowledge, the deep nature of things, and the relation between language and the world. In this sense, pragmatism is, as Papini and James say, like a corridor off which innumerable rooms open. All it does is give you a forum in which people can talk about how to fulfill their needs, which beliefs work to get them what they

⁶ John Dewey, “Art as Experience,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 10, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 62.

⁷ Shigenori Nagatomo, “Ki-Energy: Underpinning Religion and Ethics,” *Zen Buddhism Today*, no. 8 (October 1990), 124–139.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹ This is from my personal conversation in 2006 with Rorty in Palo Alto.

want, without running into Platonic and Cartesian impassés. (...) If pragmatism is taken in this, the professorial sense, then the term “prophetic pragmatism” will sound as odd as “charismatic trash disposal.”¹⁰

Yet, this is Rorty at his best. For me, his radical but usually funny irony, together with historical contingencies and motto “Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself,”¹¹ always were the best possible tests of one’s own philosophical pretensions and possible dead-ends in philosophy. Based on this, for me, any kind of respiratory philosophy with any of the possible usages of breath in philosophy must be tested on the background of this pragmatist criterion: is it taking care of (more) freedom, and, are we with this gesture paying attention to any of the obvious or hidden remaining essentialist (Platonic, Cartesian or, we may add Kantian, Hegelian or Husserlian) traits in our dealings with this phenomenon? *Breathing the freedom* might sound lovely, of course, but philosophically, the task for us always remains to bring concepts and ideas into the closest possible vicinity of our sentiments (such as of a natural love and devotion between a mother and a child), to be able to nourish what is most natural and intimate to us – like care for our children, love and trust towards our loved ones, family and friends, or, simply, to be a part of an ongoing process of increasing our sensitivities and sympathies towards others and avoiding cruelty and various kinds of violence as much as possible. For Rorty, as a neopragmatist, the progress of humanity is thus closely related to the expansion of solidarity (or, we may add, practical love), of being able to identify “we” with more and more people and thus allowing them to be as “one of us”.¹² Is there a place for breath in this kind of critical neopragmatist thinking? I think that the answer is positive and my aim here is to carefully outline one of the possibilities for this gesture. I think that this gesture has something to do with both our subjectivity and its vulnerabilities, and that democracy – if taken as a way of living by cultivating our common sentiments (and not as a system of rules and procedures) – could be a place or atmosphere of co-sharing future and utopian *breath of freedom*. In today’s political philosophy, this still is a transformative or experimentalist impulse and is similar to Unger’s attempt on the deepening of democracy. But to be able to discover and nourish this breath, an inquiry into self-affection and subjectivity (as conditions of political philosophy) is needed. Let me now try to outline the so-called *reserve of breath* of Luce Irigaray – as a doorway into the new respiratory democratic culture – and, in the final (third) part of this paper, present my own idea of *quiet democracy*, also by comparing it with the

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, »The Professor and the Prophet,“ review of *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* by Cornel West, *Transition*, no. 52 (1991), 75.

¹¹ See on this a beautiful book *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. by Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

¹² In her book on nomadic ethics, Rosi Braidotti labels Irigaray’s work with the term “ethical pragmatism.” She draws on Irigaray, labelling her as a critic of liberal individualism and characterizing her as a thinker whose “proper object of ethical inquiry is not the subject’s moral intentionality, or rational consciousness, as much as the effects of truth and power that his or her actions are likely to have upon others in the world. This is a kind of ethical pragmatism, which is attuned to the embodied materialism of a non-unitary vision of the subject.” (Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions*, Malden: Polity Press (Braidotti 2006), 14). The relation to embodied materialism will be also highlighted in our dealing with Enrique Dussel.

possibility of a *qi democracy* as political philosophy as based on a breath-energy and as presented by Fabian Heubel.

Irigaray's Reserve of Breath as a Path Towards Transformative Politics

We have seen that for Rorty, breath could not properly be thought of as a working pragmatist concept. The reason, in my opinion, is Rorty's genealogy as analytic philosopher, and even if he later inaugurated his own what we now label neopragmatism, he still remained connected to the linguistic aspects – Irigaray's genealogy also strongly relates to linguistics (her first PhD), but also to psychoanalysis, with the main focus in her thought on sexual difference, ethical gestures, (non-Hegelian) dialectics of proximity, and silence. Also, although Rorty's philosophy was compared to intercultural philosophy by some of the interpreters,¹³ he still was not willing to grant any major importance to this field of philosophical inquiry. While Dewey – alongside Radhakrishnan and Santayana – was even able to write an introduction to the first issue of the *Philosophy East and West* journal in 1951, Rorty did not pay too much attention to this rising field of philosophy. Here Irigaray differs from Rorty quite radically: as a life-long practitioner of Yoga, Irigaray draws inspiration from Indian philosophy and religion, as we know, and her engagement in this goes beyond comparative or intercultural philosophy – and here she is actually closer to Rorty as to any contemporary intercultural thinker. She remains a Western philosopher, but one seriously rethinking the possibilities of Yoga, *prāṇa* and breath from contemporary European continental thought: she contends that after years of practising Yoga, she somehow could no longer tell to which tradition she belonged.¹⁴ And this is precious. Now, Irigaray first elaborated on the reserve of breath in her essay "Ethical Gestures Toward the Other." She states:

Not only does our culture not teach us how to cultivate breathing to assure our existence in an autonomous way, but it does not make known to us that becoming spiritual amounts to transforming our elemental vital breath into a more subtle breath at the service of loving, of speaking and hearing, of thinking. Too often we confuse cultivation and spirituality with the learning of words, of knowledge, of competences. We have forgotten that to be cultivated amounts to being able to breathe, not only in order to survive, but in order to constitute

¹³ See on this a critical elaboration by Lenart Škof in his "Thinking Between Cultures: Pragmatism, Rorty and Intercultural Philosophy", *Ideas y Valores: Revista Colombiana de Filosofía* 57(138) (2008): 41–71. This discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper, but let me only highlight a very positive evaluation of intercultural potential in Rorty by an Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo in Danny Postel, "Ideas whose time has come: A Conversation with Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo," *Logos* 5.2. (Spring/Summer 2006), the interview can be accessed via: <https://iranian.com/Jahanbegloo/2006/August/Interview/index.html>.

¹⁴ See Luce Irigaray, *A New Culture of Energy: Beyond East and West*, tr. by Stephen Seely and Stephen Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 4. The book was originally published already in 2011 in Italian.

a reserve of breath as a soul that helps us to transform our natural life into a spiritual life.¹⁵

If there is a task that democratic education should follow, it is precisely this: to transform our elemental vital breath (we can call it our “ordinary” or “egoistic” breath, responsible for maintaining our life and its regular activities) into a more subtle breath (which is a “spiritual” or “vital” breath in service of others). In her recent *A New Culture of Energy*, Irigaray recalls her engagement with Yoga and Indian culture but, clearly, remains a Western (although transformed) thinker. Personally transformed, she wants to infuse “our” culture with the vital sap of Indian philosophy and religion. The need for transformative politics, based on breath is related to what Irigaray designates as an imperative not to harm anyone – neither ourselves nor others. As she points out here:

Such a course is quite different from one marked out in advance, which is what the Western tradition usually offers us. It is no longer a question of simply complying with predefined laws or of following paths drawn independently of us; rather, it is our own experience that must instruct us, teaching us bit by bit to become our own masters.”¹⁶

This is a Deweyan statement indeed – with experience guiding our growth as individuals and citizens – a path not guided by any of the predefined laws, rules or procedures, but originating in an enhanced *self-affectivity* – as a key vehicle towards a new life of democracy. Within the neopragmatism, the closest ally of Irigaray here is Unger with his idea of the deepening of democracy and achieving the necessary democratic transformation (which is spiritual and understood as *divinization*¹⁷) under the democratic experimentalism umbrella. What they both share is an enhanced view of our autonomy and subjectivity, called auto- or self-affection in Irigaray, and featuring as the awakened self in Unger. Now, Unger’s philosophical thought runs along two avenues: firstly, he is developing his own progressive and alternative theory of democracy in *Democracy Realized* by using various arguments from economics, politics, law and social science; secondly, he is proposing his own political philosophy in *The Self Awakened*, and his version of political theology in *The Religion of the Future* (Unger, 2014). In *Democracy Realized*, Unger argues for democratic experimentalism which he sees as a set of practices required for a progressive change in the world. In forming credible alternatives to the neoliberal program after the collapse of communism and demise of socialist alternative politics, Unger proposes a new method of democratic experimentalism. In line with the democratic tradition in American pragmatism (Dewey and Rorty), Unger is pleading for an alternative set of conditions of practical progress in conjunction with individual emancipation. It is

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Ethical Gestures Toward the Other,” *Poligrafi* vol. 15, no. 57 (2010), 4 (*my emphasis*).

¹⁶ Irigaray, *A New Culture of Energy*, 6.

¹⁷ Irigaray also thinks that in this process a *divinization* is required, meaning the fulfilment of humanity (ibid., 86). Taken within the horizontal transcendental, divinization now translates into the process of regaining of the vital breath in ourselves.

for a new political realm of opportunities and liberties *deepening our experience of freedom* that he as a pragmatist is hoping for.¹⁸

But is it possible even to think of this radical transformation of individuals without paying necessary attention to the socio-political (pre)conditions within the class organization of any society, and even more the Western one? In a world, where so many individuals cannot *breathe* (due to wars, trauma, oppression, forms of systemic violence, and, environmentally, due to direct effects of environmental toxicity and pollution and now climate change)? I strongly believe that there is no other way except to oppose these constellations by reorienting our values, expectations, and modes of cohabitation. According to Irigaray – and this is an example of experimental thinking:

It is from the respect for values that are universally necessary for our planet and those who live on it that we must work toward building a culture that is shareable by all humans and, more generally, all living beings who populate the earth. (...) And the remarks, heard too frequently today, about the choice between saving jobs in industry or saving the planet and its inhabitants testify for an incapacity for innovation, an incapacity to invent an economy in the service of life instead of acting to its detriment. (...) “Pure utopia!” some will object. But without this utopia will there be a future for humanity? (...) Could not a culture of breath, a culture of love, serve as the basis for the development of global human community without the submission of one culture to another?¹⁹

We will see later how this utopian building of a new culture could be related to the elemental (and in itself educational) politics of the air and live democracy.²⁰ Now, to achieve this new culture of democracy as based on a global culture of breath, a new self-affection is needed. To be able to reground a new human being, *a reserve of breath* needs to be available in our bodies and souls. In its ontological sense, the reserve of breath marks the very threshold of our subjectivity: it is what guarantees the autonomy of our soul before it could be appropriated or seized by any of the external factors. Ultimately, the reserve manifests in a redemptory role of both Jesus and Buddha, as they first shared the reserve of their vital spiritual breath with few women and men – their closest respiratory allies and friends in the intimacy of an archaic respiratory community – and later within a new community (*ekklesia/sangha*) of breathers. The reserve of breath enables our souls and our bodies to nourish the most

¹⁸ See his in my opinion main books on politics and ethics: the already mentioned *Democracy Realized*, then *The Self Awakened* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), and, finally, *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) which elaborates on his idiosyncratic neopragmatist political theology.

¹⁹ Irigaray, *A New Culture of Energy*, 80 and 87.

²⁰ I am borrowing the term “live democracy” from Cirila Toplak’s excellent paper »Elemental Politics Between Minoritarianism and Live Democracy: A Case Study of the Soča River Basin,« *Teorija in praksa* 61:2 (2024), 293–312. And I am borrowing the term “air democracy” from Alexander Kopka’s “Air Democracy: On the Principles of Breathing Together,” *Sophia* 61(1) (2022), 135–149 (special issue on Irigaray and politics).

precious endowments that we have: a possibility of an original place for a breath, being available for the arising of mild gestures of mindfulness, gentle speech, meditation, prayer, listening, and silence. What then is a relation between our subjectivity, its self-affection and the reserve of breath?

In *The Way of Love*, Irigaray describes the logic of future dialectics of two subjectivities, as based on sexual difference, horizontal transcendence (or, sensible transcendental) and self-affection (also called *auto-affection*), and enabling the mutual respect of the two. As she states, this is “not a question, to be sure, of extrapolating into some essence – mine or that of the other – but of a critical gesture for a return to oneself which does not stay in suspension in immutable truths or essences but which provides a faithfulness to oneself in becoming.”²¹ Self-affection teaches us to become two (and this indeed *is* a basis of all politics), without appropriating or annihilating the other as other, or without being alienated from our own becoming in subjectivity. The becoming of subjectivity also refers to an idiosyncratic logic of a difference between masculine and feminine world(s), since men and women have different accesses to maternal genealogies, to the rhythms of nature, and to sexual becoming and belonging through mutual desire and love. We all breathe the same air, but we breathe it differently. We all want to achieve our humanity, but we can only achieve it dialectically – by respecting our differences in an intersubjective, intercultural, and interreligious sense. Irigaray continues and clearly extends this gesture towards a new culture of democracy:

Self-affection is the basis and the first condition of human dignity. There is *no culture, no democracy*, without the preservation of self-affection for each one. (...) Self-affection today needs a return to our own body, our own breath, a care about our life in order not to become subjected to technologies, to money, to power, to neutralization in a universal “someone,” to assimilation into an anonymous world, to the solitude of individualism.²²

In an era of new technologies, the rise of generative AI and digitalization of our entire lives, this has become extremely important for our future democratic cohabitation. Based on this, a reserve of breath now means that there is a place in our being (as body-soul), that cannot be appropriated by anyone or anything, a harbour, as it were, in which all our sentiments and ethical gestures are peacefully reposed and safeguarded in our ethical, relational, and democratic being. And this place must be understood ontologically, and not only ontically – as a state of mind or some ethical disposition. It defines and permeates our being. It is the place where the seed of *quiet democracy* (as it will be presented later) resides in us. There is no logical procedure nor moralistic rule (nor religious authority) that could guide us towards the dialectics of self-affection: and this is where Eastern teachings (Yoga, medita-

²¹ Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (London: Continuum, 2002), xiv.

²² Luce Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She Was* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 161f. (*my emphasis*). Also, she adds: »Self-affection needs faithfulness to oneself, respect for the other in their singularity, reciprocity in desire and love – more generally, in humanity. We have to rediscover and cultivate self-affection starting, at each time and in every situation, from two, two who respect their difference, in order to preserve the survival and the becoming of humanity, for each one and for all of us.” (Ibid.).

tion, Buddha's teachings; we may add Daoism, Zen Buddhism and Confucianism, of course) enter into the very core of Irigaray's thought. In Yoga and Buddhism, the predominance of vital and spiritual breath is clearly represented in their meditational and practical methods, where emptying of our ordinary modes of selfhood is a key to the attentiveness (or mindfulness) of ourselves. We thus need to create a sanctuary in ourselves – a place for the advent of *breath*, a sign(ature) of the original silence (also, ontological emptiness), compassion and love. As Fabian Heubel would say in *Was ist Chinesische Philosophie?* – “In a paradoxical communication of emptiness and things breathes the subjectivity” and, even more importantly, “here reveals the possibility (...) to think the relation between subjectivity and democracy anew. This is where the critical potential of silent change comes into view.”²³ I will return to this *Fasting of the Heart* as a sign of self-affection and the logic of new and enhanced democratic subjectivity later.

Now, in his important Marxian-Levinasian interventions into the core of Western ethics and politics, the Argentinian-Mexican thinker Enrique Dussel presents us with a fascinating analysis of the future politics of liberation, based on ethical subjectivity, and related to the ontological layers of breath. His ideas will complement our attempt of regrounding the democratic hope through a new sensitivity for the breath.²⁴ As a Marxian, Dussel is interested in the *material* aspect of politics. We may remind us of the following respiratory excerpt from young Marx, namely when he wrote in his *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts* that “man, exhaling and inhaling all the forces of nature” has been an aspect of humanity, radically forgotten by history.²⁵ This could also be compared to Derrida, who in line with his earlier attempt of an idiosyncratic and critical elaboration of the grammatology vs. pneumatology dyad,²⁶ stated that social bond is the respiration of community.²⁷ Dussel is interested in an ontology of human life and questions himself on the basic enigma of all politics, namely the question: When enemy could become transformed into a friend? Dussel, as also Irigaray (and Rorty), wishes to overcome this persisting dichotomy within the politics of Modernity with its numerous avatars. In a Levinasian manner, Dussel argues for an alternative logic of the neighbour – as “one who is revealed in proximity (*face to face*, that is to say, the immediate, the non-mediated, as in the nudity of the erotic contact of the ‘mouth-to-mouth’: ‘who kisses me with the kisses of his mouth.’”²⁸

²³ Fabian Heubel, *Was ist Chinesische Philosophie? Kritische Perspektiven* (Hamburg: Meiner 2021), 354 and 356 f. In German: “In der paradoxen Kommunikation von Leere und Dingen atmet Subjektivität” and “[d]arin eröffnet sich die Möglichkeit (...) das Verhältnis von Subjektivität und Demokratie neu zu denken. Hier kommt das kritische Potenzial stillen Wandels in den Blick.”

²⁴ Enrique Dussel, “From Fraternity to Solidarity: Toward a Politics of Liberation,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38(1) (2007), 73–92.

²⁵ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by R. Tucker (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 115.

²⁶ “Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to breath. Its nature is not grammatological but pneumatological.” See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17.

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, “Faith and knowledge: The two sources of ‘religion’ at the limits of reason alone,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge 2002), 99.

²⁸ Dussel, “From Fraternity to Solidarity,” 80. On the idiosyncratic Christian notion of the breath-kiss and its ethical sense see the “Postlude” of Lenart Škof’s *God in Post-Christianity: An Elemental Philosophical*

This breath-kiss, in its extreme idiosyncratic sense, is the archaic ethical nexus in-between two persons, forming the first Judeo-Christian community of the 1st century AD.²⁹ Face to face, or skin-to-skin (or, even more radically, breath-to-breath) encounters in political ethics and political theology imply that our selves (always already based on a self-affection, originating from the reserves of breath) are dwelling in a pre-objective atmosphere of proximity – with pre-ontological responsibility for the other as its ethical mark.

Dussel further argues that this experience of subjectivity-to-subjectivity “does not exist in Greco-Roman or modern thought”³⁰ and reverts to the New Testament and the good Samaritan parable. This is how the explanation goes:

In the *midrash* of the founder of Christianity called by the tradition that of the “good Samaritan,” the Samaritan is called “good” because he/she establishes this *experience* of the *face-to-face* with those robbed, injured, or abandoned *outside the path* (*outside* of the ontological Totality). For the Samaritan the “neighbour” is thrown *outside* the path, into Exteriority: the Other. And we must not forget that the Samaritans were the “enemies” of the tribe of Judah.³¹

Dussel argues in his ethics of life (and dedicated to the suffering of the victims)³² that these texts (with “the poor, the orphan, and the widow” as their mark) have not been taken seriously by contemporary political philosophy neither in Europe nor in the US. But this proximity, inaugurating a new beginning of any politics, is now even for Dussel based on a respiratory phenomenon: in his model of an ethics of friendship, fraternity and solidarity, Dussel presents a twofold structure of political ethics, and solidarity is here based on, as presented in the model:

the spirit (*ruakh*) of the Law.

Theology (New York: SUNY Press, 2024).

²⁹ See the following insightful remark of Ivan Illich on breath kiss: “In the Christian liturgy of the first century, the *osculum* [kiss] assumed a new function. It became one of two high points in the celebration of the Eucharist. *Conspiratio*, the mouth-to-mouth kiss, became the solemn liturgical gesture by which participants in the cult-action shared their breath or spirit with one another. It came to signify their union in one Holy Spirit, the community that takes shape in God’s breath. The *ecclesia* came to be through a public ritual action, the liturgy, and the soul of this liturgy was the *conspiratio*. Explicitly, corporeally, the central Christian celebration was understood as a co-breathing, a con-spiracy, the bringing about of a common atmosphere, a divine milieu (...) [In the early Christian celebration of the Eucharist] [*c*]onspiratio became the strongest, clearest and most unambiguously somatic expression for the entirely nonhierarchical creation of a fraternal spirit in preparation for the unifying meal.” See Ivan Illich, “The Cultivation of Conspiratio,” in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich: A Collective Reflection*, eds. Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 240.

³⁰ Dussel, “From Fraternity to Solidarity,” 80.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See also his monumental *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, tr. by E. Mendieta, C. P. Bustillo, Y. Angulo and N. Maldonado-Torres (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

the life of the Other.³³

The law of ethics, then, and as opposed to the formalism of the Law, is closely related to *ruah*, or *pneuma* now. The politics of friendship and solidarity is respiratory-pneumatic. This is crucial, as also I argued in my *Antigone's Sisters*, that the original gesture of ethics comes precisely from Jesus's *ruah*. This is how I explained this decisive moment:

In Mk 15: 37, we read about the death of Jesus Christ: “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last [*eksepneusen*].” We shall argue here that, from this moment of His last breath until the moment of resurrection and giving his breath to the disciples, the co-breathing in Trinity is in crisis. There are two moments we need to acknowledge here: firstly, from the very moment of His last breath breathed into the world, when Jesus dies for us, humanity also partakes in this trinitarian crisis; it is without the reserve of breath (...) Secondly, it is in faith of a woman – namely Mary Magdalene – that resurrected Jesus will first reappear and only later *breathe* the reserve of breath back onto His disciples (Jn 20:22 – “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit”).³⁴

This is one of the moments, where humanity (here understood in a cultural-religiously limited yet, I believe, universally valid Judeo-Christian framework, of course) was without the vital and necessary reserve of breath. This crisis can be compared to another respiratory crisis when reserve of breath was critically endangered: the rupture of the human being with the suffocation of life in extermination camps.³⁵ The consequences of these crises upon humanity are memorized in Paul Celan's poetry. This materializes in his pneumatological poetry, especially in *Atemwende* (*Breath-turn*) cycle of poems, where poetry becomes the expression of this last material possibility of life. In his poems there is an “invisible but essential form of materiality that signifies, on thematic, material, and pre-syntactic levels, breathing”³⁶ and this genealogy can be traced back to the *nephes-ruach-anima-psyche-spiritus-soul* cluster of pneumatic rhythms. Here, Celan was not only familiar with Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, but also with the role of breath in his method of translating the Hebrew Bible. Namely, Buber translated the Bible by means of colometry, the division of the text into *cola*, which are *units of breath* and units of sense at the same time,

³³ Ibid., 85.

³⁴ Lenart Škof, *Antigone's Sisters* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 157 f.

³⁵ Cf. here another (environmental) catastrophe, as exemplified by Karen Barad's “After the End of the World: Entangled Nuclear Colonialisms, Matters of Force, and the Material Force of Justice,” *Theory & Event* 22:3 (2019), 524–550. Barad explains the politico-colonial and environmental consequences of the 67 nuclear and thermonuclear bombs that the US detonated between 1946 and 1958 on the Marshall Islands (the majority of them were exploded on Enewetak). Describing the mortal “hauntology” of the contemporary nuclear age, she states: “Matter fell from grace during the twentieth century. It became mortal.” (527).

³⁶ Antti Salminen, “On Breathrutes: Paul Celan's Poetics of Breathing,” *Partial Answers* 12/1 (2014), 107–126. Cit. on p. 107.

with breath pauses in the speech intended to recreate the naturalness of the spoken language. For Celan, however, especially in the breath pauses, in which one takes the breath, the unspeakable horror, suffering, and death comes into presence. The Holocaust is included in the poem through the *pneuma*, the breath that goes out. The Greek word *pneuma*, which Celan uses in his poems and letters, indicates that the breath is not just a natural breath, a breath in the physiological sense. This breath has the power of presencing, like *ruah* in Genesis (1:2) or *pneuma* in John (3:8), which are at the same time breath, wind and spirit – the words for the self-manifesting God. In one of his poems with the strongest presence of this respiratory rhythm, representing the pinnacle of his poetics of breathing, Celan writes:

Deep.
 in time's crevasse.
 by.
 the alveolate ice.
 waits, a crystal of breath,
 your irreversible.
 witness.³⁷

This now enables me to progress toward my final part of this paper – namely on the respiratory democracy itself.

Quiet Democracy and Qi Democracy

It is now time to propose an outline of respiratory (or air) democracy. Respiratory democracy is closely related to what is today known as “elemental politics,” an environmentally and socially invested political thinking, based on the four elements – fire, earth/soil, water, and, of course, air. As explained by Ingwerson and Müller:

Tying elemental agency not only to an ecological but also to a political sensitivity facilitates a politics of visibility, of foregrounding processes of material distribution that frequently remain hidden, and of explicating the concealed

³⁷ *Poems of Paul Celan*, transl. M. Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 2002), 215. In Celan's *Atemwende (Breathturn)*, poetry becomes the expression of this last material possibility of life, based on his *pneumatisches Judentum*.

socio-technical infrastructures that enable articulations of power and capital (...)³⁸

One of the most important contributions to elemental politics in its setting is without doubt Vandana Shiva's *Earth Democracy* from 2005.³⁹ In my opinion, what I call "radical elemental thinking" must form one of the decisive steps toward a future political philosophy that is able to step outside the individualism vs. communitarianism divide of the Western tradition. With Irigaray and Dussel we have already seen two interventions into this unfortunate divide from the core of our material belonging. But the question now is, how can radical subjectivity and autonomy still lead towards future communal cohabitation? In *A taste of a secret*, Derrida proposes the following starting point of any future politics:

"I'm not one of the family" means, in general, "I do not define myself on the basis of my belonging to the family", or to civil society, or to the state; I do not define myself on the basis of elementary forms of kinship. But it also means, more figuratively, that I am not part of any group, that I do not identify myself with a linguistic community, a national community, a political party, or with any group or clique whatsoever, with any philosophical or literary school. "I am not one of the family" means: do not consider me "one of you", "don't count me in", I want to keep my freedom, always: this, for me, is the condition not only for being singular and other, but also for entering into relation with the singularity and alterity of others. When someone is one of the family, not only does he lose himself in the herd, but he loses the others as well; the others become simply places, family functions, or places or functions in the organic totality that constitutes a group, school, nation or community of subjects speaking the same language.⁴⁰

Translated into the Irigarayan transformative thinking, this mode of "don't count on me" guides us towards the ontological layers of the self-affection as a process of cultivating our breath to be able to practice compassion, listening, care, and love, as well as to what is proposed by Fabian Heubel in his interpretation of Zhuang Zi, as he argues that "While for Mengzi the breath-energy [*die Atem-Energie*] arises in the heart, for Zhuangzi it is necessary to first 'empty one's own heart' so that the breathing energy can even begin to appear."⁴¹ What, then, if there is only one belonging – a belonging to the breath? In his *Ethics of Liberation*, Dussel proposes four ethical demands of any material ethics: *to feed the hungry, to provide water to the thirsty, to*

³⁸ Moritz Ingwersen and Timo Müller, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Elemental Agency," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 70:1 (2022), 16–17. I owe this excerpt to Toplak's "Elemental Politics Between Minoritarianism and Live Democracy."

³⁹ Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace* (Boston: South end Press, 2005). Cf. also already mentioned "Air Democracy" by Alexander Kopka and Lenart Škof, "Democracy of Breath and Fire: Irigarayan Meditations," *Sophia* 61(1) (2022), 117–133.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida & Maurizio Ferraris, *A taste for the secret*, tr. by Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 27.

⁴¹ Heubel, *Was ist Chinesische Philosophie?*, 343.

give clothing to the naked, and, finally, to provide a vessel or a roof for the stranger or the foreigner.⁴²

As a part of the future *respiratory democracy* and its atmospheres of cohabitation (which, in its fundamental character, is a transformative ethics of liberation) I now wish to propose another criterion: *to let the other breathe freely*, originating from the material-somatic and dialectical and *breath-to-breath* mode of cohabitation. This means both the ontologically and ethically grounded individual respiratory autonomy, accompanied by the politico-environmentally invested universal right to breathe.⁴³ To achieve this criterion, a new ethics of radical subjectivity is needed, one, that is able to secure a reserve of breath within and for our relational and democratic being and, at the same moment, incline human beings towards building a community of co-breathers, a new atmospheric conspiracy of the future.

Based on this, an impulse, or a heartbeat, as it were, of *quiet democracy* reveals. As stated in my “Democracy of Breath and Fire,” what is crucial for our evaluation of the role of breath in an ethical re-grounding of the idea of democracy, is its ability to reveal a common vulnerability of our physical and vital breaths which quietly links the community with a bond that anyone can understand. Breath links body to the soul, and it also gestures to our common and hidden ethical core – spanning across the individuals, sexes, cultures, races, and also all living beings – in a global alliance we still need to build. Breath here relates to what Heidegger understood with the *silent mildness of Beyng (Seyn)* beyond pure machination and power: without this gesture, one keeps appropriating or annihilating the other and this insight into the essence of machination and power marks the end of metaphysics as such.⁴⁴ The call for new democracy must invite beings of the earth to breathe and share the air of a new elemental-spiritual conspiracy within a new intersubjective, but also global communal correspondence of beings under the horizon of love. And this precisely is a way towards democratic subjectivity, as also proposed by Heubel. *Fasting of the heart* as an ethico-respiratory practice now means that our bodily ethical anatomy⁴⁵

⁴² Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, Dussel (2013, 451).

⁴³ See on this Marijn Nieuwenhuis, “A Right to Breathe.” *Critical Legal Thinking*, 2015: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2015/01/19/right-breathe/> and Achille Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” *Critical Inquiry* 47:52 (Winter 2021), <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/https://doi.org/10.1086/711437>. Both essays are interested in socio-political and legal aspects. Mbembe argues: “There is no doubt that the skies are closing in. Caught in the stranglehold of injustice and inequality, much of humanity is threatened by a great chokehold as the sense that our world is in a state of reprieve spreads far and wide.”

⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, ed. by Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 1998), 69: “Herrschaft ist die *χράτις* des Seyns als des Seyns, stille Würde der milden Bindung, die sich nie in das Bedürfen der Macht zu versteifen braucht.”

⁴⁵ With the ethical anatomy of the body I refer to my teaching on material ethics, comprised from:

ethical neurology (brain: mirror neurons and empathy);

ethical ophthalmology (eye: the interiority of an eye and ethical symptomatology of tears; Derrida);

ethical cardiology (heart: agapeistic compassion, *misericordia*/mercy; Caputo);

ethical pneumatology (lung: sharing breath with others; Lat. *conspiratio* as co-breathing; Levinas);

ethical dermatology (skin: haptology/touch and the logic of proximity; *stigmata*; Feuerbach);

ethical gynaecology (the inside/womb: visceral compassion and wombing motherliness“; for my inspiration here see Kuang-Ming Wu, *On Chinese Body Thinking*, Leiden: Brill, 1997).

is attuned to the breath-energy in us. Already with Ogawa we have seen that *qi of the world in our times is not in order but is disturbed*.⁴⁶ Now, for Heubel, and as based on the respiratory moment, any idea of a future community of, as it were, co-breathers (in China, or anywhere in the world), will be (re)grounded in a new democratic subjectivity as based on respiratory turn within the politics. Based on a self-affection as a sign and expectation of both emptiness and silence within our newly ethico(-politically) activated hearts, now being open toward the breath-energy (*qi*), a possibility of a new *qi-democracy* evolves. Similar to Irigaray's *self-affection* as a way towards democracy and Dussel's face *breath-to-breath* political ethics, the political philosophy of *qi* as a breath-energy now binds respiratory 'activated' subjects in a way not yet being fully envisaged as a possibility for democracy. The solidarity of co-breathers is now a new sign of what I propose to name "*qi-democracy*" – as a space of freedom now, based on the singular autonomy and newly regrounded subjectivity of breath-energy.

Finally, this is what represents the idea of *quiet democracy* as a mindful and peaceful future place to respite and to breathe, and to enkindle mutual love. Democracy needs to be rethought in a respiratory key in order to be able to adhere to the new material-somatic-respiratory ethical criterion: *to let the other breathe freely*. Based on the ethical entanglement of Western and East Asian cultures of democracy (but also other forms of democracy, such as Maya democracy, Ubuntu ethics and democracy etc.⁴⁷) – could it be now that *quiet democracy* is now intrinsically related to what I have envisaged as a possibility of *qi democracy*? The urgent need in today's world and its citizens is to build an alliance towards a free, breathful, and respectful culture of democracy.

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⁴⁶ Ogawa, "Qi and phenomenology of wind," (1998, 321). He adds: "The phenomenology of qi/ki and wind elucidates the fact that qi/ki fills the body and flows over the world at the same time." (333) Could the politics learn something from this, as it were, cosmo-communal *intertwining* of breath-energies?

⁴⁷ See on this Lenart Škof, *Pragmatist Variations on Ethical and Intercultural Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), ch. "Dewey and Intercultural Philosophy." For Maya democracy see Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Philosophy*, ed. by E. Mendieta (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). For Ubuntu ethics and democracy see, for example, *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. by P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (London: Routledge 2006), chs. 5, 7 and 8.

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