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Tactile renegotiations in actor training: what the pandemic taught us about touch

Christina Kapadocha

This article draws from the practice-research project under the umbrella title 'From Haptic Deprivation to Haptic Possibilities'. The project began as a response to the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK in March 2020 and the necessary transition to online interactions. As a practitioner-researcher who has been critically investigating tactile possibilities through somatically inspired methods within and outside actor training, I identified a 'gap' in how we could still embody relational potentialities of touch either working remotely or while practising physical distancing. Modified physical contact in my practice research originates in my work with actors in training and widens in online sessions and in-person workshops with non-actors. This article focuses on tactile renegotiations in actor training and critical observations regarding what touch can be, challenging universal and unified perceptions. Advancing two published TDPT blog posts on the project, the discussion directs attention to how necessary physical distancing during the pandemic expanded the use of touch in my training practice and how these tactile renegotiations can be applied post-pandemically within and beyond actor training. Inspired by phenomenological and feminist theories of embodiment, touch is proposed as an ethical renegotiation between self and other that necessitates differentiation and distancing in nearness.

Keywords: dermatographia, inter-embodiment, somatic methods, ethical touch

Introduction: solo tactile renegotiations

We start by finding a comfortable standing position with a supported base and a soft connection to our breath. Try to ground your attention to the dialogue between your feet and the floor as well as the simplicity of the opening and closing movement of your lungs. You may wish to take a couple of minutes to 'map' how you are within your body in the here and now seizing any small or bigger movements that want to be expressed.

Now let's activate the organ from which we get in touch, the skin, softly brushing with your hands the surface of your body. As you do so add to your attention that your skin is the biggest organ that envelops your body. It brings you in contact with the world, it gives you shape and contributes to the development of your unique identity. You may also wish to add the questions 'what is my connection with physical contact?' 'how does that feel to me?'

Begin the brushing from your head [...] . Then go to your neck, the full surface of your arms and hands, your front torso, the sides and the points of your back you can reach without over-stretching your arms. Responding to the flexibility of your skin organ, the change of temperature and the shapes your body takes, continue this 'skin shower' as you get to your pelvis, the front part of your legs, the upper part and the soles of your feet. As you follow the journey up through the back of your legs carry on with the brushing all the way to the crown of your head. Make sure you awaken every little inch of your skin.

And now release your hands and arms. Do you feel a subtle buzziness through your skin? If so, follow that no matter how strange it might seem. Start moving from your skin as if it becomes a membrane. As if I want to bring all the structures that are inside my body closer to my skin. I become this organism that moves only from my skin 'costume' that hugs my body from the front, back and sides. Keep checking in the support of the flow of your breath and whether you hold back your breathing in and out cycle. Feel free to explore the qualities that come up, 'how is it to move from my skin?' 'what can I get out of it?'

This opening invitation is an extract from how I initiate the study of the individual sense of touch through the awareness of one's skin organ in my current practice research, including the movement-based training I offer at East 15 Acting School in London, UK. I propose that it is pertinent to enact this writing on touch as *learning*, *creative* and *critical* 'tool' that can instigate ethical renegotiations between self and other, by first directing tactile attention to own bodies. I approach one's skin as the organ of touch that connects and separates us from other bodies and environments; as a locus of self-awareness and knowledge that can deepen our ethical attention to others. In other words, I suggest that by practically and somatically being in touch with ourselves acknowledging the potentials that can emerge from touch as a deeply social and ethical act can advance our abilities to ethically be in touch with others. This critical awareness is supported in practice by unpacking what touch can be, hence contributing to the understanding that there is not one way of being in touch or one way of experiencing it.

Solo modifications of partner touch-based work emerged in my practice research as a response to the necessary transition to online training and physical distancing guidelines during the pandemic. They shaped a research method in my COVID-responsive practice-as-research (PaR) project under the umbrella title 'From Haptic Deprivation to Haptic Possibilities'. Working within and outside actor training, I aimed at devising ways to preserve learning, understanding and creating through tactile potentialities asking: What happens to individuals and communities, particularly theatre communities, when physical proximity and physical contact is restricted? How would it be possible to examine new tactile

possibilities around alternative use of physical contact? How can these alternatives and critical investigations further contribute to the current re-evaluation of touch in theatre and performance training?

It is important to clarify that devising solo modifications of touch-based work in training during the pandemic did not exclude the development of interactive tactile awareness. Yet, out of necessity at that point, the actors in training and I focused on our own dynamic sense of getting in touch with ourselves, partnering with the space and the environment as preparation towards partnering with others. Partnering with others while distancing in the studio was primarily shaped upon distant somatic witnessing: echoing, complementing and responding to each other; a form of distant contact that trains the edges of vision and full-body 'listening'. By using the word 'listening' in inverted commas, I refer to one's full-body and multisensory engagement that goes beyond the ear-based listening and further facilitates the overlapping awareness of self and others. This integrated and dynamic approach to touch not only as physical contact but as rounded source of relational perception can benefit both actors and facilitators in training and creative contexts. I use it here as a quality and skill that can be cultivated through touch in training and while I expand on touch as listening methodology in my work, the interrelations between touch and listening per se are not the focus of this discussion (on that see Kapadocha 2021a).

I For the links to the blog posts, see Kapadocha (2020, 2021b) in the list of References.

Adding to material offered in two introductory blog posts on the project,¹ in this article I suggest that explicitly navigated individual preparation and negotiation of physical contact in actor training before getting in touch with others can advance a sense of ethical responsibility in collaboration, active full-body 'listening' and expressive skills. I claim that the necessity to focus on physical contact through individual processes in the context of my work offered me an opportunity to further unpack the attributes of touch and expand on systematising insights on *what touch can be, how it can be practised and experienced*. The modifications also became a helpful container for actors to understand the possibilities and intricacies of not only tactile but also overall interactions; to recognise and resonate more deeply with the significance of mutual responsibility, sensitivity, safety and active 'listening' as professional skills. Thus, I trace how my COVID-responsive investigations brought forward a renegotiated systematisation of touch that can be applied post-pandemically within and beyond actor training.

The opening of this article is also an invitation to its reading experience as a form of practical and theoretical, or in one word *praxical, dermatographia*. Inspired by Sarah Ahmed's and Jackie Stacey's collection *Thinking Through the Skin* (2004) in feminist embodiment studies, dermatographia becomes 'a form of skin writing (from the Greek 'derma', skin, and 'graphesis', writing)' (15). Otherwise used as a medical term to identify marking on skin, for Ahmed and Stacey dermatographia suggests 'that skin is itself also an effect of such marking. This is not to say that skin can be reduced to writing [...]'. But the substance of the skin is itself dependent on regimes of writing that mark the skin in different ways or that produce the skin as marked' (2004, 15). Embracing and expanding upon

this dynamic awareness between skin and writing, this article as dermographia intertwines practical and conceptual frameworks on touch in one inextricable narrative. This intertwinement is additionally reflected on the used layout which combines italics, bold and standard format. Italics communicate the actual practice in present tense, bold sections in the practice aim at suggesting emergent 'thinking through touch' principles and the standard format offers critical analysis and contextual information.

The practice-based narratives follow the work as I come into dynamic relation with the actors in training and they are transcribed from video recordings of the sessions. As a practitioner-researcher I shift between the 'we' of the shared experience and the first-person 'I' which addresses not only the active engagement of my own experience as a somatically involved *trainer-witness* but also the idiosyncratic 'I' of each individual in the process. Inspired by reflections the actors shared after an in-person practice in January 2022, I use the specific example as a case study to discuss emergent ethical awareness through touch when making the transition from solo to partnering work. In the next section I contextualise this practice by outlining underlying ideas of the overall Haptic Possibilities research project and its methodology.

Haptic possibilities: context, methodology, ideas

Touch is notoriously identified in a plethora of discussions and multiple fields as 'the mother of all senses' (see, among others, Montagu 1986; Pallasmaa 2012). We phenomenologically experience touch as 'our sense of belonging to the world' (Ratcliffe 2008, 93) or, according to neuroscientist David Linden, as 'a crucial form of social glue' (2015, 4). Yet, psychologist Tiffany Field, a researcher whose work has been pivotal in all current discussions on touch, notes: 'Despite the fact that touch is the largest sense organ (because the skin is the largest organ in the body), it is the one most taken for granted and the one most overlooked when it comes to research efforts' (2014, viii). Only in recent years the formal study of touch has attracted a growing interest and inevitably a distinctive shift took place during the pandemic with a particular focus on the impact of touch deprivation (see, among others, Cox 2020; Durkin, Jackson, and Usher 2021; Von Mohr, Kirsch, and Fotopoulou 2021).

In the field of theatre and performing arts, touch or physical contact has been established as a primary mode of intercorporeal thinking and communication (see Sarco-Thomas 2020). The necessity of physical distancing during the pandemic sparked numerous artistic discussions and projects on the significance of touch further illuminating the potentials of insightful contributions of performing arts to other disciplines including health and wellbeing.² Nonetheless, it has been primarily problematic attitudes towards touch such as the impact of #MeToo that recently attracted attention to its questionable applications in training and performance. The urgency of the matter instigated an essential re-evaluation of guidelines in performance training institutions towards the protection of boundaries and the wellbeing of both students and staff.

2 Some discussions include the C-DaRE (Centre for Dance Research) online Conversations – on Touch in May 2020 and the event Touching Matters at the Siobhan Davies Studios in

London and online in January 2022. UK-initiated relevant artistic projects include *Skin Hunger* by Dante or Die, the dance duet *Mud of Sorrow: Touch* by Akram Khan and *8 Tender Solitudes* by Fevered Sleep.

Within this challenging climate that renders touch a paradox, as a practitioner-researcher and actor trainer, I wish to focus on the productive and positive potentialities of diverse tactile experience while sustaining critical attention. My PaR methodology draws on somatic methods of *experiential anatomy* and *touch-based witnessing* as they interact with my investigations in performing arts and theories of embodiment. Informed by Thomas Hanna's revisions to the Greek word *soma* for the identification of the non-objectified 'individual embodiment of a process' (1976, 31), the term somatic in my work never addresses only diverse bodies but inner-outer, self-other, moving-sensing-thinking dynamics. Focusing on these dynamics in acting and creative processes, I modify the methods of experiential anatomy and witnessing based on my professional training with Linda Hartley.

Experiential anatomy, currently identified as embodied anatomy in Hartley's IBMT (Integrative Bodywork and Movement Therapy) programme, is an embodiment practice shaped upon the study of our bodies as unities of interconnected structures and systems. The practice develops upon the principles of Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®) founded by Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (2012; Hartley 1995). Experiential or embodied anatomy advances the study of 'objective' anatomy by inextricably combining it with self and relational witnessing methods such as movement, sound and touch. Witnessing in IBMT, an embodied concept and practice established in Mary Whitehouse's Authentic Movement, identifies an active mutuality and engagement between *movers* and *witnesses* that requires attention to the other while also attending to self (see Adler 2002). Particularly when it comes to touch-based witnessing, it becomes a form of active and interrelational full-body 'listening' that can support the understanding of diversity by embracing one's differences and conscious choice of proximity but also physical distantiation from others even in nearness.

Touch that can allow a dynamic and embodied self-experience even when physical distantiation is not a choice and there is no-body else to come in contact with, is theoretically supported by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of the reversibility of touch and his notion of *flesh*. According to the philosopher, flesh is 'an "element" of Being,' an exemplar sensible that is simultaneously sensible and sensate (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139). In other words, I touch and I am touched while I am in tactile relation with my environment: 'this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching [...] is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148). Merleau-Ponty's flesh-based tactile reversibility, however, despite its pivotal contribution to the problem of 'desomatisation' (Ahmed and Stacey 2004, 7) of touch, exhibits two interrelated ethical issues that become evident through empirical research.

The first is the problem of the *one-universal body* that I have analysed in earlier stages of my research as well while challenging logocentric problematics of hierarchy-based dualism and universalism in actor-training discourses (see Kapadocha 2016, 2021a). The issue lies in the fact that

Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality does not take into account the significance of *embodied difference*. Instead, it unifies diverse experience without considering parameters that shape one's embodied identity including but not limited to culture, race and gender. Thinking through touch in the context of this project I advance this criticism setting up the premise that there is no such thing as one mode of physical contact, one way of practising and experiencing it.

The second advancement to Merleau-Ponty's notion of *flesh* that problematically brings bodies into a consistent state of *tactile oneness*, is the approach to touch not only as organ of proximity and connection but also as organ of one's conscious separation, or physical distantiation. This does not mean to diminish the value of physical proximity to others in any way or form but to highlight the significance of touch-based ethical negotiations within relation. In resonance, in their feminist *dermographia*, Ahmed and Stacey identify inter-embodiment as 'a way of thinking through the nearness of other others, but a nearness which involves distantiation and difference' (2004, 7). Based on this approach to inter-embodiment, distantiation becomes a conscious choice of sustaining one's own *fleshiness* instead of losing oneself in the proximity to others. As a result, this conscious distantiation in inter-embodiment also advances the acknowledgement of embodied differences while in relation.

Even though Ahmed and Stacey highlight Merleau-Ponty's invaluable offering to accounts of feminist inter-embodiment, they also point out the criticism of the philosopher's universalism and oneness. '[F]or feminist, queer and post-colonial critics there remain the troubling questions: If one is always with other bodies in a fleshy sociality, then how are we "with" others differently? How does this inter-embodiment involve the social differentiation between bodily others?' (Ahmed and Stacey 2004, 6). Thus, modern feminist discourses advance touch to social and ethical considerations. As Ahmed notes, through 'skin-to-skin encounters, bodies are both deformed and re-formed; they take form through and against other bodily forms' (2005, 105). This process of deformation or reformation, established by the way we may or may not come into physical contact with others, is innately an ethical act. Based on the Haptic Possibilities project, I argue that this ethical stance starts from our own tactile sense of self and acknowledgement of the somatic complexities as well as potentialities of touch. Re-connecting these ideas with practice, the following section returns to actor training during the pandemic.

Distant tactile renegotiations

In January 2022, almost two years in the pandemic, the second term for actors in training at East 15 Acting School was about to begin. COVID-19 measures like regular testing and the use of face coverings indoors were still in place. Physical distancing however could be reduced and it was appropriate time for me to introduce physical contact or touch-based partnering. Nevertheless, the morning before my planned first in-person practice for the term with the MA Acting cohort an email was circulated saying that, due to several positive COVID cases in the group, the training

would have to move online for three days as a precautionary measure. Having progressed in my Haptic Possibilities project, at that point I took the opportunity to hold an online solo practice on the intended material and then advance it to in-person work in the end of the same week. My intention was to test out whether the actors in training would be able to navigate the preparatory work through the transition to partnering especially by experiencing this advancement in the same week.

The subject of the specific practice was full-body breathing towards the embodiment and embodied communication of text. For the scope of this writing, I focus on parts of the opening of *the breathing text* study as part of the specific session. Please note that I use the word study instead of exercise to stress the significance of individual process over a pre-determined outcome in training. My objective in this section is not to share the whole study but the parts of the narrative that can mostly contribute to this dermatographia. I aim at highlighting how tactile principles can inform ethical renegotiations of touch towards the self and eventually others. The study follows the developmental but also reversible sequencing *I touch-I breathe-I move-I sound-I speak*. Different modes of physical contact are integrated throughout, combined with co-ordination between breath and movement. A very particular component of *the breathing text* is that it starts by investigating the tactile interplay, or 'counter-dance,' between one's lungs and diaphragm to observe how this internal movement travels to the rest of our bodies and supports diverse external expression. The following section is part of the online solo work.

We begin in a comfortable but not collapsed standing position. We bring one hand on top of our chest and the other on top of the bottom of our ribcage, roughly where the diaphragm sits internally. We breathe. I touch-I breathe. The hand on top of the chest can feel the bone structures of the sternum, or breastbone, and the other hand sits in between the sternum and ribs as well as the softness of our upper bellies.

We are using the full surface of our palms and the intention of the contact does not include any pressure. The invitation is to attune to a 'pure listening,' 'what am I listening through my hands?,' physically and palpably. Am I listening to my heartbeat? Do I feel the movement of my lungs going up and down? How about the fingers of the lower hand that meet the belly? Can I feel an opposite movement there? If this sensation is present, we are referring to the input of the diaphragm that counteracts the movement of our lungs.

We are checking through our hands the breathing and movement that is happening. *I touch-I breathe-I move. Softly and subtly we bring attention to this connection with the support of our own physical contact.* For instance, something we tend to hear is 'drop your shoulders with your out-breath'. We can become aware of what this means by bringing attention to a light contact between our hand and the shoulder of each side while following the subtle movement of the breath.

The next point of contact is a sort of self-holding, wrapping with our palms the sides of the bottom of our ribcage to attune to the side movement of our lungs. My fingertips are facing forward and the bottom of my palms to the back but of course this can be reversed if not comfortable enough. **All these**

steps are going to be included in the partner work as well, so the invitation is to attune to the sensitivity that arises from each different point of contact.

The palms are in parallel to the floor touching my front, back and middle or side body. We are now bringing attention to breathing and moving through these new points of contact. **Then we add the possibility of pressure.** The invitation is: you can squeeze in with the outbreath as much as you wish to, **it is your own body anyhow, you make the decisions** as you explore the extremes and the limits of your breath.

Eventually we come to the tactile simulation of the diaphragm. I create a 'ring' using the thumbs and index fingers of both hands and I bring my hands to the bottom of my ribcage. When I breathe in the 'ring' tilts down. When I breathe out the 'ring' tilts up. **The invitation is to move beyond the cognitive understanding of what happens between lungs and diaphragm to get the physical and eventually the embodied perception of their dialogue.** When I am breathing out it is literally as if my hands want to lift my body, same as the diaphragm lifts to support the lungs and give space to our organs in the outbreath.

This is gradually combined with a small rolling down and up of our spines, no further than the thoracic spine first. We repeat the rolling and, when ready, the movement can become as big and as dynamic as we wish it to be responding to our individual study. In a similar way we can release our attention from the breathing pattern and maintain the movement expression. The breathing is happening anyhow. Eventually we release our hands from our ribcage if we have not done already. **We maintain conscious contact with the space.** I touch-I breathe-I move.

We check in how we are within our bodies and whether our attention has shifted through the support of self-directed touch as learning 'tool'.

Partner tactile renegotiations

During the in-person practice in the end of the same week, the actors and I revisited the solo preparation towards partner work. We followed the same structure and awareness maintaining the sense of sensitivity and attention. What changed was that we advanced each actor's own physical connection into collaboration with a partner. I highlighted that the most important thing was the quality of 'listening' between the Authentic Movement-inspired roles of the *actor-mover* and the *actor-witness*. The simplest way to put this is that the actor-witness is invited to offer support to the actor-mover without though abandoning their self- 'listening'. In that way the solo practice becomes a preparation and underlying awareness in partnering.

To share the shape of the partnering study, I take the role of the actor-witness and a learner, who volunteers, becomes the actor-mover. **I make clear that the expression of this shape or fluid structure differentiates based on the individuals going through the study.** First I verbally check with the actor-mover whether they **feel comfortable with the included points of contact** and whether any amendment may be necessary. When

this is clarified, I stand behind the actor-mover facing their back body **and finding a mutually comfortable distance.**

We both begin by individually reconnecting with our own sense of grounding to our bodies and the space. Gradually through that I, as the actor-witness, open up softly my attention to the physical presence of the actor-mover receiving the quality of physicality they express at that point. The intention is to establish an in-sync interaction before moving closer to offer the first points of contact. **I use the wholeness of my palm for clarity in the input, resting my hands on top of the actor-mover's shoulders with no pressure or weight whatsoever. I do not rush to change points of contact.** Instead, I maintain my tactile attention to facilitate the anchoring of the actor-mover's attention and awareness.

Expanding on the principles of the solo practice and echoing the feminist inter-embodiment of 'nearness which involves distantiating and difference' (Ahmed and Stacey 2004, 7), the partner work is established upon the practice of ethically informed differentiation, comfort and negotiation of distancing. In her therapeutic practice, Hartley refers to 'the term *interface* for this subtly shifting experience of containment, differentiation and contact. At the interface two worlds meet and interact. Consciousness arises as awareness is brought to the interface' (2006, added emphasis). As part of these negotiations and having always in my attention ethical differentiations between training and therapy given that my practice has no therapeutic intentions, touch-based partner work begins with verbal pre-negotiations of points of contact. This arrangement establishes a less intimidating ground for the actors allowing space for individual freedom and choice in the partnering.

Pre-negotiations of physical contact have been recently discussed in theatre and performance primarily within the framework of Intimacy Directing and Intimacy Coordinating (see Derr 2020; Hilton 2020). These practices resulted to a necessary shift in acting training and profession through a systematic focus to intimacy guidelines, particularly when it comes to touch in simulated sex scenes. They also contribute to the critical unpacking of the complexities of touch analysed in this discussion. Nevertheless, this does not mean that approaches to sensitive and ethical physical proximity in actor training have not been implemented before the formal establishment of intimacy-focused methods or based on other influences. In my somatically inspired work, I wish to acknowledge intimacy in all the relational dynamics in acting, whether in physical distancing or nearness.

To preserve this sensitivity when the self-directed touch is advanced to partnering, it is imperative we maintain *clarity* in the tactile input. Using the correlation with clarity in verbal communication, I prompt the actor-witnesses to 'speak' clearly through their physical contact with their partners. Tactile clarity can be identified by *pressure*, *weight* and *pace*. The way they are practised in the *breathing text* study represents the foundation upon which the actors shape their individual and inter-embodied tactile awareness. I find particularly significant for the establishment of this ethical and critical attention to begin without applying any pressure or weight and allowing time for the impulses to land for both partners

instead of going straight for speed that can activate a different sensory awakening of the skin and its 'mind'.

In my observations working with actors and in resonance with findings in developmental psychology (see Heller 2014, 27), maintaining with conscious patience pressure-free and weight-free points of contact can actively relax both partners. With this navigated clarification and consideration, that was further expanded through the restrictions of the pandemic, I would argue actors can productively cultivate a sense of mutual choice and renegotiated co-ordination instead of subduing to a directive or unclear touch. Thus, even when subtle pressure and direction is added, it resonates with what is happening in the actor-mover's physicality without offering an un-coordinated impetus.

*The actor-mover is invited to respond to the subtle tactile input through movement in any way and 'size' the impulses manifest for them. I reiterate the principle that **there is literally no 'right' or 'wrong' in this response other than mutually 'listening' to the actor-mover's responses.** The 'wrong' is to hold back this 'listening'. **What starts unfolding is an echoing 'dance' between the actor-mover and the actor-witness that has been initiated by the first points of contact.** To make this 'listening' even clearer to the rest of the group and after having warned the actor-mover for the imminent shift in my quality, I exaggerate a disconnected indifference by physically and mentally moving my attention away from the actor-mover despite keeping the points of physical contact. In that way not only do I wish to indicate that just making contact is not enough but also to highlight what is happening if we are not mutually and fully present in acting.*

*We now move to the shoulder blades, a pair of additional points of contact the awareness of which becomes available through the partnering support of the actor-witness. **I prompt the group to observe how the actor-mover's shoulder blades connect to their arms, how the legs come in through the connection with the pelvis and the spine. Nothing is mystical.** I keep referring to witnessing through contact qualities such as the ongoing check in of the actor-mover's availability instead of directing them through pressure. **Pressure changes only if the actor moves closer to the points of contact suggesting their own need and choice.** And then I begin to offer the input of the diaphragm adding a subtle lifting from the tactile 'ring' when the actor-mover's body goes down, usually following an out-breath. The pressure slightly shifts now as it indicates an upward and downward direction following the actor-mover's diaphragmatic breathing.*

*When I sense through my hands my partner's physical engagement with the countersupport of their diaphragm I minimise even further the surface of the points of contact. Using one hand, I bring the tips of my thumb and index finger on each side of the bottom of the actor-mover's thoracic spine. Their expression is now even more active and I prompt them to feel free to start moving in the space. **It is the actor-witness's responsibility to maintain the 'listening' but I do not get stressed if I lose the physical connection at any point. In fact it may be necessary if the actor-mover's activity suggests so.***

Adding to the tactile clarity in partnering, touch goes beyond merely a physical act. Instead, it becomes a mode of integrated presence and understanding of self and other. In that sense, inter-embodied negotiations of difference and distantiation as part of tactile witnessing in my practice can be additionally supported by Jessica Benjamin's concept of 'thirdness' in the field of intersubjective psychoanalysis. Benjamin identifies thirdness as a transformational space of 'coordination, or purposeful negotiation of difference' (2018, 13). This to me is the space of *witnessed thirdness* in training (Kapadocha 2018), where the idiosyncratic yet inter-embodied experiences of actors and facilitators can meet. Benjamin's ideas additionally help with the understanding of lack of presence in tactile interaction, like the moment I intentionally disconnect from my partner. For a 'failed witness' and the absence of an ethically sensitive 'listener' can cause the 'cancelling' of individuals or groups (Benjamin 2018, 64-87, 247-284). In a recent discussion, Roanna Mitchell (2022) draws on Benjamin's 'thirdness' to discuss staff and student wellbeing in performance training as in some cases therapeutic and training intentions may overlap. This is an additional area differentiation and distantiation in sensitive proximity can contribute to.

The significance of distantiation as an innate part of clarity in nearness can be somatically and more fully perceived by both actors and facilitators in the further development of the partnering practice. For the actor-witness, losing physical contact of the actor-mover does not mean that they are not still present for them. For the actor-mover, distantiation is an opportunity to integrate the offered tactile clarity that can facilitate, among others, the awareness of one's body as interconnected entity. This sort of finding can be instigated only by directing attention to information touch can reveal through empirical practice. Neuroscientist Corinne Jola, discussing a dance research workshop, refers to this 'focused attention to individual touches' (2020, 53) that brought up reflective sketches of a more unified body in her laboratory. I further unpack clarity in points of contact in my investigations including both the source as well as the *surface* of the offered contact.

By using the term tactile *source*, I refer to whether the contact is offered from one's hands or through other surfaces of our skin bodies. For instance, while in the discussed study the source of tactile impulses is the actor-witness's hands, further developments of touch-based partnering also include the expansion to other surfaces such as our back and side skin bodies maintaining the same tactile *intention* and *attention*. Moreover, a tactile *surface* of the offered contact refers to the 'size' of the points of contact. While in the beginning of the *breathing text* study the actor-witness contacts with the wholeness of their palms, the offered impetus is gradually minimised ending up being just the tips of two fingers before allowing physical distancing. Both tactile source and the 'size' of the points of contact, along with the chosen pressure, weight and pace establish different ways of communicating, practising and experiencing touch. All these attributes have a pivotal effect on the way 'skin to skin encounters' may deform or re-form our bodies and underlie multiple applications of touch in training.

Tactile renegotiations: learnings and findings

In the critical reflection that followed the in-person study, the actors in training brought up observations about the responsibility of being present ‘sometimes feeling restricted and other times finding new ways through the other person,’ a sense of safety to explore how far one’s body and expression can go and understanding of active ‘listening’ while being in sync. Beyond possible excitement of reconnecting through physical contact, I propose that it was due to the nature of our work up to that point and the preceded devised solo practice, the actors were capable of finding, recognising and following the profound awareness that was evident in their reflections. Even though enthusiasm is a familiar response to partnering, this time I distinguished a clear sense of ethical attention within the parallel development of pivotal professional skills in acting and an insightful discovery of oneself through others.

The primary finding can be summarised in the fact that conscious approaches to physical distantiation bring up tactile renegotiations when advancing to physical nearness. In other words, through specific self-directed practice one can maintain own integrity and the ability for ongoing negotiations with others even when we operate in physical proximity. It also heightens in praxis that physical nearness ethically shifts when is not shaped upon tactile co-dependency (i.e. physical contact can be experienced only in relation to others) given that, even if differently, I can stay in tune with the benefits of being in touch when I am not partnering. This skill can be cultivated by recognising the complexities and differentiations of touch as *learning*, *creative* and *critical* ‘tool’. As a non-unified and fixated action that can be unpacked through multiple physical attributes including chosen *pressure*, *weight*, *pace*, *source* and *surface*.

The touch-based principles discussed here can contribute to any field of work that involves physical contact particularly when it comes to the support of one’s mental health and wellbeing. For instance, in my latest performance-workshops *Are We Still in Touch?* as part of the Haptic Possibilities project, participants from the health sector have pointed out benefits for carers. When physical contact is an innate part of one’s work but they do not necessarily consider themselves within this negotiation of care. In actor training these principles can inform other methods of tactile communication such as in post-Grotowskian practices (see among others Gontarski, Wiśniewski, and Kręglewska 2021) or the way movement and voice facilitators wish to heighten students’ awareness in a sensory way. Moreover, self-directed practice before partnering offers not only a practical solution for actors in training who for any reason are reluctant or hesitant to practise contact with others but also an insightful, ethical and critical method of renegotiating *what* physical contact can be and *how* it can be practised in training.

In an introductory post to the TDPT journal issue ‘Against the Canon,’ the reader comes across the following questions: ‘What does touch mean post #MeToo and the killing of George Floyd? Who owns space, how do we negotiate touch, what might touching signify, what can we learn from/through touch?’ (Evans et al. 2020). Based on this discussion, I

suggest we can continuously negotiate, renegotiate and learn through touch in theatre and performance training by critically and ethically acknowledging somatic 'difference' and 'distantiation' as an innate part of nearness. Beyond Merleau-Ponty's theoretical potentialities of tactile reversibility and the advancements of inter-embodiment by Ahmed and Stacey, in the Haptic Possibilities project it has been fascinating and deeply insightful to empirically expand on the creative, learning and caring potentials of relational dynamics in both physical proximity and distance. Eventually, this *dermographia* shows that inter-embodiment, in both 'nearness' and 'distantiation,' in the practices of writing, training and beyond can be primarily and ethically renegotiated through a conscious and somatic nearness to the self.

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