Touch as a Feedback Loop: Exercising the Leap from Inertia to Activation

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This article critically reflects on the facilitation of embodied practice in virtual spaces of teaching, learning and creation, specifically looking at ways of facilitating touch within the broader context of decolonising dance and movement practices in South Africa. When working without the touch of another (human)being, I explore how the affordances of environment and surfaces can offer a feedback loop for the sounding body in motion. The article draws from experiences of facilitating movement and physical theatre courses at the University of Pretoria to suggest how touch may become an embodied technique that structures practice in spaces of isolation and inertia and in times where notions of continuity and discontinuity are ruptured. I explore how walls, surfaces and objects become secondary affordances that offer an external force onto the body through tactility. Reading discourses of embodiment and decoloniality through one another, I further argue that using touch to re-initiate motion offers political possibilities to exercise the leap from inertia to activation, and trouble the colonially-formed category of human.

Keywords: Touch; embodied practice; pedagogy; decoloniality; posthumanism

Introduction

This article frames touch as an embodied technique that offers movers in training the possibility to exercise a political leap from inertia to activation. I place this understanding of touch as a political technique of the body within the broader context of decolonising dance and movement practices in South Africa. My starting point is that a decolonial[1] praxis of movement seeks

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[1] The terms decolonisation and decoloniality appear somewhat interchangeably in this article, as various authors employ these terms differently. Broadly, I draw from the understanding that decolonisation refers to political and economic dimensions, while decoloniality as a term responds more particularly to epistemological concerns.

new techniques and that touch opens up possibilities for rethinking the relationship between humans and the environment in ways that speak to particular decolonial concerns. I begin by contextualising the notion of a decolonial movement praxis as well as my understanding of touch as embodied technique, followed by two samples of embodied practice. These samples draw from virtual movement explorations with university drama students during the Covid-19 pandemic. I link experiences of inertia created by pandemic learning within higher education, to a larger context of 'postcolonial hauntologies' (Coly, 2019) that mark bodies and practices in the global South. I suggest that touch as embodied technique has the ability to jolt the body into motion creating political possibilities. Touch creates a feedback loop for the mover offering a place to exercise agency and the relationship between self and environment as a negotiation of inner and outer modes of sensing. Finally, I propose that extending touch to non-human bodies and surfaces reworks the concept of agency itself, and that bringing posthumanism in conversation with decolonial concerns moves away from anthropocentric and binary categories of being and towards a radically open concept of embodiment. This acknowledges what Achille Mbembe (2021) refers to as 'planetary entanglement', which draws from the understanding that surviving the current ecological crisis and working out 'new ways to live with the Earth', are contingent upon 'alternative modes of being human and inhabiting the world' (Mbembe, 2021:21).

A decolonial dance and movement praxis

A decolonial praxis for dance and movement, I argue, entails shifting the focus away from discursive methodologies that risk recrafting colonial scripts and that continue to perceive such practices as responses to the aesthetics and conventions of Western theatre dance and art. South African dance scholarship has emphasised the need to disrupt hegemonic constructs of dance

and dancing bodies in order to grapple with the ongoing legacies of colonial and apartheid[2] power structures. These disruptions, South African dance scholars have argued, need to consider not only performance texts, but also questions of whose bodies are made visible in processes of creation as well as ways of teaching and training. Lliane Loots, for example has written extensively on the notion of colonised bodies, and how dance and dancing bodies, with particular reference to gender and race in South Africa, have been, and often continue to be articulated within western patriarchal paradigms (Loots, 1995:53). Gerard Samuel similarly argues that in 'no other colonised country were dancing bodies more destructively subjected to disempowerment and disembodied than in Apartheid South Africa' (Samuel, 2011:41). Loots further turns to the phrase 'voicing the unspoken' to describe how some of the key concerns in current dance practices in South Africa entail unearthing and troubling 'a host of issues relating to power and how we have constructed our (dancing) histories to either support or subvert historical power operations in our South African society, past and present' (Loots, 2012:54). 'Voicing the unspoken', I suggest, meets Michalinos Zembylas' (2018) understanding of 'decolonising' in the context of South African higher education, which 'implies a critical examination of dominant structures of knowledge and their relationship to power as they operate and are reproduced in various forms' (Zembylas, 2018:3). My use of the term 'political' as it implies to the techniques of the body I describe in this article, thus relates to ways in which these techniques trouble power both in terms of dance/movement practice and as it manifests in learning situations.

Acknowledging that decoloniality cannot be reduced to a single movement, I understand a decolonial praxis to be an epistemological endeavour that seeks to undo coloniality's hegemonic discourses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013:13). Mahmood Mamdani explains that the

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[2] The apartheid government came to power in South Africa in 1948 and instituted its policies based on the notion of separate development of four constructed racial groups. The rhetoric of separate development affected all spheres of South African life, including arts and culture (Friedman, 2012:1).

understanding of decolonisation 'has changed over time: from political, to economic to discursive (epistemological)' (Mamdani, 2016:79). He adds that the epistemological dimension, which is the area of intervention this article turns to, focuses 'on the categories with which we make, unmake and remake, and thereby apprehend the word' (Mamdani, 2016:79). I suggest that turning towards the embodied practices that circulate across the bodies of practitioners in experimentation, performances and pedagogies (Spatz, 2020:98-99), yields alternative logics for a decolonial praxis for movement. I draw from my own movement practice and embodied research processes with fellow artists and drama students in higher education to find opportunities to disrupt established conceptual frames of movement and contemporary dance-making. This follows Ben Spatz's proposition that 'notions of embodiment and embodied arts offer something specific to decolonisation efforts, which cannot be subsumed under the concept of performance' (Spatz, 2020:246).

The challenge of dislodging established conceptual frameworks is, as Walter Mignolo argues, closely connected to the hegemony of Western epistemology (in Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014:203). I borrow Mignolo's term 'delinking' to suggest that the decolonising of culturally and colonially constructed bodies and embodied practices is part of a necessary practice of undoing and disentangling from 'the legacy of modern aesthetics and conceptions of art formed in Greek and Roman philosophical thought' (in Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014:201). Delinking, for Mignolo, 'refers to any thinking and doing that is geared toward undoing a particular kind of aesthesis, of sense, that is, the sensibility of the colonised subject' (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014:201). In terms of movement technique, I connect the notion of 'delinking', deconstructing or decolonising, with the idea of detraining, de-skilling, or the undoing of layers of aesthetic conditioning that inevitably accompanies performance training. The idea of detraining or undoing resonates with practices and techniques in the field of somatics and some of the somatic techniques I draw from in my own movement and pedagogical practice. This includes

the idea of 'repatterning' the body, which is common to somatic practice and which I borrow from the Laban Bartenieff Movement Studies framework and lexicon (Hackney, 2002:44-45). Ciane Fernandes, who also draws from this framework, suggests, for example, that 'the repatterning principle' may work on:

Decolonising usual and limiting expressive manners, and expand our movement possibilities through re-experiencing the phases of the phylogenetic development (evolution of species) and ontogenetic development (evolution of the human embryo) (Fernandes, 2015:18-19).

Delinking or detraining, however, is not a move towards the idea of a 'neutral body', or a universal idea of 'human'. Rather, as I will explore later, detraining, and here specifically using touch as embodied technique, links critically with opening up embodiment through conceptions of the posthuman. In Judith Butler's sense, as Carrie Noland explains, there is 'no such thing as a "prediscursive" or "extradiscursive" moment of being, because all being is being-for-another – appearance, representation, social legibility, citation' (Noland, 2009:178). In addition, drawing from Karen Barad's new materialism, all doing is also entangled with being, implying that the practice of detraining/de-skilling/undoing is itself a 'structuring[3] principle' (Noland, 2009:42). Noland further writes that 'to view the moving body as a "structuring principle" is not to call for a return to a natural body, defined once and for all' (Noland, 2009:54). Rather, her argument centres on the body-moving as 'agentic kinesis', which leans on the idea that although gestures cannot be 'entirely relieved of social meaning', movement and gesture sensations remain interoceptively available allowing subjects to exert pressure and transform movement and meaning over time, and which meets Foucault's understanding of 'resistance' (Noland, 2009:54). Referring to examples of modernist painters, Noland notes that

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[3] Noland attributes the idea of the body as 'structuring' to Marcel Mauss (1973) and his elaboration of Techniques of the Body (*techniques du corps*).

while deskilling 'was highly necessary' for these artists, deskilling paradoxically, 'demanded a battery of techniques' (Noland, 2009: 154). In other words, de-linking initiates a process of re-linking, like the earlier-mentioned notion of 'repatterning', to possible new techniques. Processes of unlearning, deskilling or detraining, and then articulating or relearning new technique resonate with the decolonising moves made by several South African choreographers. The work of choreographer Gregory Maqoma[4], for example, is characterised by complex recombinations of elements drawn from various dance genealogies that serve to simultaneously unmake and remake technique. Writing in the context of South African higher education, Lesley Le Grange describes the decolonisation of university curricula as a cyclical process that involves 'a lifelong process of unlearning and relearning', creating 'a spiral of ongoing cycles of inquiry' (Le Grange, 2021:10). In addition, Zembylas notes that although decolonisation has been explored at the curriculum level, 'there has been less theorisation of what decolonisation might imply for higher education pedagogy and praxis' (Zembylas, 2018:2). The questions posed in this article are concerned with praxis and pedagogy, which as Zembylas reminds us, is not limited to teaching methods, but rather about the 'processes, practices and paths of struggle that oppose ongoing colonisation on an everyday basis and seek to reclaim humanity beyond its colonial legacies' (Zembylas, 2018:5). The posthuman shift I propose towards to end of the article, responds to questions of how dance and movement pedagogies might refigure the idea of human, beyond its Eurocentric and colonial blueprint. Drawing from this context, as well as Noland's argument and Spatz's conception of embodied technique, as I will elaborate below, I suggest that delinking as part of a decolonial praxis of movement and dance requires a battery of embodied techniques and, in particular, I explore the possibility of touch as a such political technique of the body.

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[4] Maqoma is the founder of Vuyani Dance Theatre in Johannesburg.

Touch as embodied technique

My understanding of touch as a political technique of the body is premised on Spatz's conception of embodied technique which stems from the notion that practices are epistemic, or as Spatz writes, practices 'are structured as much by knowledge as by habit' (Spatz, 2020:250). Embodied technique, explains Spatz, is a unit of practice that is relatively stable and thus allows knowledge contained within practice to become repeatable and transmissible (Spatz, 2020:101). I suggest that touch conceptualised as embodied technique offers both aesthetic and ethico-political[5] extensions to movement practices and pedagogies as part of a larger investment in articulating a decolonial praxis. This argument is further founded on Spatz's understanding of embodiment as first affordance. Spatz writes that the 'affordance of embodiment is logically prior to that of any external physical environment' and 'is the first site at which the dialogue between agency and materiality takes place' (Spatz, 2020:76). Transposing Gibson's (1979) environmental concept of affordances[6], Spatz posits that, in the area of practice, embodiment is 'the primary site of engagement' (Spatz, 2020:71). The focus on the senses, and here specifically touch, opens up a field in which to explore the relationship between inner and outer experience and how this dialogue or mediation between agency and materiality takes place.

On a physiological level, Linda Hartley offers that 'touch more than any other mode of sensation defines for us our sense of reality' (Hartley, 1995:17). She writes that 'the perception of touch is the primary way in which the cell learns about itself and the environment with which it comes into contact' (Hartley, 1995:16). Yet, as Carolien Hermans notes, touch is

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[5] This meets what Guattari ([1989]2000) names an 'ecosophy', which he describes as the ethico-political articulation between the three ecological registers of the environment, social relations and human subjectivity and a 'potentially radical force in the world' (Guattari, [1989]2000:15;27).
[6] The notion of affordance is borrowed from James J Gibson (1979) who refers to affordance as the relationship between environment and animal. Gibson explains that 'the possibilities of the environment and the way of life of the animal go together inseparably' (Gibson, 1979:135).

surprisingly, 'a neglected area in philosophy' (Hermans, 2021:1). Erin Manning's (2007) *The Politics of Touch* offers an important writing of the senses into political philosophy and a powerful counterpoint to conventional mind-body models that organise the senses 'within a motor-sensory system that retains the active-passive dichotomy between the one who touches and the one who is touched' (Manning, 2007:xii) and that continue to 'privilege staid readings of gender, biology, and politics' (Manning, 2007:xii). Manning undoes the idea that the senses serve to constitute 'a stable body that exists in a pre-given space-time which contains an active giver and a passive receptor' (Manning, 2007:xiii). Rather, she positions senses 'relationally as expressions of moving bodies' (Manning, 2007:xiii). The notion of relationality resonates with the African philosophical concept of *ubuntu*[7], which according to Le Grange positions 'the becoming of the human … in relationship with other human beings and the more/other-than-human world (Le Grange, 2021:17). Subjectivity, he argues, is not individual, but ecological (Le Grange, 2021:17).

In a relational model, time and space do not show up as 'stable signifiers into which the body enters … space – time are qualitatively transformed by the movements of the body' (Manning, 2007:xiii). Hermans further explains that 'the prerequisite of touch is movement. In absolute stillness we would not be able to have any tactile experience' (Hermans, 2021: 2). This resonates with Karen Barad's new materialist perspective that offers relation as an ontological starting point (Barad, 2003:815-816). Barad writes that the

> ongoing flow of agency through which "part" of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another "part" of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilised and destabilised does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself (Barad, 2003:817).

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[7] The concept of *ubuntu*, in short, indicates the relatedness between humans, which Le Grange writes, 'is emblematic of relatedness of everything in the cosmos' (Le Grange, 2021:17).

I take up the material and philosophical foregrounding of relation (through the abovementioned readings of Manning, Barad, Hermans and Le Grange) to offer that touch as embodied technique intervenes in the making of spacetime and is thus an activist and political gesture. Manning writes that 'the senses prosthetically alter the dimensions of the body' and that the senses, and thus touch, 'foreground a processual body' (Manning, 2007:xiii). This is a body of becoming, or a nomadic body as articulated by Rosi Braidotti who writes that all human and non-human entities are 'nomadic subjects-in process, in perpetual motion, immanent to the vitality of self-ordering matter' (Braidotti, 2019:36).

Touch foregrounds a relational body in motion. Recognising this ontology of touch, I begin from the inverse state of inertia to suggest that touch may re-activate the body and re-initiate motion. Manning (2009) refers to inertia as the inability to activate the body. She asks: What if the body cannot begin to move? Describing touch as technique, she draws from Oliver Sacks' case study of post-encephalitic patients who suffer a particular neurological condition that causes a loss of the ability to activate the body into movement. It is not a case of paralysis but rather a case of the body's loss of the ability to initiate motion. She further explains that

> inertia does not imply a total loss of movement: it suggests an inability to activate a change in state. Inertia is 'the property of a body by virtue of which it tends to persist in a state of rest or uniform motion' unless enacted upon by an external force (Manning, 2009:213).

Manning develops a philosophy of movement that understands movement not as displacement but as a translation from incipience to activation, which she calls pre-acceleration (Manning 2009:214). 'What is ordinarily thought of as movement,' she writes, 'is better understood as preacceleration, which is the virtual propulsion out of which displacement emerges' (Manning 2009:214). Touch, and by extension weight-sharing with other human and non-human bodies, are then techniques that can act upon the body as an external force to allow the body to take a

small/big leap from incipience to activation. As embodied technique, in Spatz' sense, touch to initiate motion can become a relatively stable, repeatable and transmissible unit of practice that sediments into a pedagogy over time (Spatz, 2015:32-35). To advance this argument and link it to the context of developing a decolonial praxis of movement in South Africa, I explore the context of online teaching and learning during the lockdown period at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, a situation characterised by inertia. Drawing from my experiences of facilitating movement and physical theatre classes for undergraduate drama students during this time, I suggest how touch may become a technique that structures embodied practice in spaces of isolation and in times where notions of continuity and discontinuity are ruptured. I offer an account of two sample of embodied practice that emerged in working with students, and explore how walls, surfaces and objects become secondary affordances that offer an external force onto the body through tactility. I link the constraints placed upon the body by lockdown learning during the Covid-19 pandemic to a greater context of inertia brought about by postcolonial hauntologies as conceptualised by Ayo Coly (2019). In making this link between two very different kinds of constraint or inertia, I take note of Katrak's comment[8] that 'Covid-19 (difficult as it is in restricting our freedoms)' is a time-bound reality 'that will end (conquered by vaccines like other diseases) unlike other epidemics that persist such as [the] 400-year disease of systemic racism and injustice' (Katrak, 2021:73). Mindful of these politics, I suggest that the embodied techniques surfacing from the specific ways in which Covid-19 caused bodies to 'stop', may produce and become repeatable as part of transformative techniques that aim to reactivate bodies arrested by postcolonial hauntings.

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[8] Katrak is responding specifically in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the USA.

Haunting stops the body; Covid stops the body

My proposition is that inertia, or the stopping of the body's motion and ability to reactivate, is created by particular constraints placed on bodies in postcolonial contexts. My understanding of constraints in relation to movement is borrowed from Danielle Goldman's (2010) reading of improvised dance practices, including contact improvisation, which in part informs my training and teaching. Goldman aligns improvised dance with Foucault's notion of practices of freedom,[9] suggesting that improvised dance is a practice of constantly negotiating shifting constraints (Goldman, 2010:5). She describes constraints as 'tight places' that are informed by class, gender, sexuality, race as well as artistic conventions and physical techniques. I connect this understanding of constraint with Coly's (2019) conceptualisation of postcolonial hauntologies, which combines the Derridean concept of hauntology with Fanon's understanding that 'the colonial continues to live on in the timescape of the postcolonial' (Coly, 2019:13). Coly diagnoses postcolonial hauntology 'as a chronic inability to break away from the colonial scene or to think oneself outside of the colonial' (Coly, 2019:13). Writing in the South African context, Loots observes how power constrains dancing bodies through various structures of control. She refers to 'patriarchal culture' which results in 'repression of the body – specifically the female body' as well as colonial – and apartheid – legacies that have conflated dance training with ballet training 'aiding assumptions that dance is a "white" art form' (Loots, 1995:55). I read physical techniques and artistic conventions, both of which are informed by colonial genealogies of knowledge and practice, as well as constructs of race, class, gender and sexuality as constraints or hauntologies that have the ability to stop the body, to paralyse it. Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation as a phenomenological question is useful here. She argues that 'how [bodies] "take up" space and what they "can do"' is closely connected to historical

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[9] Foucault (1994) argues that liberation is not sufficient to sustain 'admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society' (Foucault, 1994:282). This requires practices of freedom, which Foucault links to the ethics of the care for the self (Foucault, 1994).

processes such as whiteness and heterosexuality that 'orientate bodies in specific directions' (Ahmed, 2006:149). She explains that 'what is "present" or near us is not casual: we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there. Certain objects are available to us because of lines we have already taken' (Ahmed, 2006:21). This further links to Frantz Fanon's ([1967] 2008) insight that race and racism 'interrupt' the corporeal schema. I read interruption here as a momentary break in motion, a stop, interfering with its propulsion and directionality. I link this larger context of constraint or inertia caused by postcolonial hauntings to a kind of stuck-ness which I saw recreated in instances of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. I suggest that these constraints act as a choreographic problem that invites negotiation (delinking and relinking) and the potentiality of new embodied techniques. The question I keep turning over is: If constraints cause bodies to stop, how might touch as technique re-initiate motion?

My starting point is that movement practices offer instances of thinking, probing and re-searching, which presents possibilities for delinking/undoing/relinking/repatterning, or what may be called 'variations in performance' (Noland, 2009:3), or in a Foucauldian sense, 'instances of resistance' (Noland, 2009:3), or still in Deleuzian terms, a search for 'the unpredictable and the new' (Noland, 2009:64-65). Touch emerges as an embodied technique in response to the choreographic problem which centres on constraints and re-initiating motion. Spatz further emphasises 'the epistemic dimension of embodied practice as distinct from its instrumental value in the creation of artworks' (Spatz, 2020:98). Paying attention to this epistemic dimension serves to trouble power within institutional knowledge structures. Embodied and artistic practice emerge as both a way of knowing and knowledge-generating.

My questions unfold from experiences of facilitating undergraduate movement and physical theatre courses at the University of Pretoria, South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic, which I read as an acute instance of constraint and inertia. A national lockdown came into

effect in South Africa in March 2020 abruptly halting all classes at the university for several weeks before moving all learning online, including all learning that involved practical components and embodied practice. This situation of online learning continued for most of 2020 and 2021, frequently rupturing any sense of continuity. Only at the beginning of 2022 were students able to return to full time in-person learning for practical subjects, including embodied practices. The move to online learning prompted me and many colleagues locally, and globally, to abruptly rethink and find strategies for facilitating movement and embodied practice in an online classroom. The virtual mode of learning threw students into spaces of isolation both in space and time as many students engaged with class materials asynchronously rather than in real-time with their peers.[10] Students' classes and embodied practices shifted into rooms that were not necessarily suited to a movement practice because of spatial restrictions or privacy concerns when sharing already small spaces with their families. In addition, Hermans (2021) notes that 'the Covid-19 outbreak has led to a collective fear of touch … this includes not only the touching of others, the touching of surfaces but also self-touching" (Hermans, 2021:1).[11]

In online spaces of learning, students seemed to become increasingly disembodied and inert, leading me to return to a set of questions over and over again: How can a body seemingly floating out into space become material and concrete once more? How can a body, referring to others through a digital interface, ground in its physical place? How can a body overcome physical inertia and leap into activation? If constraints stop the body, then what are techniques that could reactivate it, and how do these techniques open new fields for embodied practice?

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[10] This mode of teaching and learning raised many concerns about access, specifically students' unequal access to technologies and data for internet use. Importantly also, it is worth questioning to what extent online classrooms impacted the kinds of pedagogies that could be engaged.
[11] It should also be noted that what is considered 'safe touch' is informed by cultural, social and gendered dimensions. Moreover, I am mindful of the fact that gender-based violence is a widespread and systemic problem in South Africa, and that this imbues the politics of touch with additional meaning within the current South African context.

Believing that touch is vital to this process, I wondered how touch, could be facilitated in virtual spaces without other (human) bodies.

Sample of embodied practice 1

The sample of embodied practice offered below functions both as documentation as well as a way in which to trace techniques that are becoming part of a decolonial and emerging pedagogical practice, with the understanding that these techniques are never prescriptive and only ever optional. My perception of a state of inertia brought on by virtual pandemic learning, led to a series of movement explorations of which I offer the following account:

1. *Find a wall. If a wall is not available, make use of an armchair. If you are seated at a desk, make use of your chair and the surface immediately in front of you. Work with a camera and/or other witnesses.*

2. *Move in order to spread your skin onto the surface. Try to bring all parts of your skin in contact with the wall. Some parts are difficult to spread and expose to the wall. Accommodate your shape to bring more of your skin in contact with the wall. Observe your breath, hum and sigh as needed. Keep your eyes closed. Sense your inner environment.*

3. *Once the whole body has found contact with the wall, turn this into a spreading, pressing, pushing dance. Begin to tune into your own body's density against the wall. Sense variations in tone and density in this spreading, pressing, pushing dance. Notice the body's changing consistency, the potential to condense and de-condense. Continue to explore breath and sound. Tune into vibration against the wall. Keep the eyes closed, stay internal.*

4. *Continue this spreading, pressing, pushing dance. Begin to open your eyes and take in more of the environment that surrounds you. Continue to tune into your own tone and*

density, and begin to bridge into the environment, reach out into space, to other nearby objects and surfaces. Notice any change in sound, unvoiced and voiced consonants may come into play. Play with being both inner and outer. Sense your inner environment while bridging to the outer world.

5. *Now begin to 'co-compose' the dance with the wall. Sense how you both shape and are being shaped by the wall. The moving sounding body and the wall are inextricable. In the words of Manning:*

> Each touch is much more than a tactile sensory input. It is a hearing-with, a seeing-through. To take the next step is never simply to touch the floor again. It is to feel the shapeshifting of spacetime, to hear the wall's approach, to express the parameters of the room expanding and decreasing. It is moving to sense the weight of the body's proprioception, to 'ground', to 'body' (Manning 2009:212).

6. *Stay in a "dance of attention" (Manning & Massumi, 2014). Witness yourself and others. Notice others witnessing you. Witness generously and responsibly.*

Touch foregrounds a relational body in motion: affordances and posthuman possibilities

In writing the exploration above, my aim as an embodied researcher is to think from the inside of the practice and articulate instances of embodied practice that, borrowing from Spatz (2020), sedimented into techniques that then structure subsequent movement investigations and pedagogies. I have found that touch, especially through the use of techniques drawn from contact improvisation[12], as in the exploration above, offers an easeful way into exploring

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[12] Contact improvisation as a form of embodied practice can be traced through the work of Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith and other in the mid-1970s in the USA (Goldman, 2010:15;22). Contact improvisation began for Paxton as a way into movement for untrained dancers. The dance begins as a duet form, and contact through touch with another body, and through weight-sharing as an extension

movement with others and introducing movement and embodied practice as research. Movers discover the possibilities of the body through the use of touch, pressure, density, play with gravity while oscillating between inner and outer modes of attending. The explorations that emerged with students were repeated later in two virtual conferences[13], further clarifying the emerging pathways of technique with each iteration. Engaging students in explorations through contact with walls and other non-human surfaces, offered productive ways to create motion. Like an auditory feedback loop describes the ability to hear oneself speak, the density and pressure of surfaces offered direct feedback into the materiality of the body. In addition, moving and sounding through audible breath and voice contributes to 'unmaking' colonially informed and imposed 'genre boundaries between theatre, dance and music' (Spatz, 2020:247). Moving, shifting, sounding and vibrating with the environment created a tactile and proprioceptive feedback loop. This meets Hermans' observation that 'the materiality of a thing is not a pre-given or determined beforehand but emerges in tactile interaction' (Hermans, 2021:5).

I further borrow from Goldman (2010) who argues that contact improvisation's political potential lies in the ways in which its physical practice trains dancers to 'ready themselves for a range of possible situations' (Goldman, 2010:25). Similarly, I propose that touch as technique trains a leap from inertia to activation. Drawing parallels between training developed by contact improvisers and techniques of the body in nonviolent civil rights movements, she concludes that improvisation has 'political power as a vital technology of the self' (Goldman, 2010:25). My interest here, is on how Goldman's the notion of a technology of the self might be extended

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of touch, offers impulses for movement. I acknowledge the modes of moving-making offered by this experimental form in the genealogy of my training.

[13] These explorations were reiterated at the Arts, Access and Agency Conference held online from 7-9 October 2021 by the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria, and the JOMBA! Masihambisane Dialogues online colloquium from 2-4 June, which was organised by the Centre for Creative Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience festival. A version of this embodied exploration was included in my PhD thesis (Johnstone, 2022).

and how touch as technique might afford opportunities to expand understandings of agentic technology, beyond the necessarily volitional, conscious, and human (Manning, 2016:2). Movement unfolds relationally, distributing and elasticising agency among the movers, and troubling notions of power. This understanding of shared agency is closer to Manning's use of Deleuze and Guattari's *agencement* (referred to in English as 'assemblage'). *Agencement*, according to Manning, breaks down the emphasis on the volition, intentionality, and agency triad as a prerequisite of freedom (Manning, 2016:115). This may also be understood through the earlier-mentioned concept of *ubuntu*, which according to Le Grange, describes individual liberation as occurring 'in intra-action with other humans and the more/other-than-human world' (Le Grange, 2021:17). In addition, for Manning, subject-centred agency, which assumes that a free individual is a master of their own acts (Manning, 2016:120), describes a neurotypical account of experience. Advocating instead for neurodiverse accounts, Manning argues that experience is collective and ecological, foregrounding a relational and ecological frame for subjectivity (Manning, 2016:115; Le Grange, 2021:17). The embodied practice described here invites movers into a negotiation between inner and outer sensing through proprioceptive and tactile connections with walls and objects. Moreover, both Manning and Hermans' accounts, as well as Barad's new materialist perspective, allow us to understand this kind of co-creation beyond human to human interactions, what Le Grange refers to as 'the more/other-than-human' (Le Grange, 2021:17). I suggest that the affordance of walls and other non-human surfaces opens the use of touch as technique up to posthuman understandings of embodiment that rethink human/environmental relations and thus resonate with decolonial concerns.

Returning to Gibson's earlier-mentioned theory of affordances, Ingold (2007) notes that Gibson 'distinguishes three components of the inhabited environment: *medium, substances* and *surfaces*' (Gibson, 1979:16 in Ingold, 2007:4). My interest here is in the properties of surfaces.

Ingold writes that surfaces have 'varying degrees of stability and permeability', but that they can be explained, drawing from Gibson, as 'interfaces between one kind of materiality and another – for example between rock and air' (Ingold, 2007:7). In addition, Ingold explains that 'like all other creatures' humans 'swim in an ocean of materials' (Ingold, 2007:7). He writes that what this immersion reveals 'is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds … undergo continual generation and transformation' (Ingold, 2007:7). Key to this argument, however, is that it is not just human agents who are capable of enacting transformation. Things, or objects generally regarded as inert, can 'act back' (Ingold, 2007:12). This can be understood through Manning's earlier-mentioned understanding of *agencement* as a move away from conventional understandings of causality and agency. Drawing from Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, Manning further argues that 'there is no external subjectivity to the event' (Manning, 2016:133). She writes that 'the subject, as in Whitehead, is not the activator of the act but emerges in the act' (Manning, 2016:133). As Ingold explains 'wood is alive, or "breathes", precisely because of the flux of materials across its surface' (Ingold, 2007:12). Touch involves engaging with surfaces of materials and the affordances of both human and non-human others. Still following Ingold's argument, I propose that touch as embodied technique yields 'knowledge born of sensory perception and practical engagement, not of the mind with the material world …but of the skilled practitioner participating in a world of materials' (Ingold, 2007:13-14).

I read this account of humans as participants emerging from a world of materials, rather than activators, alongside some of the epistemological and political concerns of decoloniality, a key concern of which is the way in which the category of human was 'forged' through the European experience (Mamdani, 2016:70). Drawing from Aníbal Quijano, Sylvia Wynter writes that the world of modernity is brought into being 'based on the Racism/Ethicism complex,' which

causes the idea of human to fall together with western Man (Wynter, 2003:260). She writes that unsettling the coloniality of power requires

> A redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of human, Man, and its overrepresentation (outside the terms of the "natural organism" answer that we give to the question of who and what we are) (Wynter, 2003:268).

The colonial order has hierarchically positioned humanness as 'the pinnacle of racial and sexual orders that classify racialised and sexualised others as less fully human' (Spatz, 2020:254). Spatz adds to this that decoloniality's troubling of the 'category of human' allows embodiment to become 'a leverage point from which to cut ties with the colonial order of "Man/Human"' (Spatz, 2020:254). I have borrowed from Spatz the suggestion that embodied technique is our 'primary medium of practice' and that embodiment implies a grappling 'again and again with the primary site of living and being' (Spatz, 2020:70-71). Rather than reading this as a humanist return to practice, Spatz argues that this conception of embodiment can be read alongside a radical understanding of posthumanism (Spatz, 2020:82). This is not the posthumanism which Donna Haraway problematises as so-called 'techno-fixes' (Haraway, 2016:3)[14]. Rather, this posthumanism troubles, what Mamdani describes as 'a universalism based on a singular notion of the human' (Mamdani, 2016:68), which is embedded within colonially-formed pedagogies. Embodied practice then, offers a place from which critiques of humanism and universalism, and concomitant power relations between human and environment, may be exercised and articulated. Prioritising embodiment ontologically and epistemologically over humanity, as

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[14] Haraway describes 'techno-fixes' as the belief that technology can rescue us from the 'horrors of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene' (Haraway, 2016:3). In this description, the term Anthropocene refers to 'the current geological era as dominated by human action through technological mediation, consumerism and destruction of the resources of planet earth' (Braidotti, 2019:53n4). While Anthropocene emphasises the centrality of Anthropos, human, Capitalocene then names Capital as a "dangerous and exterminating force" on the planet (Haraway, 2016:2).

Spatz (2020:82) argues, allows a crucial distinction to be made between technology and ecology, refigures human/environmental relations and resonates with decolonial concerns and questions of planetary living (Mbembe, 2021:41). Using touch as a feedback loop to explore affordances with non-human bodies and surfaces offers a place to exercise agency in ways that open up radical understandings of embodiment and what it means to be human not as activator but as a participant emerging from an 'ocean of materials' (Ingold, 2007:7).

Sample of embodied practice 2

1. *Begin in an orientation that resembles vertical or 'upright' in relation to gravity. Take note of which part of your body is weight-bearing. Perhaps the soles of your feet are connected to the floor. Eyes may be open or closed. Breathe, sigh or hum as needed.*

2. *Tune in to the contact your feet are making to the floor's surface. Begin by exploring the degrees of stability, mobility, permeability and resistance offered by the surface. Trace the interface between your foot/body and floor.*

3. *Invite movement through your feet, registering, as Hermans writes, the 'relative changes, micro changes through which we are able to make contact with others and the world' (Hermans, 2021:2). In turn, notice how the ground reaction force of the floor invites motion.*

4. *Walk/move your feet, or whichever part is connected to the surface, through space. Engage weight and time playfully. Pour your weight into the surface as you move, then notice when the floor offers resistance and propels you onwards. Alternate moving your body towards the surface, and allowing the surface to meet you. Extend this practice to your whole outer surface and play with this shared feedback loop as you bring the surface to life. As Ingold writes:*

Bringing things to life, then, is a matter not of adding to them a sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist (Ingold, 2007:12).

5. *Now (if available) invite a human participant into your dance and allow your surface area of play to take on a three-dimensional form. Hold surface and body in a shared 'dance of attention' (Manning & Massumi, 2014). Stay with both inner and outer. Pay attention 'not to, but with and toward, in and around. Undecomposably' (Manning & Massumi, 2014:4).*

Conclusion

I borrowed from Manning (2009) the concept of touch as a technique that incites bodies to move from states of inertia, and suggest that the proprioceptive and kinesthetic feedback loop of touch holds particular promise in the context of decolonising dance and movement practices in South Africa. Decoloniality is a widening field of political and epistemological questions and I have argued that delinking from constraints created by the coloniality of power requires a 'battery of techniques' (Noland, 2009:154). Drawing from an embodied practice of touch developed with university students in the context of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, I propose that the techniques emerging from this practice may be transposed to other contexts of constraint, particularly the restrictions placed upon bodies by postcolonial hauntings. I have described constraint as the artistic conventions, genealogies of practice, and constructs of race, class, gender and sexuality that are informed by a Eurocentric and colonial 'human', and that continue to exert power over and paralyse the body in postcolonial contexts. A focus on the senses, and in particular touch, creates a place to incite bodies into motion and exercise agency relationally. 'To be a subject,' writes Mbembe, 'is no longer to act autonomously but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy' (Mbembe, 2021:19). Touch mediates between inner and outer modes of sensing, and allows a

tuning into the dialogue between our own agency and materiality. Leaping from inertia to activation, or simply, to begin to move, arises in co-composition with the environment and spacetime itself. I further suggested that exploring touch with the affordances of non-human surfaces opens up posthuman conceptions of embodiment that have the ability to undo binary and colonially constructed categories of what it means to be human. Drawing from Spatz, I argued that embodied practices are epistemic. Touch as embodied technique is both a way of knowing and knowledge-generating, and thus offers in Santos' terms 'an intervention in reality' (Santos, 2014:201). Arguing for an ecology of knowledges in order to undo hegemonic knowledge practices, Santos importantly adds that knowledge as an intervention in reality 'always combines the cognitive with the ethical-political' (Santos, 2014:201). To trouble power, then, in the context of a decolonial praxis and pedagogy for movement and dance, includes rethinking what it means to know and what it means to be human. Building on this, I suggest that touch offers an activist embodied technique as well as an ethos and politics of moving in a world of materials.

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