Ethics and body politics: interdisciplinary possibilities for embodied psychotherapeutic practice and research

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Ethical approaches to practice and research in counselling and arts/psychotherapies demand an urgent attention to body politics. Bodies are not neutral; gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class are socio-political aspects that shape our mental, emotional and physical selves and inform our ethical values. Drawing from the author’s embodied practice as interdisciplinary practitioner-researcher, the aim of this paper is to examine the inseparability of ethics and bodies and explore how autobiographical, relational and political aspects of our selves-in-motion give rise to and build upon ‘ethically important moments’. The paper concludes with expanding possibilities; that highlighting ethical tensions within the lived experiences of bodies-in-motion allows for politically progressive approaches to practice that reflect the emerging paradigm shift of a post-Cartesian and interdisciplinary age.

Keywords: ethics; bodies; feminism; body politics; dance movement/psychotherapy; autobiography; intersubjectivity; power

Bodies are quintessentially interdisciplinary; we are socially and biologically constructed. Moreover, bodies are not neutral; gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class are socio-political aspects that shape our mental, emotional and physical selves and inform our ethical values. As an interdisciplinary practitioner, I inhabit different and seemingly incompatible worlds; as a dance movement psychotherapist, choreographer, academic researcher and educator. Permeating these roles is an engagement with the notion of performance as an art form. Additionally, I use the term ‘performance’ in two different ways. The first is in relation to the performance of identity and the social self, the second is the telling of a story as performance. This story can of course be a dance, a film, a psychotherapeutic conversation or in written form (Allegranti, 2011). Unequivocally, the locus of my work is an engagement with the politics of moving bodies and a desire to unpack taken-for-granted ideas about women and men and how discourses, practices and policies in society regulate and govern bodies (Butler, 2004; Foucault, 1984, 1988).

Moreover, I argue that as an ‘embodied performance’, psychotherapeutic and research processes incorporate autobiographical, relational and political aspects of our selves-in-motion (Allegranti, 2011). This meld of ‘personal’ and ‘public’ can be seen to be mutually influencing and suggests a continuum between the intersubjective and socio-political environment.

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As a consequence of this explicit political position, my intent in this paper is to establish the inseparability of ethics and bodies (Diprose, 2005; Foucault, 1984, 1988). I will do this by interrogating ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) in three vignettes from my clinical practice and research. This develops Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004, p. 262) focus on ‘ethically important moments in doing research – the difficult, often subtle, and unusually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research’. An additional view is offered by Wyatt’s (2006) autoethnographic research, which highlights the complexity of consent when writing about others and how the process of consulting gave rise to ‘ethically important moments’.

Ethics, bodies and ontological shifts

When ethics is conceived as stemming from processes of being and encountering – and not the relationship between a pre-constituted moral subject applying criteria to equally pre-constituted objects – the relationship between ethics and bodies becomes probable. (Fraser & Greco, 2005, p. 32, emphasis added)

The genealogy of ethics is complex and diverse, with three broad and distinguishable categories: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Upholding the Greco-Roman convention, ethics, or moral philosophy, addresses questions about morality – concepts such as good/evil, right/wrong, virtue/vice, body/soul. Therefore, traditional ethics are based on the ontological premise, and problem, of dualisms; a body/mind and subject/object split. In this way, Western ethics can be considered as disembodied rules, principles or ‘truths’ that can be applied to specific moral problems. Inheriting this legacy from late antiquity, a Cartesian cultural characterisation conceives ethics as mental or spiritual. For example, we hear of ethical reasoning and ethical principles that are universal and as Fraser and Greco (2005) point out (above), the consequence of universalising ethical principles results in a (hierarchical) subject-object dichotomy.

A universal and dichotomous view governs ethical discourses in hospitals, universities and public and professional organisations (Halse & Honey, 2007). Specifically, Western universal ethics principles were developed as a response to the Nazi atrocities of World War II. These principles were first articulated in the Nuremberg Code (1947) and the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and pertained to biomedical practice and research. Evolving from these was the US-derived Belmont Report (1979, http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html), which developed approaches to ethical research conduct for both biomedical and non-biomedical settings. The key emerging principles emphasised in the Belmont Report are respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. Notwithstanding socio-political contingency, Halse and Honey (2007) suggest the adoption of such principles as conceptually inconsistent, since they do not bring together one coherent theory but draw from the work of different eighteenth and twentieth century theorists and philosophical frames. Arguably, such ethical eclecticism has (ontological) implications for psychotherapeutic practices and research approaches that adopt (and adapt) the Belmont principles in their code of ethics, since these principles imply a hierarchical (rational) approach that organises bodies and discourses in a preconceived way.
Significantly, Foucault’s (1984, 1988, 1994) contributions to the political dimensions of ethics challenge traditional Greco-Roman thinking by expanding the notion of conventional morality with its dualistic and hierarchical framework. A Foucauldian ethics is based on embodied dwelling where bodies are constituted by a dynamic relation with other bodies in a social context of power, gender and knowledge. This perspective conceptualises an ethos of ‘governing’ self and others in a way that would enable the productive exercise of power with minimum domination (Reed & Saukko, 2010). Therefore, Foucault suggests a more distributive notion of power in human relationships and he makes this clear in his (re)vision of the notion of ‘care of self’ as ethical, since ‘it implies complex relationships with others in so far as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others’ (Foucault, 1994, p. 287).

Notably, a challenge to (subject-object) dualistic thinking raises (epistemological) issues of what we know and how we know, which in turn affects ways in which we can conceptualise, understand and transform notions of intersubjectivity and power. Consequently, the implications of seeing and doing ‘otherwise’ (Butler, 1990, 2004), in terms of ethics, necessitates an ontological shift away from dualisms and towards a complex process of being and encountering that incorporates a personal and public body-specificity (Allegranti, 2011; Frank, 1995).

In the context of dance movement psychotherapy, Wadsworth Hervey (2007) proposes an embodied ethical decision-making through pedagogical and research methods. By employing felt-sense (Gendlin, 1962/1997), kinaesthetic empathy (Berrol, 2006; Gallese, 2003) and movement analysis (Moore, 2005) as responses to the abstraction of the Belmont principles, an invaluable relationship between ethics and bodies is established. However, Wadsworth Hervey overlooks the socio-political and ontological specificity of embodying these principles. Arguably, a further shift in ontological layering is necessary, not only embodying ethics but a consideration of the political implications with/in the process of embodiment, since bodies are not neutral. Therefore, closer scrutiny is required regarding how intersections between gender, sexuality, ethnicity or age influence the embodiment of our ethical values with/in psychotherapeutic practice and research.

**An ethics of the body**

Dominant (Western) ethical discourses do not fully incorporate feminist perspectives. Issues such as sexuality, the bodily self, moral connectedness, the emotions, and psychological fluidity have been seen as peripheral to the subject matter of ethics (Frazer, Hornsby, & Lovibond, 1992). However, feminist literature on the intersections between ethics, bodies and gender is non-binary and focuses on how gender, along with intersecting characteristics of sexuality, social class, age and ethnicity, influences the way we view the world (Diprose, 2005; Irigaray, 1993).

Notably, a seminal relational approach to ethics was developed by Carol Gilligan (1982) as an ‘ethics of care’. Gilligan challenged women’s absence in ethical discourses and highlighted that conventional approaches on rights and obligations in ethics were founded on masculine understandings. A ‘different voice’ was offered, emphasising women as selves-in-relation in the context of ties to families and groups. An ethics of care is, arguably, a first step towards an ethics of the body and towards valuing the intersubjective process. However, Gilligan’s position has been criticised for its limited political transferability as a guide to decision-making at a community, national and international level. It has also come under attack for its gynocentric
(female-biased) position which contributes to women’s continuing subordination since it posits ‘caring’ as the way for women to express responsible agency (Bacchi & Beasley, 2005). Consequently, emphasising moral difference between women and men re-establishes unequal power relations. By contrast, more recent post-Foucauldian feminist contributions problematise discussions of gender where the body is viewed as an ethical and contested site. The distinctive contribution comes from the area of healthcare and biopolitics, where women’s agency (or lack of) in biomedical research and practice (Reed & Saukko, 2010) is interrogated.

Overall, a common theme in the variety of ethical feminist positions is the rejection of a priori assumptions of male superiority (Frazer et al., 1992, p. 5), highlighting, instead, moral discussions of gender-equal, non-sexist principles, policies and practices. Hence, feminist ethics is a revision of traditional Western ethics that devalues women’s moral experience and the intersubjective body. A further layer when locating an ethics of the body is an explicit consideration of the moving body, an ontologically plural body incorporating autobiographical, relational and political layers that constitute our selves over time (Allegranti, 2009, Allegranti, 2011). Notably, an interweaving of relationships, choices and social positionings allows for an understanding of power that is, in the Foucauldian sense, productive and can be described as plural (Olesen, 2000, p. 224).

An ethics of the body emphasises an ontological heterogeneity with a respect for specificity with/in difference and prioritising particulars over abstractions (Frank, 1995; Nagl, 2005). Moreover, exposing the ways in which sameness and difference operate is key to considering an ethics of the body. So, how can counselling and psychotherapy practitioners and researchers ‘do’ ethics in a way that more coherently reflects and incorporates the lived personal (intersubjective) and public (power-full) experiences of our bodies? How does paying attention to the interstitial spaces between bodies encountering one another within a psychotherapeutic process give rise to ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Wyatt, 2006) worthy of consideration? The following section explores some cascading possibilities in relation to these questions.

**Interstitial spaces**

The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own. (Butler, 2004, p. 21)

Our relationship with our own, and each other’s bodies, is a paradoxical one. As Butler posits, it is a relationship between self and other and between personal and public arenas. For me, this immediately shores up a dialectical notion – body ownership not only at an intersubjective level but, also, that ownership necessarily implicates issues of power relations in society (and, by default, within psychotherapeutic practice and research as social systems).

Combining a relational and political focus demands, in Adrienne Rich’s words, ‘that we delve deeper’ (1992, p. 336). Therefore, by way of immersing myself, and the reader, in the interstitial spaces between (and within) bodies, ethics and politics, this section turns to three composite vignettes from different areas of my own clinical
practice and research: (i) a dyadic movement exchange in a martial arts context; (ii) clinical adult mental health practice; (iii) multicultural group therapy work with adolescents. The three vignettes are analysed through the lens of ‘embodied performances’, a perspective that integrates autobiographical, relational and political aspects of ‘selves’ in motion (Allegranti, 2011). As a methodology, I argue that an embodied performance lens allows for a process of ‘re-visioning’ (de Lauretis, 1994; Rich, 1980) practice and research in a way that is ontologically grounded in the body. Moreover, within my discussion I weave between the first, second and third person positions. The rationale for linguaging in this way allows for a shift between ‘intersubjective bodies’ (Allegranti, 2011) and ‘psychic distance’ (Gardner, 1983; Wyatt, 2006). In so doing, I seek the possibility of stepping (in) between the non gender neutral authorial ‘I’ and the wider socio-political context, thereby encouraging the possibility of various ethical person positions available in the unfolding stories.

By weaving feminist/post-structural understandings of embodied intersubjectivity and power into the realm of movement interactions, my intention is to identify and build upon the notion of ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Wyatt, 2006) by paying specific attention to what can be seen and felt in the interstitial spaces with/in and between bodies. Therefore, a guiding question is: how does the process of embodying these ethically important moments assist the possibility of seeing and doing ‘otherwise’ (Butler, 1990, 2004) in psychotherapeutic practice and research? Alongside each vignette is an illustration capturing a moment in time during each unfolding story. The specially commissioned drawings are included by way of making bodies and interactions visible amidst the languaging process.

**Playing the game**

A young North African man and an older European woman are engaged in a movement exchange. The context is a martial arts class. Sparring between two people is referred to as ‘playing the game’. A few minutes into the game the man begins the first of a series of ‘take-downs’ and the woman repeatedly lands on the floor. Each take-down becomes more forceful. The man wants to end the game. However, rather than ending, the woman re-engages, and through the appropriate ritual, re-starts the game. This cycle continues for a while: the man plays the take-downs and the woman gets up and re-engages in the game. When the game is over, the woman turns to the man and they have a verbal disagreement. The woman asks: ‘Why were you being so aggressive?’ The man quickly responds, ‘No! I was not aggressive, you were intimidated by me. You don’t know how to play the game. It’s best we don’t play again’.

Playing this game involves a complex layering of power, gender, culture and bodies, reminding me of Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (2000), p. 20) assertion that ‘as we grow and develop, we literally, not just “discursively”’ (that is, through language and cultural practices), construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh. To understand this claim, we must erode the distinctions between the physical and the social body’. My fleshy understanding of this game is riddled with the simultaneity of personal and public politics. I have embodied a disciplinary regime (Foucault, 1991) that is counter-dominant (white, male, European) discourse, in the context of martial arts and in the wider social context. My body knows how to
balance in an inverted position, to kick, to fall and recover. I am versed in the language of ‘attack’ and ‘counterattack’.

Yet, I feel shaken. As integral to the rules of this martial art form, I was seeking eye contact with you so that you could see and recognise me, but my experience was that you were reluctant to engage with me on this level. I know that you have force, flexibility and strength as I also recognise this in my own (older) body. Both our bodies are muscular. But you are moving these qualities in a different way to me. What are our gender role expectations of each other? I wonder what the (culturally and gender diverse) group witnessed in our exchange. It seems that we are engaged in the production of a conventional gendered performative act through repetition and recitation (Butler, 1994), so that we were ‘doing’ our gender over and over again. This iterative process loses the shock of human possibilities than can reverberate through our bodies (Rich, 1992).

Are we consenting to the same game though? Whose rules are we playing by? The martial art form’s? Yours? Mine? How can we mutually negotiate the rules? What kinds of different engagement could be possible? One where we could resist ‘doing’ cultural colonisation over and over again? With each take-down becoming more forceful, I had a sense that you were engaging in another kind of game, one that involves force. And force is not to be conflated with power (Foucault, 1991). What needs to happen in our bodies to break this repetitive cycle?

As the feminist project highlights, it seems that sameness and difference are operating in this game, ‘not simply as opposites, but in a hierarchical relation to privilege . . . differences are always multiple, indeterminate, and mobile’ (Shildrick, 2005, p. 17). The more you refused to engage with me on an equal basis, the more I felt compelled to stand my ground, not by responding in the same way but by inviting a different kind of moving dialogue. Conversely, if as bell hooks\(^2\) (2000) points out, female and male have been socialised from birth to accept sexist thought and action, am I being ‘othered’ \textit{vis-à-vis} patriarchal culture, hence your languaging
of me as ‘intimidated’? Or as Issacs (2005), p. 142) argues, ‘men are socialized in ways 
that promote, rather than hinder their way of being in the world. And they are 
encouraged to exhibit qualities of strength and independence that are [...] more 
highly prized than the vulnerability and dependency encouraged in women’. This is 
certainly an aspect of embodied gender socialisation. However, it is easy to overlook 
that I may be ignoring my own ‘built-in privilege of whiteness’ (Lorde, 1992, p. 216) 
when trying to make sense of our exchange and therefore othering you as too 
difficult to comprehend, hence my languaging of you as ‘aggressive’.

How can understanding and addressing these consequences assist in re-
integrating the fracture of this gendered and cultural interaction? By seeking to 
establish my moral agency in this encounter, am I being undermined and 
participating in a form of subordination? Or am I, through my connection to the 
ritual of the game, and my willingness to re-engage, establishing an ongoing non-
verbal dialogue? As a feminist (martial artist) my intention was for this ongoing re-
engagement in movement to go some way towards creating a transparency in 
democratising the game. However, I am reminded of Alldred’s (2006, p. 151) warning 
of a ‘completely “democratized” position through the fantasy of empowerment’. 
Perhaps herein lies my ethical dilemma. As a woman, a feminist, a dancer (of 30 
years) and a martial artist (of 10 years), my desire in this interaction was to make 
explicit our power relationship in order to avoid complicity with the fantasy of fixed 
and stable (gendered) experiences that are internally coherent (Butler, 1990). 
Alongside this desire is an experiential awareness that it takes time for (fixed) bodies 
and movement to reorganise and change; recognising the contingency of our 
embodied experiences and interrogating the alterity of these experiences is an 
evolving process.

An ambivalent encounter

The context is the beginning of a dance movement psychotherapy group. The interaction 
takes place between two women – a client and a therapist. From the start of the verbal 
check-in the client was very vocal in the group, often speaking at length and usually from 
a position of ‘fixed knowing’ rather than one of curiosity. She regularly stated that she 
preferred listening to the group rather than being ‘fed’ by the therapist. The therapist 
often found that the client would sit directly opposite her. When the therapist reflected 
verbally on a group or individual experience, the client would very quickly follow with 
her own ‘feedback’ for the group. The client also commented that she enjoyed the non-
competitiveness between and amongst the women and men in the group. During a 
subsequent session the client spoke of feeling ambivalent about being in the group. When 
the therapist offered her reflection, the woman gathered her things together and made a 
hasty exit from the room. Several days later, before the next group meeting, the client 
decided to withdraw from the therapy group, announcing this decision via an email. 
Although the therapist offered a meeting to discuss this decision and/or come to a 
closure, the client did not respond.

This ambivalent encounter highlights the interrelated issues of gender, power and 
‘knowing’ that permeate through the bodies of the leading protagonists. At first 
appearing to be a dichotomous situation, the politics of self/other simultaneity are 
vividly embodied in this psychotherapeutic encounter. As Frank (1995) reminds us, 
the communicative body is dyadic, the self-story is never just a self-story but becomes 
a self/other-story and individuals have a degree of choice about such interpretations.
One possible framework for interpreting this simultaneity can be described by Jessica Benjamin’s feminist psychoanalytic view of intersubjectivity. Benjamin states that intersubjectivity is not the same as object relations and that ‘where objects are, subjects must be’ (1995, p. 29). This intersubjective perspective breaks down the familiar (Cartesian) polarities of subject/object, active/passive which predominate in Western philosophy and science, and creates what Benjamin (1998, p. xiv) terms a ‘third position’ which holds the underlying tension of these dichotomies. Thus, relation to the Other replaces relation to the object. Benjamin (1995, p. 30) explains that, ‘Intersubjective theory postulates that the other must be recognized as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other’s presence. This means that we have a need for recognition and that we have a capacity to recognize others in return, thus making mutual recognition possible’ (emphasis added). Benjamin’s use of the word recognition is key, since it denotes a complex developmental concept forming the basis for intersubjectivity. When working with gendered bodies-in-relation, intersubjectivity (rather than ‘object’ relations) is an apt conceptual, linguistic and political reframing. Moreover, I argue that the use of the term ‘intersubjective bodies’ encompasses both movement and verbal co-created relationships. Intersubjective bodies also denotes the co-creative process as biological and psychic (Allegranti, 2011).

During this ambivalent encounter, the intersubjective process was vividly manifest in my body countertransference. I was caught (in) between holding my/your ambivalence in my body and allowing it to shape my encounter in a way that permitted reciprocal recognition, whilst also cultivating awareness that reciprocal recognition is not an ideal; it is an ongoing process that we must labour. How can I invite you to fully embody the ghost of your ambivalence? When de-briefing this experience in supervision I described my body countertransference – I felt a sense of competitiveness when working with you and felt your presence as huge. I was confused and had a strong feeling of ambivalence towards you. This must be my
body’s experience of contingency, being subject to forces that cannot be controlled (Frank, 1995). But body countertransference is not a neat and conclusive process; it is not an ultimate goal. It is too easy to interpret and pathologise and thus resolve the situation in an act of dominance.

Different lenses will orientate clients (and supervisees) towards varying distributions of power and valuing relationships. Therefore, how can therapists (and supervisors) ‘do’ ethics in a way that alerts them to their own political positioning, and enables them to use power appropriately? If I interpret power in simple terms, such as domination, I produce an ethical dilemma that has been extensively debated in feminism: ‘emancipatory politics, which is oblivious to its own dominating elements’ (Reed & Saukko, 2010, p. 7). Can I/we move towards interpreting the nature of power as a productive force and as one that is always both constraining and enabling (Reed & Saukko, 2010)?

By doing power ‘otherwise’ (Butler, 1990, 2004), I am open to a horizontal, and less hierarchical view, where I can see the taboo of women, competition and authority in our embodied exchange. Therefore, as women, how can we think of ourselves in relation to each other and give voice to the unexpressed feminine in our power relations? I was not included in your decision-making process when you left and I felt disempowered. However, Foucault (1984, 1988) would argue that your ‘resistance’ could be understood as an integral aspect of negotiating power.

Another ethical dilemma that I encountered was my desire to support your development and change, but finding it challenging to facilitate you. The ghost of ambivalence past seemed to be obscuring your ability to see and hear me as someone that you could learn from in your embodied present. My challenge seemed to be the need to assist you with inviting the ghost into the room and incorporating her into your current embodied performance.

However, I am aware that clients (and supervisees) are enculturated into a particular discourse (through verbal and non-verbal language) by the approach of those who facilitate their change and learning. Consequently, my desire was to learn from you as client and work towards a co-creative ‘knowing’ that would allow us to explicitly address and work sensitively with issues of power. What are my own embodied performances of power? And how can I model this for you and for other women? These are key ethical questions that I aim to vivify and keep in balance in a professional healthcare context (and in my everyday life). As a therapist, I strive to be attentive to the process of trusting of my own embodied knowing, together with scrutinising how this embodied knowing is politically layered.

An Israeli-Palestinian story

The context is an international and residential arts and therapies project for young people whose lives are affected by conflict. The residential setting is the Irish Defence Forces headquarters in rural Southern Ireland. The aim of the project is to promote ‘understanding, tolerance and friendship’ between children of different cultures. A female dance movement psychotherapist is working with two groups of mixed gender Israeli and Palestinian adolescents. As a starting point the therapist decides to separate the groups and asks them to develop a group story, in movement and words, about their lived experiences in their respective countries. This takes place outdoors in open fields within the army base. The Palestinian adolescents enact scenes from Israeli checkpoints; incidents of bullying, asking of identification and then shootings and
killings are played out. The story ends with one of the youngest male members of the group rapping an anti-Israeli song (in Arabic). When the therapist asks for a translation, she discovers that the song contains strong and politically volatile language. The Israeli adolescents develop a story about the tower of Babel. The story is a biblical one where the central theme is God separating humankind on the basis of language. Babel is from the ancient Hebrew word ‘balal’ meaning to jumble. After much discussion, the Israeli group creates a tower from old chairs and tables and, once this construction is complete they bring the tower to ‘destruction’ by crashing the furniture to the ground.

The intersecting body politics in this Israeli-Palestinian story are: culture, political conflict, othering, religion and age. Nowhere is Carol Hanisch’s (1970) feminist slogan, ‘the personal is political’, more apparent than in contexts where people live with ongoing conflict. And, as Foucault (1991) makes clear, there is a link between political governance of populations and the intimate governance of bodies and selves.

Notwithstanding the political contexts for both these groups, adolescence is a time of re-configuring and re-shaping sexual and gendered selves. Moreover, promoting the peace project directive of ‘understanding, tolerance and friendship between children of different cultures’, especially those who are at war with each other, is a tall order for any political leader, never mind a therapist. Perhaps in situations like this one, the therapist becomes a ‘political facilitator’ promoting psychosocial interventions. From the start, I held the tension between an idealised pacifism and a Foucauldian awareness of the power of national, religious and ‘self-governance’. My understanding of self-governance encompasses the way in which discipline is internalised or owned by individuals so that children internalise parental discipline and become ‘good’ (Reed & Saukko, 2010, p. 7).

Consequently, my desire was not for this to be the Israeli-Palestinian story, but one among many creative and embodied possibilities that could contribute to all

Figure 3. By Neil Max Emmanuel.
individuals seeing their situation and that of others in ways that they may not have previously countenanced. As I witnessed each group’s embodied collective stories, I became acutely aware of how memory can be a process of not only individual bodily experience but also part of the broad web of connections in which the body is located (Grosz, 2005). These young people had been psychophysically inculcated by the histories and politics of each of their countries.

In an ironic mirroring, the army base, albeit of the Irish Defence Forces, seemed an unlikely setting for an international peace project and, initially, I wondered how the Palestinian and Israeli adolescents felt about the soldiers in uniform and the high security compound. My stomach was beginning to churn as I entered this rather surreal and untenable situation. I started to scrutinise my own political alliances and genealogy – a maternal Irish great-grandfather who was involved in ‘freedom fighting’ at the turn of the 20th century and a paternal Italian grandfather who was killed for his anti-fascist activities during World War II. Embodied issues of hard and soft power seemed to be intertwined in this Israeli-Palestinian story, at the level of international relations and interpersonally. Ikeda (2002) characterises hard power as aggressive action and soft power by employing dialogue. Regarding dialogue, I am reminded of the interminable Northern Ireland peace process, where John Hume (of the Social Democratic and Labour Party) and Gerry Adams (of Sinn Féin) kept meeting, face to face, often without discursive resolution, but in constant (embodied) contact with the intention of working towards a ceasefire. Moreover, when talking to officers and soldiers on this Irish army base, and from seeing the way they interacted with the young people during recreational and meal times, I identified a soft boundary that I would not normally associate with a (male-dominated) military context. This shift in perspective prompted me to consider the use of ‘soft power’ in order to allow for embodying an ethics of difference.

By inviting each ‘national’ group to embody the story of their lived experiences, was I naively mirroring a political confrontation? Or perhaps the creative process offered a holding space for alterity, and surely ethics is about striving to maintain openness to alterity in the expression of bodies, without erasing the boundaries of ambiguity through which bodies make sense (Diprose, 2005, p. 243). However, allowing for this openness and ambiguity creates an ethical fissure; locating the ‘I’ in the ‘We’ and appreciating that each individual embodied performance is experienced differently and further re-contextualised by the wider social system. Moreover, how could both groups see (tolerate) each other’s experiences, I wondered? If no repertoire of embodied experience exists, then how can mutual understanding be possible? It is not enough to assume that ‘empathy’ in the altruistic sense is available through thinking or languaging differently. This experience needs to be embodied in order to allow for emotional, neurological and cognitive integration (Gallese, 2003). Potentially, a next step in therapeutic psychosocial intervention might be to encourage each group to be morally responsible for their autobiographical story, a story that necessarily implicates the other (Wyatt, 2006).

The renowned Jewish composer Daniel Barenboim has brought together both Israeli and Palestinian young musicians into one (harmonious) orchestra. As long as unity is not misnamed as a need for homogeneity (Lorde, 1992), the reality and metaphor of an orchestra, with its different instruments playing one symphony, is apt. In his Reith Lectures, Barenboim (2006, p. 8) suggests that in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ‘sensitive talking and painful listening’ is necessary.
Perhaps the listening is painful because it raises issues of listening to difference and therefore recognition, rather than polarisation of the other.

I am reminded of Diprose’s (2005) recommendation to restore moral status to the body, and so, as I listened and witnessed each group’s embodied performance and replayed it over in my mind in the following days and weeks, I saw fractured stories and bodies. I was acutely aware of how language became the means of conveying ethnic identities. However, there was conflict and confusion in the language; it existed ‘outside’ the spaces and around their bodies. There needed to be a re-embodying and not a polarising of difference at a personal level and then a move to being able to extend this understanding to the other. Does this offer an antidote to the dehumanising effects of conflict? In my exchange with others, all I can offer is recognition of my body’s complex experience of dwelling-in-the-world and turn to Adrienne Rich’s words with cautious optimism: ‘The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy’ (Rich, 1992, p. 336).

**Contingent bodies**

A critical stance is necessary in relation to ethics since claims of objectivity and body neutrality are increasingly difficult to defend. Notwithstanding discussions regarding inclusion of the moving body in psychotherapy, as counselling and psychotherapeutic practitioners and researchers, surely paying attention to socio-political layers in our embodied exchanges warrants closer scrutiny?

Throughout this paper, it has been my intention to explicitly engage with different aspects of body politics in order to highlight how ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Wyatt, 2006) emerge specifically from embodied practice. By no means an exhaustive analysis, I have incorporated feminist understandings of embodied intersubjectivity and the complex nature and interaction of social processes, as exemplified by moving bodies. In so doing, I have demonstrated (albeit microcosmically) that embodying ethics is a process that involves working with contingent principles based on lived moment-to-moment and ongoing psychosocial experiences. With this suggestion, I am not endorsing or taking on a position of epistemic uncertainty, but offering an opening up to other possibilities (Shildrick, 2005, p. 13), possibilities that allow for practitioners to be ‘open to the openness by which bodies make sense’ (Diprose, 2005, p. 238). By suggesting an openness to embodied psychotherapeutic practice and research, my call is for practitioners to consider politically progressive possibilities that involve continually challenging personal and public taken-for-granted-assumptions and incorporating an understanding of our/their ‘social flesh’ (Bacchi & Beasley, 2005, p. 190). To this end, the intertwining of ethics and body politics offers a processual view and moves psychotherapeutic practice and research in line with the emerging paradigm shift of a post-Cartesian and interdisciplinary age.

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Notes
1. I draw specifically from Judith Butler’s (feminist) concept of ‘otherwise’ in her reworking of Emmanuel Levinas’s contribution on ethics and responsibility to the Other, in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence (1974/1999).
2. bell hooks uses unconventional lowercase for her name.

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