

## Meeting Nita – A Phenomenological Description of Touch Or Knowing by Moving

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My shoulder brushes up against Nita's. Will we dance? I wonder, fleetingly. Then my attention hones back in on the pressure she's giving me and the possibilities it suggests. This moment explodes with potential. We've danced before, so this moment contains the memory of countless other moments, as well as the knowledge, expectation, and hope that we'll have countless more. There was that time in the middle of dance class one day when her hand slipped in an accidentally inappropriate gesture and we collapsed in laughter. There was that time I had an incapacitating headache and our dance evolved into a bodywork session. Nita's hands, my neck—healing touch. If I were Husserl I might call these past moments 'retentions' or moments of experience that have sunk into my past with retentive modification. As a dancer, choreographer and movement therapist, I access and think of them as memories embedded in my tissues. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty articulate additional language that describes my experience in movement improvisation and of this immediate shoulder connection.<sup>1</sup>

Nita's skin is soft, delicate, eminently light, and exquisitely sensitive. I'm mixing my experience of her skin as object of my awareness, or "intentional object," and my experience of her depth of knowledge—my experience of her subjectivity. Nita's body is not only a thing that I can hold in my awareness as the object of my attention, like the cream I swirl into my coffee or the neighbors bantering outside my window as I write these words. Nita is a movement sage, a dancer, teacher, and long-time developer of Contact Improvisation (a movement form that has been growing since its inception almost 40 years ago). And she is my friend. In this moment of delicate touch, pregnant with possibility, my human subjectivity meets hers. An object presents itself in my awareness, and that object is human, Nita. I recognize not only that my shoulder is meeting *something*, but that this particular thing is a live human, an entity that is capable of noticing me back. This human aliveness is what makes our meeting so exciting. My aliveness meets hers – intersubjectivity.

Back up. How is it that I even notice this piece of skin brushing mine? Immanuel Kant would say that my giving of attention requires the a priori conditions of space and time. Without such forms of sensibility, I couldn't have this experience at all. (Marshall 42-3) For Kant my ability to perceive is predicated upon my existing in the same time and space as the object to which I attend. Space and time preexist and Nita and I meet one another inside those external preconditions. Kant was trying a new way to resolve the debate that had raged between Rationalists and Empiricists for 200 years since Descartes'

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<sup>1</sup> I could draw out this single moment like a Nicholson Baker novel. Baker dedicates entire chapters to articulating a single moment, drawing out all possible implications of each thought that occurs to the hero. The moments are protracted by their verbal explication in novel form, although in practice Baker's hero may be on the briefest of missions to purchase a pair of shoelaces.

*cogito ergo sum* split subject from object in seemingly irreconcilable dualism. If my thinking defines my being, then how is it that I can know anything about the world outside of myself, the object of my attention? Which is more real, the subject or the object? Kant considers the process of knowing as the process by which things from outside make their way inside the mind. He distinguishes between things in themselves (noumena) and our experience of them (phenomena) such that our knowledge of things is always perspectival. Space and time are the a priori conditions that make our experience of things possible.

Husserl agrees that time, space and bodies are structures of a pre-existing life-world (*Lebenswelt*), but not in an abstract, mathematical sense, distant and separate from the humans who sense and make meaning of that world. (Husserl *Crisis* §36) The human body is not just another object in this world; the human body is that unique living body (*Leib*) with organs of perception and motility (*Beweglichkeit*) and with a unique sense of being (*Seinsinn*) that not only locates me in the space and time of the world, but involves me with it. (Husserl *Crisis* §28) I could have bumped into the wall (rather than into Nita), in which case my perceptual system would also have detected a difference, a contrast standing out against the constant horizon of my body, which I experience in an ongoing way. My living body provides my constant horizon, the backdrop against which I am able to sense, to sense by sensing difference. My body is always with me acting as a baseline, ground zero for my perceptions. I sense a pressure shift in my perceptual field and I recognize that difference as “not me,” not my body.

How is it that I am able to interpret this tiny piece of perceived information? If in this moment my shoulder were brushing up against a wall, I would be able to put together this particular experience of texture, pressure, and temperature with past experiences and expectations to create an image of “wall” that is not limited to that “flat, hard thing touching my shoulder,” which I experience in this instant. Even with my eyes closed and even though it is just a tiny bit of this wall that claims my immediate attention, I am passively aware of its entirety. I actively “thematize” this particular bit and passively thematize its relationship to a whole, as well as to me. I know passively that the room ends here and that there is another room beyond it. My knowledge of these physical objects transcends my physical experience of this shoulder-sized wall bit in a combination of immediate embodied experience, retained physical experiences from the past, and expectations of potential experiences. I could slide my shoulder along the entire wall from corner to corner to gain an active experience of its width, but even that extra experience wouldn’t tell me about the other side of the wall, nor how tall it is, etc. Such knowledge I retain from past experience and synthesize passively with the new experiential knowledge of this moment’s “flat, hard thing.” I form the image “wall” by synthesizing these potentialities beneath the level of conscious cognition.

This immediate moment of touch contains past, present and future. My experience of “flat, hard thing touching shoulder” contains retentions, past experiences I’ve had of this and other walls, as well as protentions, expectations of experiences I could potentially have with it. I could lean on it, roll against it, pound it with my fist, or walk through its door and touch it from the other side. Do all these images flood my mind in the instant that I touch the wall? Yes, and many more. Maybe, but I don’t need to thematize them

actively to make use of my wall knowledge. No, because I may be focusing on sensation, rather than on image or action. No, because I'm actually touching Nita.

How do I know that this bit of skin I am touching is not wall (or any other notable interruption on my horizon, my body, ground zero of my perceptual field), but human; and not just any human, but Nita? I form my impression based on past experiences that have habituated my ability to make this determination. I have only this piece of skin to go on. I can't even see it because my head is turned the other way. My first perception is a kinesthetic one – pressure, temperature, texture, and a practice of decoding such information to read it as human skin attached to human body. Somehow I know that piece of skin is attached to not only another human, but which human that is. I am able to create an image of that particular whole human even though I am not at this moment walking in circles around her examining her every surface to compose such a three dimensional image. I assemble this minute touch with countless expectations, retentions, and protentions to compose this multi-dimensional person, my friend.

Merleau-Ponty explains Husserl's notion of retention in order to refute the notion of time as a 'river' of equally defined now moments. For Husserl and Merleau-Ponty the presently occurring now is the only moment to which we have access (and the only one we should bother defining). They're much more concerned with experience and thus with observing that the coffee event I experienced this morning has by now (and even in the moment directly following it) sunk into my past in such a way that I still have access to it – but limited access. Such a past experience is no longer located in that alive, potent present in which I might choose to add a squirt of chocolate syrup or another splash of milk before polishing off the last few swallows, or in which I might equally forget to finish it at all in my haste to run for the train. These experiences may (or may not) be part of the coffee event I actually experienced, and they have all sunk into a past that I can no longer relive in its fully embodied, present nowness. Nor can I in this present now moment experience this evening's final turning off of my bedside lamp. I have access to imagining it. I can project myself into that delicious moment of giving in for the day; however, in this current moment I'm physically located at my computer typing this projected image of myself, not actually located there in time and space turning off the lamp. Heidegger calls this projection into an imagined not-now *ek-stase*, a standing out of oneself or throwing oneself out of the present. Merleau-Ponty paraphrases, "It is this *ek-stase* of experience which causes all perception to be perception of something." (Merleau-Ponty 81) We are always only here in a currently existing now, which is the only place and time in which we perceive /experience the world. And from which vantage point we consider other temporal and spatial locations.

As an event recedes into the increasingly distant past, it is vulnerable to being forgotten, misremembered, and otherwise modified. I modify the moment as I retain it, and I increasingly lose access to it. Each now moment that I ever experience is potentially colored by all other now moments I ever retain. Tomorrow I might remember that a whole squirt of chocolate is too sweet for the last dregs of my tepid coffee and adjust tomorrow's now moment accordingly (just one half squirt, for example). Merleau-Ponty would call such learning a retained habituality. Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty emphasize this process of acquiring experience with and in time, rather than presupposing an external linear temporality. Both past and future are available to and

inherent in my current moment such that I experience time as a network of experience. “Time is not a line but a network of intentionality.” (Merleau-Ponty 484) The relationship of the now moment to retained past and potential future moments creates this dense network. I am here now, skin touching skin, and this moment holds within it a network of past and future.

This immediate point of skin contact is thrilling for its boundless potential. Or perhaps it’s not so boundless. It’s at least defined by our two meeting entities. Neither one of us will magically change into Pina Bausch or Michael Jackson.<sup>2</sup> Stable entity Nina and stable entity Hilary meet in a moment of shoulders brushing up against one another. Where does this sense of potential come from? When I improvise I practice noting each and every sensation in my body. I seek to expand my awareness. I track my physical sensations. I track my moods and desires. I also track my attention as I wander between these and other intentional objects. I track my imagery as it conjures up animals, landscapes, outrageous visions and magic. There’s a lot to notice, a lot of potential, so much that I can’t possible act upon each contrast that pops out against the horizon to capture my attention. And so I also cultivate focus.

I practice training my attention on one particular aspect (*Abschattung*) noticing more and more about that aspect until it seems to transform of its own accord. I notice that I’m tapping my foot. The tapping has called my attention and now I hold my attention on it collecting more and more information about sensation, rhythm, pressure, muscle involvement, etc., and tracking my interest in and response to that activity. The longer the movement continues the more detail I collect, and the more likely that these little details themselves become the focus of my attention. Eventually I may no longer be tapping just the ball of my foot, but my heel as well, or just the toe, or no longer tapping at all but enjoying “tap-like” tension shifts in my calf muscles. There is a dance between the activity and my awareness of and attention to that activity that affects the unfolding of the action. Suppose I notice that my shoulder has brushed up against the wall. When I hone in on that sensation I might choose to extend it by continuing that brushing motion all along the wall. Once that wall came to its eventual meeting with another wall this new structure would present itself as a new point of interest in my perceptual field. My attention would likely shift to that new situation, a new contrast with my horizon, or I could choose to return to my interest in the shoulder sensation if it still calls to me.<sup>3</sup>

I practice opening my awareness to internal sensation and desire, and also to external stimuli. My movement in the studio takes me past a window and as the increasing light hits my retina I imagine stepping out into the footlights for my curtain call at the Paris Opera. I hear tires squealing from the street outside and I’m in my getaway car dodging bullets. My shoulder grazes “flat, hard thing” and wall becomes an overturned bus trapping a little boy while I become the hero who saves the day. I practice responding to

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<sup>2</sup> Two stable bodies whose time on earth ended during this writing.

<sup>3</sup> I also practice flexible, multi-focus or spread attention that seeks to take in multiple inputs like a kindergarten teacher managing children in all corners of a busy room, or like an air traffic controller simultaneously tracking multiple screens. In Laban Movement Analysis the technical term for multi-focus is “Flexible Attention to Space” (or Indirect Space Effort).

stimuli, noticing which call my attention and choosing among them. I practice noticing as much as I can, so that I increase my field of possibilities for action. The greater my awareness, the greater my options. Part of the practice of improvising is to bring increasingly more synthetic processes from passive into active thematized synthesis. To be in the presence of someone whose awareness is actively thematizing enormous amounts of information is to be in the presence of aliveness. Such presence is exhilarating. Conscious aliveness is what keeps me coming back to improvised performance and to a personal practice of improvising.

There is a Buddhist practice of subdividing moments of awareness into smaller and smaller increments. If Buddhists and neuroscientists are correct in theorizing that I can attend to only one thing or one possible course of action at a time, then increasing the number of “instants” in each minute increases my potential awareness and my potential for action. The smaller the now instant becomes, the greater my potential for both action and awareness. In this moment of touch, I could be spinning a firestorm of potential responses to this wall/object touching my shoulder, one possibility per subdivided mili-instant. Or I could be expanding my awareness of this, my intentional object, at the rate of one new modicum of information per subdivided mili-instant. It is this sort of expanding attentiveness that I cultivate when I am improvising. I practice opening the floodgates of attention for an ever-increasing awareness of external inputs and internal impulses in constant interplay. Part of this process is what Husserl describes as essential precursor to the project of phenomenology—*epoché*, or the bracketing of my preconceptions about myself, my world, and my options for interaction with it. Such prejudgments I “put out of play” and seek instead new possibilities for myself, as well as new and richer perceptions of the world. “The epoché can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me.” (C.M. 21) I learn more about myself and my world when I put on the shelf those unexamined notions I assume to be true. Those notions may still be true and may still serve me, but I don’t limit myself to them. The less I limit myself and the world with preconceptions either invented by me or inherited from elsewhere, the closer I get to my true self, and the greater my potential.

Action Theater improvisation theorizer and teacher Ruth Zaporah speaks of improvisational frames or “stones.” She teaches her students to maintain a connection with motifs, sensations, experiences as they occur throughout the improvisation. The idea is to maintain access to these “stepping stones” even they sink into the past, so that we can reactivate them in a new context. I may choose to color my shoulder to shoulder moment with some aspect retained from my squealing tires car chase vision. Or our delicate shoulder exploration might benefit from its contrast with my previous heroic bus pushing rescue mission.

My *Leib* and its motility give me the capacity to move in a variety of ways and to keep me actively aware of my intentional objects, such as Nita’s shoulder. My momentary connection with Nita began in movement, continues in movement, and it is through movement that I perceive and interpret it. I don’t know what will happen. I stay alive to the possibilities and I follow my attention, engaging with it as both listener and speaker, leader and follower, fully integrated with sensory input both internal and external. Just as

the body aids me in guiding and interacting with my intentional objects that call me on my horizon, I also jump in and feed that interest, love, interested engagement. I direct my attention, holding it on a particular intentional object. Neuroscience describes passive filtering processes that happen in the brain. My practice intends to make these processes active. I don't know what will happen with Nita. My connection with her is all the more exciting because she is also a subjective agent, directing and following her attention. The improvisational practice we share places a value on following attention as a departure from the lives of action and control that we might tend to lead outside of this practice. There is an intersubjective sharing of leadership. We alternate seamlessly between leading and following, without deciding when that shift will happen.

Nita's touch is gentle and delicate in this moment. And I remain open to change at any moment. My training prepares me not to close off possibilities by relying on expectations or by expecting certain outcomes, but rather to be available for an expanding repertoire of potential possibilities, protentions. My retentions supply me with passive knowledge that we are each capable of mercurial shifts in direction and movement quality. Nita is playful and can instantaneously organize her frame into stable structural support that sends her partner soaring. But what happens if I insist upon, expect, or seek such a lift? What if I leave this actual moment and invest in my projection, in my desire to 'catch a ride'? In that case I leap out of my current experience—ek-stase. I am no longer living the now moment, but 'stuck in my head' trying to *make* something happen and most likely frustrated that reality fails to match my expectations. I return to the problem Kant was trying to solve, in which the world in my head is de facto distinct from the world outside. Instead, my improvisational practice resembles the practice of epoché, in which I put my expectations on a shelf, invest in the now moment, and make myself available for an increasing range of possibilities including, but not limited to, a lovely lift, a "whee" moment when Nita may (or may not) support me in a lift.

My physical experience contains sense data from immediately active sensory perception as well as passively integrated background information. Husserl describes a process whereby we combine a particular instantaneous experience with retentions and protentions to form our complex network of knowledge of the world that extends far beyond the little pieces we actually perceive to perceptions we potentially could have. For Husserl the world is a perceptual field and the living body is more than just the interface of engagement between me and the world. My body is the constant background against which I perceive the world, my site of meaning making, my ground zero of perception. This phenomenological description of body as interface between self and world fits snugly with my practice as movement improviser. In both methodologies I endeavor to isolate my habits, plans, and prejudgements, so that they are not the first lens I use to interpret incoming information. Rather, I invest in full investigation of my perceptual field and make myself available for any possibility. (Wheeel!)

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