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## Writing touch, writing (epistemic) vulnerability

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## Abstract

Touch mediates relations between self-other, writers, and readers; it is material and affective. This paper is the outcome of writing touch as a collaborative activity between eight women writers across different times and locals. In sharing experiences of touch during and beyond the pandemic, we engage with collaborative writing articulated here as *colligere*, involving the assembling of writing in a holding space. The meanings and feelings of touch arise from our distinct writer positionalities as we think, work, and write in and about life, research, organizations, and organizing. We suggest that writing that reflects on/through touch presents epistemic vulnerability and openness to unknowing in the nexus of intercorporeal relationships. Writing touch contributes to writing and doing academia *differently*, particularly by offering sensorial encounters that reframe the ethico-political conditions of academic knowledge creation.

## KEYWORDS

collaborative writing, ethico-politics, knowledge, relational reflexivity, touch, vulnerability, writing differently

*Taste of otherness; smells of sweat; undefined sourness. I look at your faces. I hear your voices. You are all different. My internet is unstable. I "lose" you. You appear again. Pixelated, puzzled, (un)plugged. You use your hands; weaving your fingers in your hair; caressing your chin ...I am jealous. How does it feel? It revives my memories. I am prompted to do the same. You act. I react. Touching is acting, and acting is always relational: "we never act alone" (Manning, 2016). I bring my*

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*fingers together; to mimic your gestures; to sense you closer. I am tempted to put them in my mouth. It helps me to reflect, but am reminded that my own body might betray me.*

*Time goes fast. I try to catch a moment, to lean my insecurities against the certainty of a fleeting instant. But it is faster than me, passing by uncaptured, leaving me overexposed. I stay there witnessing its journey, y-our journeys of gesticulating; our faces next to each other separated by squared frames. I move right or left to touch you, but I disappear rather than bring our heads in connection. We-move-with-the-bandwidth-alone-and-together. I touch the screen; your wrinkles escape my fingers. I write these lines, taking comfort in Savarese's words (2012, p. 188): "touch-based typing coordinates ...sensuous, relational thought", creating language as always relational. Yes, "touching and (automatically)... being touched, forming, connecting, relating." Valtonen and Pullen (2021, p. 10), drawing on Bellacasa (2017, p. 20), write "touch's unique quality to reversibility ..., (which) puts the question of reciprocity at the heart of thinking and living with care". These words comfort me.*

Academic research and writing often neglect touch and sensory knowledge in their literal and symbolic functions (Hancock et al., 2015; Mandalaki, 2021; Pérezts, 2022), considering them impure (Cixous, 1993). "Rather than grasping the issue, academics shed light on it", preventing sensorial participation in research practices (Classen, 2020, p. 5). This results in academic texts, that more often than not, fail to touch their readers. In this paper, we follow our troubled times and chronicle our experience, as women<sup>1</sup> academic writers shaken by this world's devastating COVID-19 pandemic. Doing so, we grasp how our

bodies, for good or ill, are touching each other upon this page

(Nancy, 2008, p. 51).

Reflecting on the (im)possibilities of making the body straightforwardly readable and knowable in writing, we present a collaborative endeavor, offered here as *colligere*. We experiment with such writing to explore the meaning and feeling of touch as/for un/knowning, as we think, work and write life and organizations. Our text/s can be seen as a provocation, showing how the intimate sharing of embodied knowledge through expressions of vulnerability may help us navigate a conflict-ridden world and enrich our ways of writing and un/knowning in academia. The individual texts can be read in isolation, in any order or collectively as *colligere*. *Colligere* creates a holding space for individual texts and the bodies that created them, offering a form of writing collaboratively that breathes openness rather than closure. Whilst what is known can be read, we think through the limitations of knowing when writing touch, in all its vulnerability.

## 1 | TOUCH (AND) WRITING

As a group of eight authors, at different stages of life and career, we met in person and online over the past 3 years. We discussed *writing differently* and our embodied intersectional experiences of touch in multiple social, economic, and political domains. Identifying as feminist scholars, holding different world-views and intersectional positionalities (e.g., citizenship, age, race, marital and parental status, and tenure) (Einola et al., 2021), we relate in diverse ways to writing and touch. Besides the COVID-19 pandemic, which heavily influenced how this project started, our interest in writing (about) touch emerged from a shared desire to recognize and challenge the toxicity of our everyday working environments (Plotnikof & Utoft, 2022).

Management and organization theory has historically been based on generalizations drawing from white male/masculine experience (we do not refer to biology but to whiteness as an institution, see Dar et al., 2021; Ahmed, 2017; Bell et al., 2020). Academic workspaces and ways of working have become increasingly *managerialized*, reinforcing the image of the ideal, abstract, and universal (academic) worker (Acker, 1990; Boncori et al., 2020). Dominant epistemic traditions favor positivistic, statistical, and meta-analytical techniques over qualitative research approaches. Doing so, they aspire to "legitimacy at the top of the evidence hierarchy, leading to academic texts that 'reduce,

simplify, gloss, flatten, or side-line problems and situations that are inextricably contextual, messy, unique, contestable, oppressive, absurd, humorous, or socially complex in dozens of ways” (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015, p. 528).

With such masculine knowledge dominance (Phillips et al., 2014), excellence, competition, heightened productivity (Ashcraft, 2017), disembodied research and writing practices (Bell & Sinclair, 2014; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015b; Vachhani, 2015), precarity (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Seymour, 2022; Steinhórsdóttir et al., 2019) as well as superimposed evaluation metrics (Sousa et al., 2010) have all become norms for those seeking employment or struggling to remain employed. In this context, explorative, caring, and embodied—which some would identify as feminist—ways of working and knowing are not valued or legitimized. These remain absent from the (normative) criteria against which feminist researchers are evaluated (Bell et al., 2020; Boncori, 2022; Gherardi & Turner, 1987; Lund & Tienari, 2019). Such disciplinary norms alienate academic writers, from their academic scripts, leading to disembodied “final products” that deprive readers’ relational reading experiences (Brewis & Williams, 2019). Academic papers therefore often fail to evoke sensuous re-actions on the part of the audience, while academic reviews touch/cut like surgeons’ scalpels (Pullen, 2018), leaving scars on the naked, vulnerable skin (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022). It is not surprising, then, that as academic researchers and writers we grow accustomed to senseless practices of knowledge creation. These render our bodies invisible, insensible, insentient, and de-touched from each other, as well as from our academic texts and our readers.

Such academic practices tend to ignore vulnerability and correspondingly relationality or perpetuate it only as “injurability” (Cano Abadía, 2021). Against this backdrop, feminist researchers and teachers remind us that the (constructed) dichotomy between knowledge work and body work is political and that scientific practice is inherently bound up with sensorial, affective, material, social, and institutional forces (Fotaki et al., 2017; Mandalaki, 2021; Pérezts, 2022; Pullen, 2018). Feminist and critical scholars highlight how writing that touches and makes us feel (e.g., Brewis & Williams, 2019; Mandalaki, 2021; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008) might mediate the intimacy of experience. These works acknowledge that affects, senses, and emotions are deeply entwined through our engagement to social objects, such as words (Ahmed, 2014).

Nancy (2008, p. 11) points out that the way in which writing might touch bodies does not refer to the possibilities of playing with/in the limits of the skin. Neither does it involve bringing forth some kind of writing pattern for inscribing bodies into letters (Nancy, 2008). Writing touch is more about exposure or exscription; this points to the nakedness of all writing that exposes us to the impossibility of owning knowledge fully (Nancy, 1990, 2008). Goh (2019, p. 1080) depicts exscription as writing (and reading) that involve sensing, giving us a sense of ourselves and of our existence in the world. Goh goes on to point out that this “sense” escapes our meaning making and is to be understood in “all of its senses”. Not as something to be returned to the self but as something coming and going in all directions beyond our determination (ibid). When infused in academic writing, this sense might enable a synesthetic experience (Pérezts, 2022), which “is always already traversing (out into) the world, allowing our existence to *make sense to others*” (Goh, 2019, p. 1080, *our emphasis*). The body then becomes multiplicity (Nancy, 2008), continuously shifting, relational, and open, which manifests through vulnerable sensations.

Engaged writing can thus be understood as a gesture toward touching upon the sense/s. Such understanding does not involve cognition or signification (only). It rather involves exposure to others—more precisely to other bodies, or even just bodies (Nancy, 2008). Writing and reading involve proximity and distance, literally and symbolically. Brewis and Williams (2019) evoke “skin-text”, which touches, “plays with pace, stimulating embodied responses of (dis)comfort, incrementally shifting thought and drawing readers’ attention to their own skin as both a physical and social interface” (p. 88). Embodied texts (i.e., texts written in ways that account for the body and its affective capacities) might thus create attachment, touching us, as inter-subjective and sentient beings, and dis/re-orienting us ethically and politically (Mandalaki, 2021; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). In so doing, such texts move us toward and away from those whom might have caused us pain or pleasure (Ahmed, 2014, p. 28). The sentient body can thus enable us to think about where we begin to experience the world, becoming a surface over which this world (and *word*, we might add) might unfold (Ahmed, 2006, p. 8).

By presenting the knower as a “situated creature of flesh and blood”, embodied texts view bodies both as objects and subjects of thinking (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001) and as sites of/for transformation, ethics, and politics. As Panayiotou (n.d., p. 3) writes: sensory knowledge, as well as the senses, are not apolitical; they raise issues of power,

privilege, identity, and goodness, accounting for the vulnerability of the body. Such fleshy, sentient alternatives (Bispo & Gherardi, 2019, p. 371) and sensorial events unsettle long-sustained dichotomies between mind and body, reframing academic research and writing as intersubjective experiences of being in the world with others (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022). Engaging our senses in knowledge creation might thus reframe our ethico-political engagements with the complexities and tensions of life and organizing. Sensorial engagement might as well lead us to reconsider habitual patterns of researching, writing, and knowing organizations.

## 2 | INTIMATE CONNECTIONS: RELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE CREATION, VULNERABILITY, AND TOUCH

In words and silences, we, the authors of this text, come to appreciate how touch might facilitate sensory knowledge through openness to vulnerability and un/knowning. The sense of touch becomes the medium through which we each come to live, know, un/known, reflect, and write our lives. Facilitating the relationality between the self and the other, writing touch also reveals the impossibility of knowing the self and the other, reflecting ethical moments that become (im)possible through vulnerability and uncertainty. These moments are not only about knowing. They also involve being open to the relationality of getting it right and wrong and still wanting to be vulnerable in pursuing one's ideas, beliefs and feelings (Gilson, 2011, p. 325).

Following Erinn Gilson (2014), vulnerability can be read as one of the basic structures of human experience and a condition for learning. Vulnerability can be seen as unavoidable receptivity and openness to the ability to affect and be affected by others (Gilson, 2014, p. 37). In this text, vulnerability is understood as a particular kind of bodily relation to the world (Ahmed, 2014, p. 69, p. 69)—as an intense affective state that is both involved in and can be transformed by touching (Mellström, 2016). Relational learning and knowledge creation might be interwoven in the vulnerable moments we experience in our day-to-day (work) lives (Rogowska-Strangret, 2018). This recognizes vulnerability as an ontological state carrying salient, ethical meaning, and significance. Such a conception might be relevant not only for how we treat the vulnerable self or other but it might also shape how we come to learn, empathize, and form community with and cultivate our “capacity for imagining, *feeling*, and seeing that does not exclude” (Gilson, 2014, p. 3, emphasis added). To be clear, we do not wish to put forward vulnerability as a value to be professed and affirmed. We ponder vulnerability as a foundational condition to think (and live) with (Gilson, 2014), the values of which are revealed to us through touch when writing. Such a condition, we suggest, becomes the basis for ethico-political transformations.

The individually written pieces forming this text reflect different forms that vulnerability may manifest in the social world, considering writer positionalities (Haraway, 1988). As they emerge to us through writing, for/about/through/with... touch, such knowledge/s remain partial and unfinished, challenging the absolute grounds of epistemological closure. Crafting, *touching*, and reflecting together on this collaborative endeavor is, thus, also about finding a way to work together. Collaborating leads us to value the complex set of research relationships (e.g., between authors, readers, research subjects, reviewers, theoretical, methodological, and epistemological inspirations) that shape knowledge creation (Doucet, 2007).

In writing, we engage with plurality and difference through touch (Blake, 2011; Gherardi, 2017; Strati, 2007), seeking to enable relational connections beyond the similarities we share (e.g., Gilson, 2014; Held, 2005). In doing so, we write to resist normative conceptions of what counts as knowledge, challenging the ways in which sensory knowledge is often caught up within the systemic forces, and discriminatory epistemological hierarchies shaping the gendered nature of subject fields and academic work (Beavan et al., 2021; Pullen, 2018; Vachhani, 2019). In challenging extant tensions between normalized academic writing and touch as a way of un/knowning, we are confronted with an ethical dilemma. The backdrop against which we are evaluated and expected to write produces closure of knowledge as well as alienation and exclusion. It does so by putting forth negative connotations of vulnerability, erasing differences, connectedness, and the materiality of bodies. This dilemma is navigated here from a viewpoint that recognizes: (1) touch as a particular way of un/knowning through which we might explore vulnerable forms of connectedness and multiplicity, (2) the inseparability of ethics from politics—in this text, discussed as ethico-politics

(Poldner et al., 2019; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015a, 2021), and (3) the role of touch as a vulnerable experience that surfaces and extends our ethico-political imaginaries for change (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

Starting from our collaborative process to explore the ethico-political potential of writing touch for un/knowning underpins Meriläinen et al.'s (2022) recent conceptualization of "vulnerable relational knowing" emerging from naked relational bodies (symbolically and literally, Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022). Resonance is also found with Rogowska-Strangret's argument (2017, p. 18), which reminds us of the "vulnerability of the self" in the context of shared vulnerabilities. Embracing deep connections and relationality between us, we articulate the situated vulnerabilities that touch has made visible to us. We invite vulnerability as a precondition for learning, seeking to fight the forms of (epistemic) oppression underpinned by wilful ignorance and closure of knowledge (Gilson, 2014). Writing touch through vulnerability contributes to the integration of the vulnerable body within relational epistemology (cf. Gherardi, 2017).

This text thus highlights the potential of situational sensory experience for knowledge formation. It joins collective efforts fostering collegial relationships, collective purposes (e.g., Ahonen et al., 2020; Abdellatif et al., 2021ab; Einola et al., 2021; van Amsterdam et al., 2023), and collaborative writings (e.g., Salmela et al., 2020; Valtonen & Pullen, 2021), broadening the scope of writing and un/knowning differently in and for academia (e.g., Gilmore et al., 2019; Helin, 2019; Mandalaki, 2021; Mandalaki et al., 2022; Pullen et al., 2020).

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## 2.1 | Craving for, and dreading, touch

So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others – other beings, other spaces, other times – are aroused

(Barad, 2012, p. 206, cited in Valtonen & Pullen, 2021).

*The sinking feeling, and the longing for touch, haunted me—and it happened again on 4th of January 2021, when PM Boris Johnson announced a new lockdown for England (BBC, 2021), which required the public to stay at home as the pressure of public health in England became severely daunting. All hope was pinned on a speedy vaccine rollout. There is craving for human touch, to be held and yet be afraid of physical affection and intimacy, compounded with loss of sensations running through my body, which sometimes became exaggerated, within a state of seemingly "inertia" after 7 months of living under restrictions and alone in England. I am unable to recall (or simply say, I can't remember) when I first realized these feelings. Maybe because the amount of touch I had was suddenly gone. These feelings make me realize that I have never really felt like I wanted to be touched safely, freely and abundantly. Writing this text is enabling my embodied, intimate moments, exploring how the confinement, the ups and downs, prompted me to write about these cracking moments as a single woman who lives alone.*

*Following the new lockdown measures, my surroundings have returned to deserted streets, closed shops, and schools and working from home. In many ways, these new measures are like the first-round of national lockdown last March (2020), in that the isolation has changed the way I work and interact with other human beings. We, along with the other academics and professionals, almost exclusively relied on the same screens that host our daily work meetings and research activities (Gao & Sai, 2020). But this time, I lost the motivation to maintain a "normal" working life routine. I found myself unable to switch off from emails as I craved for more messages, contacts from colleagues and more activities that those messages might bring. The human transactions of those emails are also conducted online via the computer screen. I don't feel a sense of satisfaction when jobs have been achieved well. I desperately try to catch my colleagues' gazes via Zoom. Eye contact is such an impossible treat in this Zoom work life. The less I feel the touch of my colleagues, the more I crave messages or emails from them. This is such a vicious circle. I know more emails cannot replace the physical touch, but emails are the only thing that seem to be available. I sent out an email at 8 p.m. One colleague replied at 8.05 p.m. Another wrote back at 9 p.m. By the time I was ready for bed, I had already had five replies. My colleagues are all on the screen and I craved more interactions whilst also knowing that the isolation was only getting worse with more screen time.*

*I craved a comforting touch from those I loved, yet I was afraid of being approached even inside of rigid support bubbles. Part of me would find comfort from forever retreating from human touch. I can't stop wondering if these cravings for imagined physical contact are the cause of long isolation as a single woman living alone. It seems to me that being able to hug or cuddle someone loved, close and trusted, searching for emotional security becomes a "privilege" at a time like this. I am alone, coping with isolation and exaggerated loneliness after a 7-month working regime, living alone under restricted social orders. This pandemic time gives rise to a desire for emotional closeness, an exposure of numbness and feelings of being untouched because of the lack of intimacy and the experience of being suspicious when it comes to physical interactions.*

*Social distancing is challenging and even suffocating this time—with tougher measures being placed in this cold, dark winter in England. Yet, unlike the first lockdown period when I spent a great amount of time online, a way of alleviating loneliness was through social interactions and finding comfort in the silence of solitude, even virtually. Nowadays, the online fatigue becomes daunting; this mode of interaction disrupts the balance between busy daily rhythms, as if in a normal physical work-life environment, further blurring work-life boundaries. But how could I fill the emptiness in those blanking moments and these cravings for physical contact without pushing myself out of the familiar solitude of being just by myself? The only thing I am good at now is sensing and feeling once again such silence permeating the air. I desperately need an "exit" to free my human body and the blocked mind ... Here I am trapped in work, longing for and dreading human touch at the same time—the more touchless work I do, the deeper I am in this cocooning all by myself...*

*Untouched, alone. The isolation of this pandemic makes me realize the touch-phobic culture of academia more broadly. In the social sciences, we give precedence to visual observation (Rasmussen, 1964), thinking that through the 'eye', and the 'I', we can 'understand' and control the world (Pallasmaa, 2005), educating ourselves to de-activate our senses and with, the potential of/for affective relationality (Pérezts, 2022; Meriläinen et al., 2022.), to remain 'neutral' in the field. But our (writing) fingers remain "famished for touch" (Mandalaki, 2021, p. 8).*

## 2.2 | Touchless interviewing, digital connectivity and loss

*No coffee cup, no paper, no pen, no exchange of business cards, no handshakes and not a chance of staring into interviewees' eyes! How can I have a satisfying interview in this touchless world? Just a Big Computer Screen between me and my interviewee. I don't understand how my colleagues can use only a small laptop for their Zoom fieldwork. I invested in a big monitor as I need to "see" my interviewees. It is obviously nothing like actual human size and does not compensate for human presence, but I feel a sense of relief knowing that there is a decent physical space on the screen so I can see facial expressions. I can even detect wrinkles around my interviewee's eyes when she laughs, or on the interviewees's forehead when he engages in deep thinking or disagrees with my questions. If I put the Zoom screen in the top corner, I can perhaps fit my notes and interview questions around the interview scene. I cannot possibly be going through different windows during the interview. All elements must be spread out on the same screen, just for my nerves. Today is the first online interview with a corporate finance guy in a leading bank. Luckily another colleague from the same project team could join me. The Internet worked in our favor this time too—all three of us found ourselves promptly in the same Zoom Room. The interview started with a slight awkwardness. None of us was able to strike any smooth small talk. We don't know each other personally, and there is probably no need to pretend that we are interested in each other as human beings. The common goal, the interview, was what connected us all. We needed to get this interview done with.*

*So, we take one question after another, strictly following the interview guide that fills in for the lack of naturally occurring interaction and spontaneous sharing. I am merely a data collector with no means to see, feel or sense, let alone touch, anything. Other than the screen to adjust its settings. Whenever I drift away from the interview for a few seconds, I feel I am not part of this. Instead, I am watching this boring conversation as an outsider—in the same way as I would stare at a TV screen. The context is dead. I don't even assume that it would be possible to conduct an in-depth interview in this virtual world.*

After the last question in the interview guide is “done”, I just have to make an attempt to get closer, to access the person in front of me that, until now, has felt like being part of a machine (The Big Computer Screen). So, I improvise: “Is there anything that you think we should have asked? Any further thoughts? Just anything?” My interviewee pauses. Then comes a firm answer: “No. That’s it!” This is immediately followed by an awkward smile as he realizes how abrupt his reply has been.

That concludes the interview—perfectly on time. I was hoping that my colleague would stay on the call, so that we could at least reflect a bit on the interview. But that did not happen. Her next Zoom call is waiting.

What had I just done? I asked 20 questions and collected probably around 15 pages of interview transcripts. But I did not feel any presence of a living person behind these answers. I used to love interviewing people—the excitement of meeting someone new, the anticipation of whether I could guess what comes out of the interview, the connection in the conversation flow, and most importantly, the impressions and multiple opportunities triggered by the interviewing setting. The clothes, the building, the coffee and the biscuits, the lunchroom, the shoe-shining machine... and the real voices coming out of real three-dimensional physical bodies.

With the rollout of vaccines, I am dreaming of real interviews this summer. I want to reconnect with the journalist in me who cares for the story instead of the data.

...

...

It is no accident that we fall for the delusion that technology such as digitalization should, and can, substitute the mediator for physical touch and touching, just as we have always been indoctrinated into believing that seeing is the basic sensation for knowing. Yet, the pandemic has taught us something else by pushing most human activities to online delivery. When the lack of interpersonal touch, feelings of connectivity and physical encounter erode inspiration, courage, intellect and motivation, one begins to see what Aristotle once said: flesh and skin is a complex mediating organ associated with complex sensations (Massie, 2013; Rosen, 1961). If touch is at play across all our psychic abilities, it must be linked to thoughts, intellect, emotions, cognition, and most of all, with love and caring thoughts. Touch(-ing) stimulates, inspires, pleases, encourages, conveys affections and connects people, the most unique thinking and sentient beings on the planet.

During the pandemic, touch has been compromised and prohibited as a gesture of care. I never imagined a world without touch or being touched, and yet, never missed it until now, when I stopped hugging my grown son who is 22 and lives a few blocks away from us. I feel a lack of words expressing my love for him without being able to embrace him. I never valued a small chit-chat in the corridor with a colleague or grabbing a coffee in the canteen until now, when the new norm becomes sharing a conversation over the computer screen. Now I miss connecting with others by sensing their breaths, their gazes, their energy in the smile, laughter and even in their sighing. And I fear I lose touch with people that I care dearly about when I stop traveling a long way to unite with them. And when we let touching screens substitute physical contact with others, with material objects such as books and newspapers, once so crucial for intellectual stimulation and *habis*. And when we touch each other through the screen, it is often to belittle, to ridicule, to objectify.

...

## 2.3 | In-between bodies and wor(l)ds

Words that touch, linger on my skin. The pain of being touched

by misogyny

sexism



anger  
frustration  
a concern of their place in the changing world?

*I am ripped open, bare*

of knowledge  
expertize  
experience

*In a space so intimate, within the walls so familiar to me. I try to find the ceiling with my eyes to hold back the tears. In a public, virtual, space. I try to find the ground under my feet and resist the urge to type an answer.*

Drip,  
drip,  
drip

*... becomes a single unvaried pitch, like Yugo Nakamura's Amaoto no Yurai (2014), a rainfall that sweeps over <http://tha.jp/4561/>*

The tears wet my skin  
I am reminded of my littleness  
You silly girl, just like the ones forming our government!  
Dismissed

*I see my words misused, signs slipped into one and remain a faceless spectator of online discussions echoing yearning, thirsty, hands entering the unknown terrain and pleasures of an/ot/her body. Longing for self-fulfillment—to redefine oneself, to touch with hands ready to take—their objectified bodies/words/worlds go on exclusively and utterly unaware of the radical potential of finding a loving, caring, inter-corporeal touch, connection with an/ot/her. Skin to skin, as surface boundaries pressed against one another, passages of affect, clogged.*

*The air reeks of authority, desired closure. It is thickened by it. It's hard to breathe.*

*Get off me!*

*Disrespect. When did that become an accepted option to generosity?  
When we forget that words—touch—bodies*

*You read me; I write you  
We are connected  
Open your sense(s)!*

*Do not make a scene out of this, I am advised by a bystander.*

Drip,  
drip,  
drip



*I think of my children. The words that linger on my skin, soon attach to theirs. I cannot choose silence, compliance. Yet, time after time, it is only me who is touched.*

*My surroundings are Teflon!  
and the battle is exhausting  
Nothing sticks...*

*But maybe I am wrong?*

*Words reach out, come in, engage, disconnect, resist, and give in.  
Words can nurture, caress, and elevate, scar, break and/or diminish.*

### 3 | WRITING TOUCH: A COLLABORATIVE METHOD

Writing touch seems that it would always be unfinished, unknown, and unattainable.

By virtue of creating a collective consciousness of contagion, the pandemic cultivated a touch-phobic sentiment, which guided our interest in exploring touch. As a group, we met to discuss research and decided to write and share, with each other, short individual pieces reflecting on our experiences of touch. Our wish was to stay-in-touch with ourselves and each other. Reading our individual texts during several online meetings, we saw how we each approached and related to touch. The process was one of learning, feeling touched, estranged, and at times, made uncomfortable by each other's experiences and memories. The texts reflect how touch circulates through affects, serving as an everyday medium for meaningful intercorporeal acts between human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman interactions (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019, p. 30).

To develop the full paper, we worked collaboratively (Ahonen et al., 2020; Salmela et al., 2020; Valtonen & Pullen, 2021) via emails, Zoom meetings as well as one-on-one and small group conversations. Recognizing the multiplicity of our differences, experiences, and realities, we respected the collective decisions made, striving to nurture a space of solidarity, empathy, care, and compassion. Such practices fostered respect and confidence to speak our mind, slowly empowering many of us to let go of our writing inhibitions.

#### 3.1 | Re-touching

*I enter the shared document to add some methodological reflections on our touch paper in preparation for the revision. I meet you on the page. You have already started experimenting with edits following what we discussed in our last meeting. I start reading your proposed edits. I feel touched. What I wanted to write is placed somewhere in the margins of my head (and of this page, I suppose), confused, convoluted and overshadowed by the need to respond to your writing. I start touching your edits, feeling unsure, vulnerable, weak, ashamed, almost guilty. Do you feel anything on your skin? I send you a WhatsApp message to say hello and "apologize" for these edits, trying to "ensure" (if ever) that my effort to relate/try-to-know/experiment is not de-touching you from your own effort and from this/y-our writing. I wanted to say thank you and sorry. In my head resound the closing words of one of us during our last Zoom meeting: "Honestly, I do not know." Despite our differences, it felt like in these words, we had found something of one another.*

*I see you moving through the newly created lines. I feel my heartbeat rising while a smile appears on my face. I sense exposure but feel safe. Your pace is faster, fingers lighter? I seem to dwell on the words as if trying to find the perfect one, feeling the pressure under my fingers against the keyboard—only realizing now that whichever word I choose, it reaches*

out. I see it has reached you, the cursor is moving. Crafting on impulse, created by touch, you are answering (not to me or to any question, but to the text). I feel reassured, although this does not mean the text stays intact. Rather, it grows, sends out roots and shoots, shouts between us while we (friendly) intrude on each other's wor(l)ds... Opening WhatsApp, I touch my phone's smooth screen and immediately think of the roughness, the fragmentation of our text. We've been told it may leave the reader out... Just bleeds on paper? A lot of what we have written has been based on self-reflexive private experiences. But it feels like something else has taken place in the meetings, especially in the last one. Perhaps it was an episode of another kind (of reflexivity)? Should we name it to explore it? My connection breaks, echoing...relational reflexivity... we cannot know...refreshing! ... pre-reflexive moments...overcome boundaries...is this the only way to contribute to the theory...to the community! Maybe it wasn't an episode but an ethical aspiration?

Maybe.

The paper was reviewed, and the group met via Zoom to discuss the engaged review comments. There was much discussion about whether and how to address the review comments directly, especially those offering specific readings to engage with. A smaller group started the revision, and the paper was passed around for individuals to work on before resubmission. Even though the reviews were care-full, constructive, and embodied, the revision process involved struggle, as some comments raised the need for more logical and clearer argumentation and a more structured account for the reader. In a spirit of openness, the plurality of approaches may be perceived as lack of coherence, as indeed one of the reviewers stated. We reflected on how we might address inconsistencies by removing or restructuring texts or altering some of the arguments to produce a coherent argument. Our openness allowed vulnerability to emerge. These struggles enhanced our thinking around the potential of touch to nurture relational processes of writing, learning, and un/knowning. Engaging in such a process has thus taught us about knowledge creation itself.

As writers with differing material, social, and epistemological relationships to touch, writing touch often came to us pre-reflexively and reflexively. Some of us wrote about our objective relation to touch. Others focused on the materiality of touch, while some pondered touch discursively, affectively, sensorially, passively, or actively. Writing and knowing touch seemed partial and unfinished because of the ways in which vulnerability surfaced. Yet as we wrote, our individual texts amplified the presence and affectivity of touch, its absence and hollowness, the loss of and desire for intimacy, of relations between care or memory and touch, of our changed relationships to ourselves, of (un)learning touch and not touching, and of (its) openness and reciprocity. Through collaborative writing, our relation to touch became intercorporeal in/through the affective multiplicity of our bodies. Such writing elicited reflexivity, challenging the epistemic and ethical closure of the self and the other in knowledge creation. In our experience, it opened avenues for reframing it in unforeseen ways (Gilson, 2011).

We felt *itched* (Thanem & Knights, 2019) to come up with a term that captured our onto-epistemological underpinnings of writing touch. *Colligere* has been brought to this text to capture our collaboration whilst also acknowledging the limits of clearly and fully capturing embodied experience. We employ the Latin infinitive to capture the unknowable and unrecognizable aspects of this touch-writing process. Hopefully, this expresses our desire to work together and the multiplicity and fluidity of writing, presented here in clumsy, nonlinear ways, both textually and conceptually (cf. van Amsterdam et al., 2023). *Colligere* thus denotes an unfinished feeling/thinking/writing processual endeavor of assembling, gathering, and collecting. It captures holding together and apart through tension, resonance, dissonance, agreement, and disagreement, a relational effort to hold space with openness, vulnerability, and struggle.

Such writing offers, we suggest, "new possibilities for understanding" each other and knowledge creation by embracing paradigmatic plurality (Herrmann, 2020, p. 298). It involves experimenting with a form of writing differently, grounded in reflexivity between the authors (Lafaire et al., 2022). As Doucet writes, reflexivity might be understood as gossamer walls "shift(ing) constantly depending on who is on the other side, represent(ing) varied degrees of transparency and obscurity, connection and separation, proximity and distance, and moments

of closure and openness in the relations that constitute research and knowing" (Doucet, 2007, p.84). Writing as *colligere* allowed us to open up to and be touched by each other, as authors of this text, and to extend this invitation to the readers to offer their own interpretations and reflections (Meldgaard-Kjær & van Amsterdam, 2020). We seek to grasp the difference of writing touch differently through such vulnerable, relationally reflexive processes and, in this way, look behind these walls. We also seek to access possible meanings of touch through its absence.

### 3.2 | The hollowness of touch

The invisible is *there* without being an *object*, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask. And the "visibles" themselves, in the last analysis, they too are only centered on a nucleus of absence.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 229)

*Yesterday, I explained to the students how Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" includes not only the material entanglement of all living and non-living materialities, but also the invisible part of the world. My own words hit me.*

*What is that?*

*What is that?*

*Even if we cannot see that hollowness, can we sense it in our bodies?*

*I can.*

*The hollowness of my lap. Memories of having you there, sitting, leaning against me. I sense the hollowness, a pressure of not-anymore there. Your little, dear body. Gone. Out of my touch, out of my reach, but still the sensation, the hollowness of you not being there anymore. Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 79) talks about the phantom limbs that one can still sense when they have already been lost. Cut away. The "physiological" limb is gone, but it still continues to exist in the person's experience, brought into the present by the memories, emotions and desires.*

*This feels like it.*

*You were not my limb, but you were of me. It feels like you have been cut away from my body. Leaving me with this hollowness, an ache that I feel especially on the left side of my body. There where you sat before you had to go. Empty lap. Hollowness of this sensation.*

*My sister got a second son after you were gone. Her son became something that helped me cope with this hollowness. I got to hold him and to love him. And that was at the same time painful and relieving. He reminds me of you, but he is not you. He could never be you. But still, what a relief it was to my aching body that shouted the lack of you! Somehow, it felt like I was held when I held him. My body relaxed.*

*Fortunately, I got to see my nephew regularly as we live in the same town. But then the pandemic came and it happened again...*

*it happened again...*

*I could not meet my nephew anymore, let alone touch him. To hold him. To play with him. That love did not have any place to go. That love, which was aimed at a little baby boy.*

*It was like losing you happened all over again when I could not meet my nephew. I kind of lost him too.*

*The hollowness swallowed me.*

*But if the hollowness is a part of the “flesh” of the world, are you then also? I cannot see or touch you, but my body still senses you from time to time. You do not exist anymore as a body, as a being in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2012), but you still exist as a phantom ache in my body. As my body’s memory, as a hollow sensation.*

*Did Merleau-Ponty mean that hollowness, as non-sensible, invisible, untouchable, is an opposite of a thing and therefore cannot itself be sensed? Is it the unknown, escaping our words, our touch, our senses? And we, as living bodies, have to deal with that hollowness? Sensing the hollow that our bodies can somehow imagine but still not touch?*

*Writing and thinking the hollowness of touch brings you closer to me. You are a part of my body’s perspective on the “flesh” of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), as the hollow side of it, as the phantom ache in my body.*

*And I get to hold my nephew again (for now). What a joy it is! I got him back even though I never will get you back...*

### 3.3 | De-touching

*I think of touch and sit to write something about it. No idea what to say!*

*Am I supposed to write about how touch feels or about how I think touch feels?*

*(how) can we expel what is sensed on the skin with our brains?*

*(how) can we write the skin without exposing its wounds?*

*Do brains feel?*

*Do bodies think?*

*Not sure if these things are separate, but we like to think in these terms in academia*

*—Don't we?*

*Touch is not “any theme”; it is sensed on the skin enabling active embodiment that opens the self to the world to let the world enter into one's experiences (Lennie, 2000). Our feet touch the ground to claim our embodied presence in the world, leaving traces and negotiating gravitational “acrobatics” with the earth; tensions with-in/outside. The ground touches them back, making our bodies part of this world's magic and reconstructing them through it.*

*Now. Fear. Isolation. Distancing.*

*- “Don't touch”, I hear people saying (i.e., “it's deadly”).*

*- Do we live more fully when we divorce ourselves from our senses?*

*Skins un-touched. Bodies detached. Sanitized-Dirty-Sanitized-Dirty... Again ...*

*I catch myself wetting my lips more than usual lately; my tongue is undisciplined, transferring an undefined flesh-sensed experience inside. I swallow deeply to not let it go, to make it part of my innards. My fingers, undisciplined too, abusing my bleeding lip cracks, sculpted on the skin by now. The doctor says that self-touch overexposes me to germs. Maybe, there was a nuance of virus, which risks traveling down to the lungs. But I can't help it. I miss my body. Indelible, touching memories appear to me, when I touched to express gratitude, care, generosity, love, responsibility for/with/through the other. I touched to enact my response-ability (Barad, 2014), feeling “unbreakable”, in strength and in weakness. Maybe this is what sensing has taught me: that “everything” was possible. Pallasmaa mentions that all our senses involve forms of touching, functioning like extensions of the body's touching capacities.*

*But this is all reversed currently.*

*And this lock-down doesn't help;*

*it distances me from the senses I thought I “owned”.*

*I need to learn to disown,*

*to change my relation to my body and to others,*

*unlearn what unconsciously sustained my existence;*

calculate benefits and costs  
and convince me that this is all  
for m-y-our good.

- Is it?

Thinking back, touch seems to be at the root of my life. On the island where I grew up, I spent long hours with my sisters creating sand towers. Then, the waves came to sweep over this "knowledge" and an extension of our bodies' sentient capacities. I remember the comforting experience of my mother caressing my hair, closing my eyes and activating my skin's pores to listen, to taste, to see, to absorb. My father was a "cuddle-seeker" too; he opened his arms and we fell in. Reflecting on this now reminds me of Bellacasa (2017, pp. 95–102): "I can close my eyes, but I cannot close my touch. I can see without being seen, but I cannot touch without being touched. I can see from a distance, but touch assumes closeness, intimacy" (cited in Valtonen & Pullen, 2021). Manning (2016) agrees that touch renders sight unusable.

- I wish these words could touch the pores of ears eager to hear...

## 4 | CODA: TOUCH-FORMATIONS

This text embodies the experiences of women's struggles of everyday life. The words have been written from bodies that yearn to touch and be touched, exploring writing as a medium for this. *How* we write matters as much as *what* we write, since the multivocality of collective texts rests on the coming together of individual experiences (Ahonen et al., 2020; Einola et al., 2021; Abdellatif et al., 2021ab; van Amsterdam et al., 2023). The pandemic unsettled many entrenched ways of being, relating, thinking, and knowing, prompting us to write touch; thus, revealing and sharing our vulnerabilities as a means of collective healing and recovery (Kivinen, 2021; Mandalaki, 2022). By writing *colligere*, we embraced cooperation and connection with each other, as much as uncertainty, fragmentation, and difference. Our approach to writing was one of resistance against the competition-based dominant model that permeates our institutions (Care Collective, 2020). Instead, we immersed ourselves in the (im)material *touching* experiences of others, feeling, living, breathing, listening, and commenting on each other's texts. Writing touch embodied the openness of being affected and altered, leading us to explore un/knowning and un/learning differently. This process entailed heightened vulnerability as it surfaced past experiences and memories across our lives in precarious pandemic contexts, marked by distinct particularities (Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020). It also made us aware of others' vulnerabilities (Gilson, 2014).

The complex physical, textual, embodied, and affective encounters between authors, memories, research subjects, literature, methodologies, epistemologies, and the audiences that shape the research process (Doucet, 2007) all live both within the text and through it. Even though these are often excluded from dominant epistemological analyses (Code, 1993), they shake us in all directions, offering space for rethinking the (im)possibilities of knowing. Sharing vulnerable lived experiences, sensory aspects of knowing, and unpredictable processes of affective becoming might present an ethico-political possibility for reframing our relations with each other and with knowledge creation (Bozalek, 2020). For us, sharing text/s that amplify the centrality of touch as both the subject and object of intercorporeal relations and ethico-political un/knowning practices has led to "an epistemological act of undoing how we know (and) what we know" (Bozalek, 2020, p. 6). In offering up a space in which to create new knowledge (ibid), epistemological alternatives expressly resist marginalization, (re)productions of otherness, and claims about the knowability of the "universal" other (Kaasila-Pakanen, 2021).

Upon reflection, the intimacy involved in the solidary practices of writing touch through vulnerability have ignited touch-formations in our reflexive and ethico-political imaginaries. The process of writing (about/on/through/with) touch revealed multiple layers of reflexivity; these layers underlie (and are underlined by) the onto-epistemological assumptions that inform our writing and relations to ourselves and each other (Doucet, 2007). This brought us to terms with un/knowning as central in defining one's sense of self. It led us to experience ourselves differently in rela-

tion to our knowledge claims and in relation to whom this knowing takes place (Gilson, 2014, p. 96). Moving toward a feminist ethics of vulnerability, we suggest that writing touch presents an embodied possibility for the ethico-politics (Pullen & Rhodes, 2022) of/for change (i.e., Abdellatif, Aldossari, et al., 2021; Beavan et al., 2021). It fosters epistemic vulnerability, or a “resource for ethical response and political resistance to oppression” (Gilson, 2014, p. 2, 93), enabling “intimate sharing of academic knowledge” (Meriläinen et al., 2022, p. 79). This stands in stark contrast to Western patterns of disembodied knowledge production, which detach the researcher's body from their research/writing (Valtonen & Pullen, 2021) and eventually from the reader (e.g., Ellingson, 2017; Pullen, 2018; Thanem & Knights, 2019). An ethico-politics of touch thus offers a way to nurture possibilities for thinking, writing, researching, relating, and knowing in *different* embodied ways (Bell & Sinclair, 2014; Brewis & Williams, 2019; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Mandalaki, 2021; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008; Vachhani, 2015).

In this text, especially, such ethico-political engagement involves and calls for developing writing communities and practices to stay *in touch* with one another. It wishes to inspire collaborations that foster care and mutual trust, challenging the hermetically closed-down spaces of neoliberal academia (Mandalaki, 2023) that instrumentalize relationships against productivity outcomes. These activist, embodied practices matter; they carry the potential for intersectional feminist curiosity, paving the way toward collaborative feminisms. Embracing unknowing, novel ethico-political directions straddle the boundaries between ontology and epistemology (Bozalek, 2020), leading us to experience knowledge creation as a politico-ethico-onto-epistemological endeavor (Bozalek, 2020). Such an epistemological shift recognizes the impossibility of offering finished research outputs and knowledge claims, exposing the limitations of (self)reflexivity. However, this process is not without its ongoing struggle of making our bodies fully accessible to ourselves, each other and to our readers during and through the act of writing. This reveals research as an ongoing process in the *making with the other* (Haraway, 2016). Research that embraces attentiveness, active listening, recognition of shared and different vulnerabilities as well as the cultivation of our ability to respond to each other's needs with care—with *response-ability* (Barad, 2014).

In such open, vulnerable spaces, finding a coherent voice to speak back to our audiences (Krieger, 1985) would fail to capture collaborative writing. Whilst readers may be troubled by the lack of coherence and rationality, we echo Gilson's argument (Gilson, 2011) that it is through discomfort and immersing ourselves in new, different, plural spaces—including textual spaces—that learning takes place. Thinking, writing, and acting toward one another, and the knowledge that we create (Contu, 2020), challenges how ignorance of invulnerability sustains epistemic systems of oppression (Dotson, 2014; Gilson, 2011, 2014). This learning embraces vulnerability not only as an existential condition but also as an epistemic attitude, considering the embodied and affective dimensions of knowing. In so doing, it renders the self open to unknowing and/or never fully knowing as a precondition for learning (Gilson, 2011).

As we near the end of this relational and reflexive process of writing touch, an empathy toward each other emerges (Doucet, 2007). We become aware that *all we might hear or know is something about touch and each other's relationships to touch*, as they emerge from our narrated subjectivities (Doucet, 2007, p. 80). We embrace uncertainty, epistemic plurality and humility, breaking through the commonly thought security and closure in the spectrum of knowing and unknowing.

Our writing seeks to add another affective dimension to writing differently (Ahonen et al., 2020; Brewis & Williams, 2019; Gilmore et al., 2019; Jääskeläinen & Helin, 2021; Mandalaki, 2021; Pullen et al., 2020; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). We propose novel politico-ethico-onto-epistemological avenues for engaging with knowledge creation, namely, by embracing un/knowning as a condition for learning and knowing organizations and organizing *differently* (Mandalaki et al., 2022; Meriläinen et al., 2022). Writing touch also contributes to the feminist archiving of pandemic lives enabled by collective and caring endeavors (e.g., Abdellatif, Gatto, et al., 2021; Einola et al., 2021; Gao & Sai, 2020; Plotnikof et al., 2020). We stand in solidarity with feminist voices against dominant paradigms in knowledge creation to find space in the “unruly edges” of neoliberal (Rogowska-Strangret, 2017) and gendered (Benschop & Brouns, 2003) academia and the inherent masculine norms that it perpetuates (Fotaki, 2013; Lund et al., 2019).

As this text is read, and (if) your touching voice is added, its surface extends and becomes a collective experience of un/learning and un/knowning through touch, in unpredictable, surprising, unfinished ways...

To be continued...

...

(how) can I care for/about/with/through you now?  
 does the body end at the skin?  
 can I touch your echo?  
 (what) do you listen to when I write?  
 The only way to reach you, this interface.  
 Our bodies have become immaterial.

Behind a shadow  
 I feel y-our othering  
 Determination;  
 Fight;  
 Persistence;  
 Hope I am othered through you  
 and writing this heals me.

Sorry to speak with "you", "us" and "we" all the time  
 Not always sure whom I am talking about  
 Not even sure to whom I am talking  
 I didn't mean to bring your body where it might not fit  
 or touch it and risk contaminating it.  
 It might have to do with my need  
 to think more in unity than separation;  
 to hope that I can still dream  
 This is selfish, I know.  
 But I also know that I am breakable.  
 These words come "from the heart  
 where passions rise  
 to the fingertips that  
 hear the body thinking." (Cixous, 1993, p. 1)

In these lines  
 "we" might (still) choose  
 if "we" want to stay "in touch"  
 And become know-able to one another  
 A smile behind the mask  
 before we wake up.

...

...

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The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest and have nothing to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data employed in this article is not publicly available due to its embodied and private nature.

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## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The word “women” is used in this text because we, the writers of this text, all identify as women. In/through writing touch, we make space for expressing all forms of difference, otherness, and nonbinariness.

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