

Ghost Gestures: Phenomenological Investigations of Bodily Micromovements and Their Intercorporeal Implications*

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Abstract. This paper thematizes the operative kinaesthetic style of world-experiencing life by turning to the ongoing “how” of our habitual bodily comportment: to our deeply sedimented way(s) of “making a body”; to schematic inner vectors or tendencies toward movement that persist as bodily “ghost gestures” even if one is not making the larger, visible gestures they imply; and to “inadvertent isometrics,” i.e., persisting patterns of “trying,” “bracing,” “freezing,” etc. All such micromovements witness to our sociality insofar as they are not only socially shaped, but perpetuate certain styles of intercorporeal interaction and sustain certain modes of responsivity. “Reactivating the sediment” – retrieving the tacit “choreography” of everyday life from its anonymity and sensing our ongoing ways of living out the legacy of our “communal body” – not only allows one’s individual bodily style to shift, but can open new possibilities for healthy interkinaesthetic comportment. Such work can thus contribute to an “embodied ethics” in both theory and practice.

1. Invitation to Evidence

The dimension of lived experience addressed by the present research report¹ is the tacit “choreography” of everyday life – its ongoing kinaesthetic patterns and processes, not as observed from the outside, but as experienced from within.² In other words, I am concerned with the ongoing “how” of our corporeal/intercorporeal “world-experiencing life.”³ This might include, for example, the kinds of movements (and ways of holding still) involved in sitting or standing (including the micromovements of withholding weight or letting it settle); breathing (or holding one’s breath for a moment while one ponders something); looking and listening (with head tilted or turned in a particular way, with the micromovements of directing the gaze and focusing, or perhaps relaxing focus for a moment while reflecting on something); touching and manipulating things (e.g., the micromovements of holding a pen or pencil now more tightly, now more loosely); participating in dialogue, whether with a partner face-to-face or with an absent author of a written work (including not only the movements of actual speech, but also the micromovements

* An earlier version of the present paper appeared in the *Study Project in Phenomenology of the Body Newsletter* 7: 1 (Fall 1994).

involved in, say, being ready to respond “But . . .”); intercorporeal adjustments (between, e.g., two people working on a shared task, or a group making room for one more in a crowded space); and so on.

Now it is generally recognized that our everyday movement patterns and modes of corporeal comportment are socially/culturally shaped (see, e.g., Mauss, 1968/1973; Johnson, 1983/1992; O’Neill, 1985). My focus here, however, is on how such “social shaping” is *ongoingly and concretely* lived out – performed, executed, maintained, perpetuated (and perhaps in some cases shifted) by *individual moving bodies*. And I am approaching this question by turning to the relevant experiential evidence itself. But since even reading a phenomenological work also requires, according to Husserl (1975, p. 61), a “direct personal production of the pertinent phenomenon” on the part of the reader, I shall begin by specifying more precisely just what sort of evidence I have indeed turned to during the course of these investigations, so that any readers who may be interested in finding the “pertinent phenomena” and consulting the appropriate experiential evidence for themselves can more readily do so.

1) As Cairns (1976, p. 62) reports, Husserl recognized that in the natural attitude, we are directed toward what we are doing (e.g., bringing about certain changes in the surrounding world of nature), and do not necessarily have any immediate awareness of the bodily movements our aims and activities entail.⁴ But my goal here is not to describe this typical feature of life in the natural attitude; rather, with Husserl, I want to retrieve our ongoing kinaesthetic life from its customary anonymity and sense its “how” from within. Thus the experiential evidence relevant to these investigations belongs to a *special type of experience* that explores certain nuances of bodily movement that we usually take for granted, and in this way allows us to bring into question the very movements we usually simply rely on. Moreover, kinaesthetic life is indeed relational (our steps adjust to the terrain, the gesture of opening a door adjusts to the kind of door it is, giving a hug adjusts to the size and condition of the person being hugged as well as to the social situation, and so on). But my aim here is to perform what might be termed a “*kinaesthetic reduction*” – a leading-back from the lived situation as a whole to the specifically kinaesthetic dimension of our corporeal complicity with this situation. Thus I am more concerned with the “how” of our kinaesthetic participation and less concerned with what or whom these movements and micromovements partner, relate to, or respond to. In other words, although the tendency in everyday life is to focus on things, tasks, others, etc., while remaining largely unaware of our own bodily movements, here we are deliberately asking back (Husserl’s term is *Rückfrage*) into the kinaesthetic powers and possibilities that are always and already essentially swung into play in ordinary experiences of all types.

2) But there is more than one way to understand kinaesthesia. For as Cairns (1976, p. 64) also reports, “what Husserl means by kinaesthesia is not the bodily sensations accompanying movement or muscular tension, or the inner sensations, but rather something volitional or quasi-volitional that remains when one abstracts from such sensations.” For present purposes, I will set aside the issue of whether this is the only or final notion of kinaesthesia in Husserl (see, e.g., Kersten, 1989, pp. 159 ff.), taking it instead as an invitation to evidence, to finding the phenomenon in question for ourselves. For example, without actually either nodding my head “yes” or shaking my head “no,” I can “find” these kinaesthetic possibilities experientially, purely *as possible moves I could make*, and I can appreciate the difference between them, or I can appreciate how both of them are different from, for instance, the possibility of outlining small circles in space with the tip of my nose, and so on. Though we may seldom thematize these matters, such distinctions are indeed experientially available even without actually “doing” the movement. Thus the kinaesthetic dimension need not be equated with actual sensings of movement (*Bewegungsempfindnisse*), but can be understood as a practical kinaesthetic horizon (Husserl, 1966, p. 15), a coherent nexus of kinaesthetic systems (Husserl, 1973a), a familiar field of both potentiality and activity (Cairns, 1976, p. 7), which we often summarize under the heading “I can,” although it is also important to recognize the “I cannot” (see Husserl, 1952/1989: §§38, 59–60a).

3) This way of understanding the kinaesthetic dimension may be further clarified with the help of another Husserlian distinction. In *Ideas 2*, Husserl (1952/1989: §54; Supplement VI) distinguishes between two sorts of “mineness” – mineness as “possession” and mineness as “act” – and remarks that even “sensations” can be counted as “possessions” (Husserl, 1952, p. 214/1989, pp. 225–226). I want to take up this distinction by contrasting, on the one hand, *somaesthetic or proprioceptive sensations as possessions* with, on the other hand, the *kinaesthetic dimension* as a domain of actual and possible movement that is “mine” *qua* “act.” In other words, I want to contrast the particular class of sensations or “sensings” (*Empfindnisse*) that present my own lived body (*Leib*) or “body feeling” (*Leibgefühl*) with the “quasi-volitional” kinaesthesia already mentioned.⁵ And in order to make this contrast even more vivid, I want to suggest a contrast between the following two styles of experiencing as well: first of all, bodily sensations as over-against “me” – typically, as presented to an experiencing “me” located somewhere in my head, behind my eyes (so that, for example, my felt foot is “farther away” from “me” than my felt shoulders); and in contrast, “inhabiting” whatever gesture I am making with, for example, my leg or foot, such that I no longer experience myself as a punctiform “ego” with bodily sensations

“over-against” it, but inhabit the “dilated” mineness of a total kinaesthetic act, inhabiting it from within rather than being a spectator of it.⁶

So far, then, I am not only distinguishing a “quasi-volitional” kinaesthetic horizon or nexus of systems from actual sensations of movement, but am also distinguishing between an “inhabiting” style of experiencing one’s own gestures “from within” and an “over-against” style of experiencing the unique felt or sensed object, “my own lived body.” To this I would now like to add yet another distinction.

4) In many texts, Husserl contrasts “things” and “tones.” A thing is given as existing all at once, even though my actual experience of it takes the form of a temporal process (be it continuous, interrupted, intermittent, etc.) in which, for example, I see it first from this side and then from another side, and so on. In contrast, the tone itself – and not just my manner of experiencing it – is characterized by a certain “ongoingness”: it is not as though it is somehow already present as a whole, albeit with certain parts I am not properly positioned to hear; rather, each new phase of the tone emerges contemporaneously with my hearing of it in an ongoing, dynamic process. Now if we take the “thing-tone” distinction more generally as an “all-at-once” – “ongoing” distinction, and combine it in a particular way with the “possession-act” distinction (which I have also already linked with an “over-against” – “inhabiting from within” distinction), two new experiential variants emerge. In the first variant, my body is a relatively stable “thing” over-against “me.” Of course, if I consider my own body visually, I find that I cannot get outside of it to walk around it and see it from all sides (cf. Husserl, 1973a, p. 280; 1952, p. 159/1989, p. 167). But if I focus instead on tactile, somaesthetic, or proprioceptive sensations, I can make use of what might be termed a moving “ray of attention” and successively sense whatever I can feel in, for example, my right leg . . . and now my left leg . . . and the center of my body . . . or perhaps my forehead . . . and so on. Individual sensations may arise and pass away, but the “where” of these sensations – “down there” in my feet or toes, “up here” in my tongue or lips, in my “left side” or my “right side,” and so on – is organized according to a relatively stable framework, a peculiar sort of inner experiential “object” that is directly accessible only to the “subject” whose “felt body” it is. In the second variant, however, I experience my body according to the “tone” paradigm rather than according to the “thing” paradigm: I inhabit, from within, some local or global gesture I am making as an *ongoing process* of making this gesture – including “holding still” as an ongoing gesture of maintaining precisely this shape, tonus, etc. (for example, holding my head at just this angle).⁷ Thus just as I experience a tone as an ongoing, dynamic process of sounding, here I experience not a thing called “body,” but an ongoing, dynamic process of “bodying.”

Moreover, even a movement that seems at first to be rather removed from the realm of the “voluntary” – i.e., a movement (or an ongoing process of holding still) that might be characterized as “involuntary,” “unconscious,” “habitual,” or “automatic” – can be inhabited from within *as if* it is an ongoing gesture that I am in fact making. For example, right now I am breathing in a certain way (or perhaps holding my breath momentarily), and I can inhabit the kinaesthetic “how” of this even if I am not actively “directing” it in any way, but simply “allowing” it to go on in its own way and of its own accord (cf. Husserl, 1973b, p. 447). Similarly, if I reach for an object and pick it up, this automatically swings into play a whole array of movements and micromovements throughout my body, movements that I normally do not consciously “direct” (or even notice at all). Yet with practice, I can learn to inhabit these movements too from within, in their ongoingness – aligning my “I can” with what is already going on anyway, joining with it and appreciating the “how” of it experientially (cf. Behnke, 1988/1995). Yet the “I” at stake here is emphatically not a punctiform, non-extended ego who is a spectator of whatever is over-against it, but rather a dilated locus of powers and possibilities embracing unexpected (and often subtle) spontaneities as well as deliberate, purposive “actions,” embracing responsive movements and micromovements as well as explicitly initiatory movement, embracing the movements of “undergoing” as well as those of “doing” – embracing, in short, the entire kinaesthetic life.

To summarize these four points, then, locating the kind of phenomenological evidence relevant to the present project involves finding, experientially, the kinaesthetic dimension of “I can” (or “I could”), not in the manner of a “spectator” consciousness with “body sensations” over-against it, but by inhabiting the ongoing kinaesthetic situation, in its ongoingness, from within – even including seemingly “involuntary” movement patterns. But before moving on, I will touch on two further methodological points.

In the first place, though I will be drawing upon many concrete examples during the course of this paper (and framing some of them in terms of stories drawn from personal experience), I am assuming throughout what Richard M. Zaner (1978, pp. 6 ff.) has called the “exemplifying” move: namely, taking these examples not for their own sake (e.g., as empirical facts or as experiences of unique, existing individuals), but as standing within a range of actual and possible examples of “the same kind of phenomenon.” In other words, my interest is eidetic, not empirical, and the specific examples chosen are merely meant as clues toward structures that could equally well be illustrated by different examples.

And in the second place, I am concerned with what can be technically specified as “essential possibilities.” In other words, I am not interested in

finding “the” essence of, say, human movement; I am neither searching for “essential necessities” (invariant features that have to be there for something to be an example of a certain type of phenomenon) nor searching for “essential impossibilities” (features that are necessarily excluded if something is to be an example of a certain type of phenomenon). Rather, what is at stake with the notion of “essential possibilities,” in the sense in which I’m using the term here, is simply the distinction between “fact” and “essence,” such that an essential possibility is not limited to the “facts of the matter” on any particular occasion, but is both *repeatable* and *shareable*. It may not, *in fact*, show up on each and every empirical occasion, but is open in principle to being checked out, in experiential evidence, by any phenomenological researcher capable of turning to the appropriate experiential evidence (see Zaner, 1970, p. 30).

Thus the experiential structures discussed in this paper are *invitations to evidence*; the distinctions discussed above are meant as clues toward what Robert Sokolowski (1974, pp. 108–109) has called “appropriate sensibility,” i.e., the sensibility appropriate to the type of experiential evidence in question. Let us accordingly turn, with this type of sensibility at our disposal, to the “phenomena themselves” (Husserl, 1973a, p. 9) that it is the task of these investigations to elucidate.

2. Making a Body

Research in phenomenology of the body discloses a certain *bodily presuppositionality* at work in our corporeal/intercorporeal life. For example, many activities presuppose some form of upright posture (cf. Straus, 1966; 1969, pp. 34 ff.). Yet if we turn to the “how” of the ongoing kinaesthetic process of maintaining upright posture, we find that it can be accomplished in a number of ways. In the first place, what we call “upright posture” is not a single static “position,” but a dynamic “base of operations,” a zone or range or leeway (*Spielraum*) of possible moves and adjustments. And in the second place, even if we are able to identify a recurring or persisting bodily configuration that the moving body typically returns to after performing a specific gesture (or that it maintains in, say, the torso as a base of support for movements of the limbs), closer examination shows that this abiding bodily “signature” varies from person to person: there is more than one way of achieving and maintaining the uprightness we assume for most of our waking life.

If we now inquire still more deeply into the “how” of this, we can distinguish a stratum I have termed the *operative corporeal infrastructure*, including such interrelated elements as habitual bodily tonus (a zone of what I experience as “normal” bodily tone, neither particularly “tensed” nor particularly

“relaxed”); habitual bodily configurations (for example, typical shapes of, and relations between, body parts such as head and neck, hand and wrist, and so on); habitual range of movement (including not only the limits within which specific movements are usually performed, but also just where I experience myself as articulated so as to permit movement in the first place); and habitual movement quality (as well as typical patterns of coordination).⁸ Though movement is explicitly mentioned only in the last two elements, maintaining bodily tonus between certain typical levels – so that, for example, I am hardened to some things and sensitive to other things – can readily be recognized as an ongoing manner of “holding myself” (or perhaps, in some cases, “holding onto myself”).⁹ Similarly, my typical bodily shape or signature may be understood as an ongoing kinaesthetic “self-shaping.” Thus although the visible moves I perform will vary with the circumstances (consider the kinds of movements typically involved in doing research in a library; stacking a cord of wood; running to catch a bus; playing a bagpipe; and so on), these overt moves presuppose and rely upon a *deeply sedimented kinaesthetic style* that is played out at the level of the operative corporeal infrastructure, an ongoing and persisting constellation of micromovements and “holding patterns” that I will collectively summarize with the phrase “*making a body.*”

To begin to locate this phenomenon experientially, think, for example, of the specific gesture of “making a fist.” I can experientially appreciate this kinaesthetic possibility without actually doing it, or I can go ahead and make a fist, noticing, for instance, how the gesture not only involves certain movements of my hand and fingers, but also entails certain accompanying movements (and micromovements) in my lower arm, upper arm, perhaps shoulder area, and so on. Now, however, if I let go of the fist and just let my hand be there without making any gesture in particular, I can begin to experience what kind of “gesture” my hand is already ongoingly making, even when I am not deliberately “making” any gesture at all. (Imagine, for example, that this hand at rest is holding an invisible object; feeling, from within, what sort of shape this object is, and how loosely or tightly I’m holding it, can help me to appreciate the kinaesthetic “how” of this ongoing self-shaping.) Or I can imagine deliberately “making a face” – for example, a facial expression indicating disapproval or disagreement – and then let go of any explicit attempt to make a face and kinaesthetically inhabit the face I’m already making, as it were, even when I’m not explicitly attempting to “make a face” at all (cf. Nagatomo, 1986, p. 384). Similarly, I am always and already “making a body” in an ongoing kinaesthetic process that privileges some movement possibilities while others are arrested, excluded, curtailed, forgotten, or rendered irrelevant. And although this deeply sedimented kinaesthetic pattern reflects both my own personal past history and a more pervasive “social shaping”

of bodies in a given milieu,¹⁰ all this is being ongoingly “executed” here and now, ongoingly carried out in movements and micromovements whose ongoing “how” I can begin to inhabit from within, and study, and describe.

The research method for these investigations, then, is performing the kinaesthetic reduction and inhabiting the kinaesthetic dimension from within; the research question is: how am I ongoingly making a body, here and now? Applying this method to this question, I find a rich range of phenomena, including a class or stratum of micromovements I call “ghost gestures,” to which I shall now turn.

3. Ghost Gestures

The types of micromovements I am calling “ghost gestures” are not necessarily overt or visible movements (though they are occasionally detectible to an outside observer), but are as it were the ghost of a gesture – a kind of inner “quasi-gesture,” a schematic inner vector or tendency-toward movement that can persist in the body even when the large-scale gesture that the ghost gesture schematically implies is not actually being performed. Ghost gestures are thus one example of bodily “sedimentation” as the effective presence of the past, and in this they are related to, for example, the “knowledgeable body” as a general having-access-to certain skills and capabilities (e.g., the body that knows how to throw a split-finger fastball, or breathe while giving birth, or play the organ, or adjust the timing on a Chevy V-8, and so on). Ghost gestures do not necessarily “haunt” the body permanently. But they do tend to “persist” in a manner that may be characterized by the phrase “it is as though I am always inwardly . . .” (fill in the blank). Some examples can help specify the kinds of phenomena I am singling out here. (I have gathered these examples into rough groups for ease in presentation; however, the phenomena themselves do not always fit into neatly defined categories, and further research may suggest other ways of ordering the findings.)

1) It is often possible to catch ghost gestures in the act after performing the same kind of gesture over and over again for hours. For instance, after a long day of digging in the garden – a process that in my own case inevitably involves unearthing innumerable rocks – I may stretch out in bed that night to go to sleep, only to discover that even though I am physically lying down, I am somehow still “inwardly” prising up rocks (stepping firmly on the tread of the digging fork, encountering the obstacle and feeling it through the tines of the fork, gaining leverage, prying the rock up against the resistance of the earth around it, feeling the jerk when the rock comes loose, etc.). Similar experiences can happen after one has been painting a house, hammering nails all day, or even typing at a keyboard for long periods. Such ghost gestures are

usually relatively temporary echoes – micromovements “shrunk” from larger repetitive movement patterns one has recently been engaged in. But there are also more persisting ghost gestures related to lifetime occupations. The ongoing self-shaping of a musician’s hands, for example, may subtly embody the requirements of the instrument concerned even when one is not actually playing it, so that, for instance, after decades of playing the violin, my left thumb is somehow always inwardly curving around the neck of the fiddle in the way prescribed by my very first violin teacher. This, however, already suggests another group of ghost gestures.

2) Some ghost gestures may be traceable to specific instructions a person was once given or to explicit training a person once received – i.e., movement patterns that were once learned for a specific purpose, but linger on schematically, enduring beyond (and outside of) their original relevant context and becoming part of one’s habitual way of making a body. For example, as a very young child, I was told that I had “weak ankles,” and at one point I was given certain corrective foot exercises to perform every day. These have long since been abandoned as visible, voluntarily performed movements. But after having learned to become aware of what I am calling ghost gestures, I discovered – with amazement and some dismay – that I am still inwardly (and unnecessarily) “making a body” along the lines of inner vectors that are kinaesthetic “sketches” of precisely those movements that were prescribed for me so many years ago. And although the gestures in question were initially prescribed as part of a therapeutic practice, these sedimented micromovements are now counterproductive, since they subtly distort the relation of ankle to knee and knee to hip joint. Yet by perpetuating a particular relationship among these parts of my body, such ghost gestures shape the ongoingly reiterated way I stand, walk, run, jump, etc.

3) There are also ghost gestures that point beyond themselves, as it were, to cultural artifacts such as shoes and clothes. For example, I am aware of ghost gestures in my feet that reinstate the way I used to squeeze them into certain types of shoes; although I have not worn such shoes for years, the inner gesture of holding my toes in the way those shoes required still lingers even when I go barefoot (or wear entirely different types of footgear). We might also note that wearing a business suit (whether the traditional male version or a more recent female version) enables some movement patterns and styles of corporeal comportment and hinders others: are there micromovements that have to do with “wearing” this body even when one is not actually wearing a suit?

4) It would also be possible to investigate gender-related ghost gestures. For example, women of a certain age may be familiar with the ghost gesture of “keeping one’s legs together,” while men may be familiar with micro-

movements linked with attempting to suppress or conceal an erection that threatens to occur at a socially inconvenient or inappropriate moment. Moreover, there may be ghost gestures related to socially situated, “appropriate” expression of heterosexual desire (for example, micromovements manifesting “modesty” on the part of a woman and “respectful restraint of passion” on the part of a man). In addition, women (and perhaps increasingly men in service occupations) may detect the ghost gesture of the ever-ready social smile, meant to be graciously produced on any and all occasions, while men (and perhaps increasingly women in leadership positions) may detect ghost gestures pertaining to assuming an “appropriately serious” facial expression indicating that they are capable of “shouldering responsibility” (and note how micromovements of the shoulders and back may indeed participate in this). These ghost gestures – and undoubtedly many others that could be retrieved from anonymity, inhabited from within, and described – would seem to have to do with social expectations proper to traditional (or shifting) gender roles in a given sociocultural milieu.

5) But there are also ghost gestures related to social expectations that apply to both men and women. An anecdote may help to illustrate this point and serve as a transition to new issues.¹¹ A little girl was repeatedly urged by her parents to “concentrate” as she did her homework. Accordingly, every time she sat down to study, she hunched over her work, frowning and staring at the page, clenching her teeth and gripping her pencil tightly. Now as it turned out, she had absolutely no comprehension of “concentrating” as a lived experience of, say, focusing one’s attention on the task at hand, immersing oneself in it and allowing everything else to recede to the margins, and so on. Instead, she complied with the command to “concentrate” by doing what she saw adults do when they were concentrating! This example could be broadened to include other sorts of situations where children – or adults – respond to commands, exhortations, or accusations that have to do with “trying harder” by displaying a kinaesthetic pattern that is visibly expressive of “trying.” This may involve, for instance, displaying movement-against-resistance even when there is no actual external “object” or “force” pushing back against the movements they are making. (Think, for example, of a mime lifting or showing a heavy invisible object or engaging in a tug of war with an invisible opponent.) Thus it is visually clear that they are indeed exerting effort and thus “trying hard.” Moreover, this gesture of “trying” is often extended to subsidiary, “helping” movements that are actually no help at all, i.e., one may be squeezing and holding on tight in parts of the body that thereby participate in the general effort of “trying” without functionally aiding the performance in any way whatsoever. In fact, such “trying” and “trying harder” can wind

up getting in the way of actually accomplishing the task, since it sets up countermovements resisting the very moves the task itself requires.¹²

Ghost gestures of this sort seem especially likely to become “trapped” in the body, migrating all too readily from one body part to another, haunting us far beyond the original occasions eliciting the bodily comportment in question and becoming instead a sedimented style of response in general. Yet at the same time, they tend to make the kinds of micromovements I have been describing remarkably difficult to appreciate, since on the one hand, they tend to diminish our ability to feel subtle somaesthetic sensations, and on the other hand, they also seem to make it more difficult to inhabit kinaesthetic patterns and possibilities from within. They thus deserve a special section and a title of their own.

4. Inadvertent Isometrics

One of the inspirations for the term “inadvertent isometrics” can be found in the work of Thomas Hanna (1988, pp. 67 ff., especially pp. 73–74). As Hanna points out, we are familiar with the notion of static, “isometric” muscular contraction from “isometric exercises” that pit one group of muscles against another (e.g., pressing the palms of one’s hands together as hard as one can). But certain typical sorts of postural alignment (or misalignment) also involve persisting contractions where one works against oneself, resulting in stiff and limited movement as well as pain and fatigue (and even shallow breathing and high blood pressure). To put it another way, certain kinds of postural distortions and chronic tensions are not merely “states” of a thing called “body,” but can be understood instead as ongoing kinaesthetic “holding patterns” in which movement is simultaneously produced and arrested, executed and countered. Such ongoing patterns are “inadvertent” isometrics in two senses. In the first place, unlike isometric contractions that are deliberately performed and consciously maintained, these are “inadvertent” in the sense of being “unplanned” or, as we say, “involuntary.” And in the second place, they are “inadvertent” in the sense that they are not “adverted to”: we typically don’t turn to them, and seldom have occasion to sense them for what they are. The ghost gestures of inadvertent isometrics may nevertheless be presuppositionally implicated in “making a body,” and thus they not only influence one’s ongoing manner of shaping oneself “at rest,” but also alter the quality of larger, visible movement through space in a way that might be suggested by the phrase “driving with the brakes on.”¹³ What follows is not an exhaustive list of possible types of inadvertent isometrics, but a preliminary survey designed to demonstrate the range of phenomena that may be identified and gathered together under this title.

I have already mentioned the example of “trying.” Then there are various types of “bracing.” What I mean here is not appropriate, local, temporary bracing – for example, making one’s hand firm and strong in order to play a chord *fortissimo* on the piano, or stabilizing some part of one’s body in order to receive and carry a heavy load – but rather an ongoing and pervasive “inner” bracing presuppositionally caught up in everything one does. This might include, for instance, people who were physically abused as children and who are still inwardly braced against possible blows, or victims of racism constantly protecting themselves in advance from possible verbal abuse. But in addition to bracing oneself “against” something in the sense of protecting oneself from it, there can be a type of bracing that is resistance-against rather than protection-against. For example, colonial doctors claimed that the generalized muscular contractions they observed in Algerian natives were the result of congenital factors in the native’s nervous system. But as Fanon (1963, p. 293, as cited in Freund, 1982, p. 91) points out, such contraction may instead be “the postural accompaniment of the native’s reticence and the expression in muscular form of his rigidity and his refusal with regard to colonial authority.” This might be more generally described with the phrase “outwardly complying, inwardly resisting.” And in addition to these varieties of bracing-against, there can also be ways of bracing-for, as in, for example, the kind of constant tensing-in-alertness one might find in military personnel on guard in a dangerous area or in mothers of small children ready to intervene in a variety of emergencies at any moment.

If we return to the example of racism, we can consider the case of young Black Southern males practicing being on the receiving end of verbal abuse and not reacting to it. Here what is particularly noticeable is the theme of “holding back,” which can also be exemplified in masking a facial expression that wants to arise spontaneously; choking back tears; keeping oneself from crying out (or the related inner gesture of the silent scream); restraining excitement by curbing one’s breath; clenching one’s fist in impotent fury or rage; or indeed, “putting the lid on” any impulse toward movement that one experiences as potentially dangerous or socially inappropriate (in, for instance, an educational system that expects people to sit still and shut up, producing a “schooled body” that knows how to keep from interrupting or talking back). The theme of “control” that emerges here may also be seen in certain sorts of “being careful” – for example, a conscientious small child anxiously attempting to “color inside the lines” of a figure in a coloring book, or gripping a brimming bowl of liquid extra tightly in attempting to carry it across the room without spilling a single drop. Many of these examples, of course, do suggest gestures we have all found ourselves doing at times. However, if such gestures – or their general style – haunt us without respite

and characterize our manner of making a body at every moment, we may identify them as inadvertent isometrics, whether it is a case of constantly “getting a grip on oneself,” continually numbing feelings that are too much to bear, “freezing” inside in any situation that seems threatening for any reason, constantly proving that one is “tough enough” to stand it, and so on.

Now at first, some of the examples cited might seem to imply that inadvertent isometrics typically have their origin in some kind of traumatic incident (or series of incidents) in one’s own personal “psychological” history. This may indeed be true in some cases. However, patterns of inadvertent isometrics may be embedded in the flesh even when we can’t point to a specific incident (or a specific series of incidents) initially motivating this response. Rather, inadvertent isometrics can have multiple, intersecting, mutually reinforcing, yet elusive and anonymous “origins.” Thus, for example, it is possible to feel that one has to “try harder” without ever having received a direct order to that effect, it is possible that one has learned how to hold back tears even if nobody ever actually said “don’t be a crybaby” (or words to that effect), and so on. Moreover, it is not necessarily true that simply locating a past origin for inadvertent isometrics will automatically shift or release them in any way, for their power lies in their being *ongoingly* reiterated, perpetuated, reinstated here and now, precisely as ghost gestures. Nor can inadvertent isometrics always be characterized as present echoes of past troubles; for example, frozen gestures of defense and desensitization may not be mere relics from an unhappy past, but may be an all too appropriate response to networks of power relations operating here and now. Finally, it is not necessarily true that inadvertent isometrics are merely the manifestation of individual “psychological problems” that have been “somatized” in “holding patterns.” Rather, they may be clues to the way(s) bodies and bodily movements in general are *ongoingly* shaped in a particular social milieu. Thus the inquiry into such phenomena as inadvertent isometrics can lead to a broader “*critique of corporeal experience*” (to borrow and extend a phrase from Paci, 1972, p. 467) directed toward the typical style(s) of “making a body” in a given historical/cultural setting.

For example, a certain typical move that seems to be at work in many of the “holding patterns” discussed above may be indicated with the phrase “set/vacate.” To locate this feature experientially, one might begin by making a moving gesture of “pointing,” feeling this gesture from within while it slowly and flexibly scans the horizon without pausing to point at any particular object. Then, however, one can (a) bring the gesture to a culmination in a “set” position, zeroing in on a particular target object, and (b) “vacate” the area, as it were, so that one no longer inhabits the entire gesture from within, but retreats to a “vantage point” typically located somewhere in the head behind the eyes, perhaps attending to something else while the “set” gesture

is maintained (just as, for instance, one might simply leave one's hand up when waiting to be called on during a discussion, maintaining the gesture without "living in" it in any way). In fact, a similar "set" involving the whole body can be detected when one gets oneself in position to be able to see something clearly and distinctly – which entails not only obtaining a clear line of sight, but also holding still so as to keep things in sharp focus (rather than, say, seeing with "soft eyes" while moving). One might almost want to say that the inner move of "set/vacate" swings into play a general style in which the experiencing "I" shrinks to a non-extended point surveying a world over-against it – including its own body, which has meanwhile become a mere thing, mechanically carrying out its habitual activities.¹⁴ The ghost gesture of "set/vacate" is, in short, part of the kinaesthetic means whereby the Cartesian mind-body dualism familiar to us from philosophical reflection can be concretely lived out at the level of individual moving bodies.

Much more could obviously be said here comparing this way of making a body with other ways, whether these ways are found in other cultures (for example, in Indigenous peoples) or emerge from alternative practices within our own culture. For instance, even to call an area "vacated" is to imply that it could be "reinhabited" from within, and bodily practices can be devised that "match" the ambient holding patterns of inadvertent isometrics, inhabiting them "as if" they were ongoingly performed and maintained "on purpose" – a practice that can allow these sedimented gestures to shift (Behnke, 1988/1995). I look forward to further research in this area. But it is already possible to see that one's own individual way of making a body, here and now, has significant intercorporeal implications, some of which I will now summarize by touching upon some specific areas for future investigation.

5. Intercorporeal Implications

1) First of all, the work presented here has implications for the way we understand the term "intercorporeity" itself. On the one hand, we may take the notion of intercorporeity as a theoretical concept that shifts the notion of "intersubjectivity" away from the traditional epistemological notion of the "subject" (cf. Waldenfels, 1987, p. 133) and emphasizes instead an anonymous, pre-personal dimension of human existence – or, in a variant reading of the concept of intercorporeity, we may take it as an ontological commitment to a primordial connectivity, and a corrective to accounts that inevitably take atomistic individuals as their point of departure. On the other hand, we may take the word "intercorporeity" as a term referring to the *phenomena themselves* – a term that is therefore an invitation to evidence, an opportunity to search out for ourselves the lived experiences in which inter-

corporeity becomes particularly salient. Starting points might include, for example, Schutz's (1964, p. 160) reference to Mead's notion of the "conversation of gestures" between two wrestlers; Sudnow's (1979/1980, pp. 90–92, 111–113) brief descriptions of the "corporate body" of members of a string quartet or of an orchestra; and Coenen's (1986) descriptions of the incorporation of a stranger into a communal corporeal context and of a contagion of gestures among children at play. If, however, the researcher's own body is characterized by inadvertent isometrics – and with this, a dampening of the ability to feel somaesthetic sensations or to feel one's way into one's own kinaesthetic possibilities – then the conditions are not propitious for sensing subtle intercorporeal resonances, for making experiential distinctions among various styles of intercorporeity, and so on. To put it another way, bracing and numbing oneself and then "vacating the area" is not a good way of developing the "appropriate sensibility" for researching the phenomena themselves proper to intercorporeity rather than simply calling upon it as a concept.

However, recovering these ghost gestures as lived micromovements – reclaiming them kinaesthetically from within – can help us to develop the sensibility needed for further research into intercorporeity. For example, somaesthetic sensations may indeed be fundamentally private: I may wince when I see you get hurt, and I may even know from my own experience what kinds of feelings you're going through, but you are the one who is actually undergoing the pain, not I. In contrast, much that is kinaesthetic is shareable. Think, for example, of holding hands with someone and skipping – or of skipping together without holding hands, yet still being caught up in the same movement, even without actually touching.¹⁵ It would thus seem to make sense to recognize the *interkinaesthetic* as an important manifestation of the intercorporeal, and to develop phenomenological descriptions of various types of interkinaesthetic experience.

2) In the second place, we can use such notions as "ghost gestures" and "making a body" to search out the specifically kinaesthetic dimension of the social production of docile bodies (Foucault, 1979: Part 3, Ch. 1). For example, we can inquire into the micromovements involved in "shrinking before authorities" (Johnson, 1983/1992: Ch. 1); the ways in which inadvertent isometrics contribute to our becoming the effective agents of our own oppression in the many modes of disempowerment and "inferiorization" (Bartky, 1990: Ch. 2, 3); the way the inner move of "vacating" one's body helps perpetuate both a "worker's body," numb to exploitative labor conditions (Freund, 1982: Ch. 7), and a "consumer's body" (O'Neill, 1985: Ch. 4) whose needs do not arise spontaneously from within, but are defined, imposed, and manipulated from the outside; and the way in which the inner gestures of numbing oneself create the body of violence – and here I'm referring not only to the braced

and frozen bodies of victims and survivors of violence, but also to the body that can do violence to others (or witness violence done against others) and remain unmoved (Johnson, 1983/1992: Ch. 6; Moyers, 1990).

3) The example of the body of violence suggests that one especially important area for research might be that of “toxic intercorporeity.” For example, if one walks into a room full of tense, angry, frustrated, or anxious people, one may well find – if one has the appropriate sensibility to discern it – that one’s own ambient bodily tonus has also increased, as though there can be a kind of interkinaesthetic “contagion” of inadvertent isometrics.¹⁶ Now one might suppose that the micromovements of tightening up, numbing, freezing, bracing, or desensitizing would act to cut the individual off from the web of intercorporeal connectedness, so that one is effectively (and affectively) isolated from others. But there is more to it than that, because even individuals who are maximally braced in the “body armor” of inadvertent isometrics can get caught up in a kind of interkinaesthetic resonance: think, for example, of a workplace where bodily tensions circulate among the personnel in a kind of escalating spiral until the resulting hostile, aggressive style of corporeal/intercorporeal comportment explodes into actual violence. It thus seems important to identify various forms of toxic intercorporeity and to study its recurring structural features.

However, with the notion of toxic intercorporeity there also arises the question of what characterizes healthy intercorporeity.¹⁷ What, for instance, are the interkinaesthetics of genuine mutual responsivity? If the kinds of ghost gestures I have termed inadvertent isometrics play a role in maintaining a body of violence, what ways of making a body contribute to the body of compassion, the body of tolerance, the body of peace? And what sorts of practices swing into play and reinforce the style of bodily micromovements that further healthy intercorporeity?

4) Such considerations lead to the question of the practical application of the kind of research I have been reporting on here. I will address this area by offering two examples where sensitivity to the ghost gestures moving among us has had positive practical results. The first example is drawn from the “Validation Therapy” developed by Naomi Feil (see Feil and Flynn, 1983; Feil, 1991–92), in which validation workers are trained to develop empathetic connection with disoriented elderly persons, especially those in institutional settings. Here what I have called ghost gestures have escaped from their usual relative invisibility and are plain to be seen, but they are all too often misunderstood. At first, the elderly person merely seems to have withdrawn from current reality while engaging in seemingly senseless repetitive motor actions – “abbreviated muscle-movements” in which “eyes blink, waver, focus, unfocus, and fingers pat, fold, wiggle, trace a line or a chair or a

person” (Feil and Flynn, 1983, p. 9). But such gestures are the ghosts of meaningful actions performed by these persons in the past – milking cows, shoveling dirt, hammering nails, filing papers – or of emotionally meaningful movements (cradling, caressing, rocking) related to past situations that may well be far more vivid to the person than the present reality is. The validation worker learns not only to recognize these movements for what they are, and to acknowledge them verbally, but also to match them kinaesthetically, setting up an interkinaesthetic resonance that establishes genuine contact with the person in a meaningful, validating relationship. Thus “instead of pushing or patronizing,” the validation worker “walks alongside old disoriented human beings, moving to their rhythms” (Feil, 1991–92, p. 51). In this way, then, developing a sensitivity to the ghost gestures haunting others’ bodies can help transform a mere “warehousing” or “caretaking” relationship into a situation where persons are accorded a fuller measure of intercorporeal dignity and respect.

The second example is drawn from an unpublished paper by Kathy Washington entitled “Practical Applications of Phenomenology,” which describes a presentation she gave on “The Body as Object: The Effects of Racism on Lived Body Experience” (cited in Behnke, 1990, pp. 17–18). During the presentation, Washington had other people confront her, reading aloud racially offensive things that people had said to her in the past. At first, her body felt like a thing or object, with minimal sensations. As the presentation progressed, however, she was able to regain a connection with bodily feelings:

I felt a quivering, as if my muscles were trying to act out and move but something was holding them back. In that moment, I understood very intimately, without any intellectualizing, what this kind of societal oppression does to me and how it is sustained. A threatening situation does not need to exist at all! I have embodied it and carry it around with me at all times.

The room after my presentation was heavy with silence. In front of all of us, I had begun the transformation from an object who was acted upon to a lived body who was beginning to reclaim her rights to awareness and consciousness. This is, I believe, a crucial step in helping to resolve many of the injustices of the world.

Thus the experiential retrieval of the very inadvertent isometrics that numb and disempower us can have a transformative effect: when lived from within, ghost gestures lose their power to haunt us.

6. Concluding Remarks

We are familiar from existential phenomenology with the claim that my body is not something I “have,” but something I “am.” What I am suggesting here, however, is that my body is something I *do* (cf. Ames, 1984, p. 48). And if we ask “who” does this, the answer is not a punctiformal ego with its body over-against it, but rather a dilated *kinaesthetic consciousness*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, even if my body is something I do, I do not do it alone: the micromovements through which I am continually making a body are situated within a more encompassing interkinaesthetic field, including not only the movements and micromovements of those around me, but also the sedimented traces of such movements and micromovements in the artifacts around me. Thus I am always already caught up in a corporeal style that is not necessarily of my own making, even though my own way of making a body may ongoingly perpetuate it, with or without my being aware of the fact.

Yet even if I am not the sole “author,” so to speak, of the reigning corporeal/intercorporeal style, I am not necessarily a mere “victim” swept along by it either. Instead, I can choose to *reactivate the sediment* (Husserl, 1954, pp. 371–372; cf. pp. 73, 152/1970, p. 361; cf. pp. 71–72, 149) rather than letting it play itself out anonymously within me. The socially situated body is a body woven of movement, articulated by movement, shaped and sustained by movement. But I can begin to inhabit the ghost gestures that both sustain our lives and constrain our lives, and this in turn can open up alternative styles of movement and micromovement in a “productive movement” (cf. Waldenfels, 1987, pp. 144 ff.) that need not simply re-produce what has gone before. In this way I become as it were a puzzle piece that no longer fits easily and neatly into the current picture, but begins to imply a new one – a different order, an alternative interkinaesthetic style.

Thus ultimately, for me, a phenomenological investigation of ghost gestures – an investigation that does not content itself with abstractions, but appropriates the phenomena themselves from within and appreciates their intercorporeal implications – can be a kind of “action research” that not only calls us to ethical self-responsibility, but can eventually lead to the development of an embodied ethics, in both theory and practice.

Notes

1. The work presented here is part of a larger research project (Behnke, work in progress) using Husserlian phenomenological methods to elucidate transformative somatic practice (body work and body awareness approaches).
2. For another approach to “place ballet” and other movement patterns sustaining everyday life, see Seamon (1979).

3. The characterization of subjectivity as “world-experiencing life” (“*welterfahrendes Leben*”) stems from Husserl (see Brand, 1955, p. 18 n. 4).
4. As Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 161 n. 1/1962, p. 138 n. 2) remarks, “It is not easy to lay bare pure motor intentionality: it hides behind the objective world that it contributes to constituting” [translation altered].
5. Cf. the distinction between a lived body part as “phantom” – i.e., as something experientially “given” (though not yet constituted as a physical “thing” with “characteristics”), and presented not only visually, but also through the specific stratum of lived-bodily sensations I am terming “somaesthetic” – and the same lived body part as “organ” of free motility (see Husserl, 1973b, pp. 281–282; see also pp. 55 ff.).
6. The contrast between a punctiform and a dilated sense of self is explored in Spiegelberg (1966/1986).
7. Husserl characterizes holding still as a mode of the “I move” or the “I do” in 1954/1970 (§§28, 47).
8. The descriptive language developed by Rudolf Laban (see, e.g., Dell, 1977) can be helpful in learning to appreciate nuances of movement quality. (On the proto-phenomenological elements in Laban’s work, see Maletic, 1987, pp. 189–201; cf. Connolly and Lathrop, forthcoming.)
9. In this connection it can be pointed out that not only sensations of movement (*Bewegungsempfindnisse*), but also many other sorts of somaesthetic sensations – including bodily tonus – stand in an experiential “if-then” relation to the correlative kinaesthetic circumstances.
10. As Johnson (1983/1992, p. 66) points out, “Each of our bodies is an artifice, a community project visibly manifesting the values of those implicated in the task.”
11. I owe this example to Alexander teachers Bill and Barbara Conable; see also F.M. Alexander (1923/1924, pp. 261 ff.).
12. Note the role that language plays in eliciting and perpetuating the phenomenon at issue here: if the countermovements implicated in “trying harder” turn out to be counterproductive, perhaps we should consider “trying easier.” It might also be mentioned that one can find oneself “trying” even when one is not actually performing the task in question oneself, but merely watching someone else do it.
13. In some cases, it might be more accurate to speak of “isotonic” rather than “isometric” muscular contraction. But my purpose here is not to give a physiological account within the naturalistic attitude; rather, I am using the familiar notion of “doing isometrics” as a way of introducing and as it were “locating” a certain type of micromovements to be explored *experientially*, within a phenomenological attitude.
14. Cf. the discussion of the “separative seeing” paradigm in Behnke (1984).
15. More complex examples where participants are not necessarily performing the exact same gestures or moving to an obvious, regular rhythm, yet are indeed intercorporeally linked in a shared movement, remain to be studied; cf. the theme of “entrainment” presented in, e.g., Hall (1983, see especially Ch. 9, 10).
16. Cf. the notion of “tonus imitation” discussed in G. Alexander (1985, pp. 48, 55, 57, 61–62).
17. Edith Matter reports that according to Heinrich Jacoby (a teacher of the kind of work usually known in the United States as Sensory Awareness and a colleague of Elsa Gindler, who originally developed such work), “nothing is more contagious than genuine tranquillity” (cited in Weber, 1986, p. 31).
18. The Husserlian theme of kinaesthetic consciousness has been taken up in Claesges (1964) and Rohr-Dietschi (1974).

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