

Anatomy of the Touch

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BODY

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CARR

Feminism is sensational.

—Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 21

Feminism wants to expand the sensorium.

—Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present*, 24

Contact is crisis.

—Anne Carson, *Men in the off Hours*, 130

In this essay I want to examine two sites of contact, two moments of touch, that have recently moved me and which I would describe as instances of feminist practice. Both moments of contact are intimate and private. Both are also public and political. The impact of the touch is felt by me as life-changing, clarifying, indelible. What such touch does for others, I cannot know,¹ which does not mean that the touch is unintentional, or that its politics are neutral. Rather, embodied practices will always be made up of “minor gestures,”² whose power lies in their

1 “There were two of us involved in this ... endeavor. I don’t know how to account for the second person’s experience. I don’t want to speak for anyone but myself.” —Anna Moschovakis, “The Capacity to be Alone.” <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/08/16/the-capacity-to-be-alone/>.

2 “While the grand gestures of a macro-politics most easily

accumulation or in their capacity to initiate, however marginally, a way of being. For me, these moments of contact are one way to answer a fundamental question: In what way might the body present a site for feminist practice, and not just the ground for feminist identity?

TOUCH 1

First: A story

Our Mythology, or, The Body that is
and is not Mine

Two brothers who always, throughout their childhoods, detested one another. Their parents learned that their only task, the only parenting skill they absolutely had to master, was to keep their sons apart. Of course the boys had separate rooms, separate schools, but they also needed separate meal-times, separate vacations, separate outdoor play areas. As the boys grew older, the task of keeping them apart grew more urgent, for now they could do more harm to one another than simply cutting or bruising. Eventually, the doors between rooms were not enough. One boy or another would break a lock or shatter a door with his fists and feet, hard toys or tools, once, with an ax. The parents considered buying a separate house, keeping one boy in one with one parent, the other in the other with the other. But the parents loved each other; they had no wish to live apart. They loved the boys

too, for as long as the boys were separated, as long as they were not aware of one another's presence, they were delightful. They enjoyed swimming, bike riding, coin collecting, and other harmless things, when alone. They read books, wrote stories, even sang songs to themselves, when alone.

The parents decided, finally, to build a wall in the center of the house, a brick wall with only one tiny door. This tiny door was made of steel, secured with heavy padlocks on both sides. These locks had only two keys; one hung from a chain around the mother's neck, the other around the Dad's. The parents passed back and forth through this door all day long, crawling on their hands and knees, and quickly locking the door behind them. No sound passed through the wall, and no light. And for a while, it worked. The brothers seemed to forget about one another. Each half of the house had its own door to the outside, its own family room, its own music. Inside their separate spaces, the brothers focused on their peaceful activities: stamp and coin collecting, reading, taking care of animals (one had a snake, the other, a rabbit). But then one day, as the mother was scurrying through the door with a sandwich for one son, the other son coughed. It was a tiny cough—more a clearing of the throat. It could have been a chair scraping the floor. It could have been a dog down the road. But the other brother knew; he'd recognize that cough anywhere. He stood to his full height (and he was quite big now, almost a man) and approached his mother, still on her knees. "What's

sum up the changes that occurred to alter the field, it is the minoritarian tendencies that initiate the subtle shifts that create the conditions for this, and any change." — Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 1

there?” the brother asked, stepping toward the door. His mother, without thinking, clasped her hand to her chest—the key, under her shirt, between her breasts, its stillness, its perfect flatness. All art is entertaining on some level, entertaining a darkness, or a delight, entertaining a spirit or an arrogance, entertaining a rage.³

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I wrote this tale in 2015. I thought of it as one in a series of hypothetical art installations. A visitor to this installation would enter this “house divided” as a witness to the familial crisis enacted there.

I sent the piece, along with many other hypothetical installations, to dancer/choreographer Gesel Mason,⁴ inviting her to create a “realization” of the work for a website I was building of forty such realizations by as many artists.⁵ She chose two. The first, she made on her own. This one, we would make together.

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The idea was for us to speak the text while performing a “dance,” or an “enactment,” or a piece of theater. I preferred to just keep calling it an installation, which seemed to open the widest range of possibilities.

At first it felt obvious that Gesel and I would “play” the parts of the brothers. And yet, as Gesel pointed out early in our process, it was too obvious. Doing so would, as she suggested, overdetermine audience response by limiting the possible readings of the text to one, for Gesel

is black and I am white; were we to play two brothers in an aggressive relationship, the audience would have nowhere else to go with the piece than to consider it an allegory for racial antagonism. She suggested instead that we open it up; each of us would dance all four parts—mother, father, brother, and brother.

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We could not get outside of our bodies and the meanings they imparted. White woman, black woman: we were marked as such, called these names. What these identities, these social meanings, meant for us in our lives—how being black and a woman or white and a woman had produced scenes of injustice in which we’d played a part, had made us differently alert to difference, had created distinct alliances or animosities within our lives—we spoke about mostly in general terms during the months of our first collaboration. We were getting to know each other, we needed to take our time. Though race would be an over or under-riding subject matter of whatever we were to do together on stage, in a sense we let it be. We needed, I think, to learn who we were together, and the piece would be a forum for that.

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The family scene we were acting out, in which two brothers hated one another so intensely that their parents had to build a wall down the center of the house to keep them from killing one another, was, of course, derived from a range of realities and mythologies (Cane and Able, the Civil War, the current climate, all the walls). But it was also fundamentally a story about

3 Julie Carr, *Real Life: An Installation*, 172.

4 <https://www.geselmason.com>

5 www.reallifeaninstallation.com

male rage, about how violent masculinity dictates a world, requiring strenuous and vigilant response.

What kind of labor would be demanded of the parents of these boys? How does one protect such a fragile structure under constant threat? What kinds of obsessions would such a dangerous situation produce? What possibility for care, even love, might arise from or despite of this situation? What about the private lives of these boys? What capacity for joy or tenderness might a boy, enraptured by violent hatred, still have? What about the parents together? How might they love each other within the fact that they had bred this violence and were managing it? These were the questions we were asking. We asked them with and through our bodies. We spoke in the way that dancers do: by describing the actions we were trying on and out, by describing how these actions felt.

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“I accept that feminism begins with sensation: with a sense of things” (Ahmed, 21).

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The questions this piece pulled up for us were feminist questions. If, as Ahmed writes, “becoming feminist cannot be separated from an experience of violence” (22), then managing male violence is one aspect of feminist practice. Another would be to note the toll that managing such violence takes. A third would be to try to generate alternatives to such violence even while *managing* it, even while acknowledging its toll.

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There is a moment in the piece when Gesel and I as “mother” and “father” (and again, we are each both and neither of these) exchange the keys that are hanging from chains around our necks. This moment of exchange occurs about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through, and it’s the first time Gesel and I face each other, the first time we directly acknowledge one another. I lift the chain from around my neck and place it around hers, tucking the key between her breasts. She removes the other chain from around her neck, places it around mine, and tucks the key between my breasts, her fingers resting for a moment in that space.

Yes, we are the “parents” performing our vigilance and also our tenderness. But we are also ourselves, facing one another, feeling the charge of our real-life relationship: our intellectual and creative exchange, our growing trust, the precarity of such trust, the eros of care, humor, and work in a relationship between women, in a relationship between women across race in America. All of that is there in that moment where we trade keys, symbols of security and also threat, symbols of trust and also fear, charged and amplified by the energy of performance.

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“One of the most revolutionary legacies of feminist art concerns the epistemological contours of touch itself,” writes Peggy Phelan in her 2007 essay, “The Returns of Touch: Feminist Performances 1960–80.” Phelan’s examples of “dramatized intimacy” are extreme: Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964) in which Ono invites the audience to cut away pieces of her clothing;

Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974), where audience members use any one of a series of tools and objects (including a gun) on Abramovic's body; or Orlan's ongoing performance of self-invention through plastic surgery. My example is so small, fragile, and momentary, it hardly seems to merit discussion.

And yet, the touch lingers there on my sternum as something important, a moment that I will carry in the ongoing struggle against patriarchal violence which I consider myself and Gesel mutually, and differently, engaged in. In the midst of the extended meditation on male violence that I've been deep in for years, this touch underscores my own bodily vulnerability, as well as my desire for such contact. In that touch I experience a momentary melting of fear and anger, the states that we, living under the canopy of patriarchal violence, so often carry. I felt, right then, a visceral bond between Gesel and I, an alliance built on the foundation of this very minor gesture, this glancing stroke. The pleasure of the contact was therefore in no way distinct from its politics.

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"The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic" 56).

Not incidentally, I first saw Gesel dance in *Women, Sex & Desire: Sometimes You Feel Like a*

Ho, Sometimes You Don't, her years-long study and multi-media performance that took Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic" as its jumping off point. In the final moments of the piece (which included lap dancing, burlesque, a chocolate tasting table, and various kinds of audience participation) Gesel performs a solo in a short red dress. Would it be melodramatic to say I was remade in watching this solo? It would, and I'll say it anyway. What I mean is, everything changed. Her power altered me.

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"One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel," writes Judith Butler in "Violence, Mourning, and Politics" (*Precarious Lives* 24), where she also imagines grounding a political structure on precisely such vulnerability and on precisely such desire, rather than on their denial.

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Two weeks before the performance, I was waiting for Gesel to arrive for rehearsal, and my phone rang. An unfamiliar number. Because it was a local, and I thought it might be her, calling from her partner's phone, I answered. "I want to fuck you," said the male voice on the other end. I hung up, skin prickling with slight fear. How did he get my number? How "local" is he? Next a text. I read only the words "STICK __ UP YOUR" before turning my phone over. When Gesel arrived, I asked her to take my phone, read the text I hadn't read, and block the caller.

Once she'd done this, we began our work: "Two brothers who always, throughout their childhoods, detested one another," we said.

It was this day that we discovered the moment of tucking the keys between one another's breasts.

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Anne Carson opens her essay "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity" with the following statement: "As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another—whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional or imaginary" (130). She goes on to explore the problem of the female body as a problem of lax boundaries. In Greek society, she tells us, the protection of personal and social boundaries is a paramount concern. Because the female body "swells, shrinks [and] leaks" (133), and because in a patrilocal society, women are the mobile unit, women impose a risk, a threat. Therefore, "to isolate and insulate the female, from society and itself, was demonstrably the strategy informing many of the notions, conventions and rituals that surrounded female life in the ancient world" (131).

As readers of Carson know, she never offers a tale from antiquity that is not meant to resonate with and reflect our own world. In fact, we only need to consider various contemporary efforts to limit and control woman-identified bodies—attacks on reproductive rights, so-called bathroom laws, the efforts to hush the leaky mouths of porn stars—to know that our culture still sees all genders but the cishet-male as

a threat to its stability. Feminism, in one way of looking at it, is a struggle against such imposed boundaries, a struggle to move toward a society whose foundation is not "the wall," but instead, the touch.

TOUCH 2

In the summer of 2017 I return to the house where my mother had lived during the final years of her life before dementia. The house is hers, speaks of her, in every way. Curtains, blankets, bowls and plates, books, lamps, measuring spoons: all of it is hers and seems to carry, still, her smell, if that is possible a decade after her departure.

Once I am home, I dream that she is dying again, and I am caring for her. She's a tiny person, not a child or a baby; she's herself as she might have been at age forty or fifty, but doll-sized and wrapped in blankets. Another woman suggests that maybe now my mother has finished nursing. I hold my doll-sized mother to my breast to see. It's true, she no longer wants to nurse. She has stopped speaking as well, but stares up at me. "You're already growing cold," I say, laying her down. I ask the other woman to gather the family. She goes, but does not return. I sit alone with my mother, my hand on her chest, watching her die.

Later that day, my same hand is in the dirt. Nearby, three girls play: two with long hair in braids and skinny legs descending to purple plastic roller skates; the third all dressed in pink, seated cross-legged on the ground as the other two slowly circle. This pulling and hauling, this weeding and piling, this clearing and watering, an

occasional worm. A mom calls, “Get out of that alley!” and the girls call back, though I can’t quite make out what they say. An evening like any other, but also like itself only—mid-summer, the kids released or drawn back to the houses, depending on age and dinner time.

In three summers of making and sustaining this garden, where we grow food mostly to give away, I’ve had my hands in the dirt hundreds of times, and each time the actions are more or less the same (a repetitive stress injury in my right shoulder can attest to that). But this one evening with the dream of my mother’s death still present in my mind and body, the touch of the wet earth feels specific. I know, even as I’m living it, that this particular instance of contact will remain in that hand.

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I could describe this instance of touch as one of hope, regeneration, repair, and even justice. I work this garden in order to add some resources to the neighborhood, in order to help feed the families who can’t easily afford the store. (It’s not so simple—it never is.⁶)

Is the garden a feminist project? In that its goals are to participate, in whatever minor way, in the redistribution of resources, I would say that it absolutely is. And in that my hope is always to garden in community, to include as many people as possible in the project, I think yes, the feminist project is a communal one.

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6 See my essay “On Property and Monstrosity” where I discuss food-justice gardening in the context of gentrification and homelessness in *Someone Shot My Book* (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

“The minor invents new forms of existence, and with them, in them, we come to be” (Manning, 1).

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In what way might the body present a site for feminist practice, and not just the ground for feminist identity?

When I think this question in relation to the garden, I’m reminded of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, where she describes life in the Greek polis as divided into three categories: labor, work, and action. Labor constitutes all those activities necessary for the preservation and continuation of the bio-life of the species: farming, cooking, cleaning, caring for the sick and young, and of course reproductive labor, all fall into this category. Labor is connected to the earth and is performed by the body. Labor is repetitive, painful, exhausting, and most of all, anonymous. Its temporality is cyclical; its products are not meant to last but to be consumed, and thus, there is no glory in labor. Indeed, according to Arendt, in the ancient world, labor is performed by women and slaves only and belongs in the “private” realm. Here Arendt, quoting Aristotle, emphasizes the close relationship between labor, the body and that which is private or shameful: “Hidden away were the laborers who ‘with their bodies minister to the needs of life,’ and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was ‘laborious,’ devoted to bodily functions” (80).

While labor is performed with the body, “work,” is done with the hands. With our hands we fabricate the objects (a chair is Arendt’s first example) that are meant to be durable and which “have the function of stabilizing human life” (137). But the highest realm of human activity is what Arendt calls “action,” which includes both politics and the arts—those arenas that “together constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs” (95). Though Arendt acknowledges that the realm of “work” demands and creates its own (lesser) socialities—those of the marketplace and the collaborate workshop—she makes clear that those who labor, even in groups, labor fundamentally alone. For this reason, for Arendt, labor is “antipolitical.”⁷

Clearly the relationships and affairs that are privileged here (whether or not this is an accurate description of ancient life) are not those relationships that are born forth from the body, that develop in the private realm, or that manifest in attention to the body and its needs. And clearly, the *political* excludes the privacy of the body in its most intimate moments of touch and care, or its most strenuous moments of toil.

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Feminism has long argued against divisions of private/public and body/mind such as Arendt describes in these passages. Breaking down such hierarchical arrangements is, one could say, feminism’s base project.⁸

⁷ If one is to make sense of this argument in today’s world, one has to consider these divisions on a global scale. The “labor” that I, and I assume you, perform—cleaning, cooking, taking care of children, the aged, or the sick, possibly growing food—is, if we are relatively well-off, somewhat optional or at least intermittent, while for subsistence rice farmers in Cambodia, for example, it is not.

⁸ Arendt acknowledges that these categories are not, in most cases, strictly divisible, but bleed into one another.

“The personal is political!”

“The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge” (Lorde, “Erotic” 56).

“I want to suggest that feminist theory is something we do at home” (Ahmed, 7).

And yet, our society continues to devalue the body, especially the female body, as a source of knowledge and power, and to disregard the private labors (so often performed by women) that sustain and care for the body. As such, the felt memories of tending beans, of laying my mother down (in both dream and real life), of touching and being touched by Gesel—all in the context of patriarchal violence and control—resonate within me as if from an old-new time of possibility. And while these moments don’t replace more aggressive and visible forms of political protest, they both accompany and complicate them, as an undercurrent does a wave.

“The register of the minor gesture is always political: in its punctual reorienting of the event, the minor gesture invents new modes of life-living” (Manning, 8).

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It is true that touch lingers. We hold the memory of contact in our bodies for a lifetime. I can still feel the weight of my father’s hand on my forehead as he said

Nor is she advocating for such divisions to be upheld. Rather, in the context of post-war America, she is seeking a way to re-value intellectual life, regarding the demise of such as a threat to democracy. See Fred Moten’s essay, “Refuge, Refuse, Refrain” in *The Universal Machine*, for a discussion of Arendt’s failure to recognize black struggle in the U.S. as politics, or black study as “action.”

goodnight to me when I was a little girl. I can still feel my mother's hands rubbing me dry through the towel after a bath. A certain beloved friend, lost to me now, used to press her face against mine, fitting the curve of her cheekbone into my eye socket as if we were two pieces of a puzzle. Another friend who did not survive lay his head on my shoulder as we sat on the front step, and I still have the weight of his head there. In all of these instances, the touch lasts because something in the exchange indicated a belonging. The moment was not stable, not contained, but with these people there was an exchange of need, responsiveness, and pleasure. We were "for" each other in vulnerable but also powerful ways.

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"I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by those very relations... Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (Butler, *Precarious* 23).

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What are feminism's goals as I see them today? Here are some: To seek a more equal distribution of resources and power (across genders, races, and nations); to work toward more sustainable and less violent ways to live on the earth; to support young people in their desire for joyous, safe, and meaningful lives; to protect and empower all people who face and confront patriarchal violence. "Feminism is a crucial part of ... networks of solidarity and resistance precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on

the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities, and, in fact, all minorities," writes Butler (*Vulnerability* 20). Clearly, our bodies speak for these goals when they enter a space of protest, whether that be in the street, the conference room, the classroom, or the state house. But feminism must always be more than complaint, even more than resistance.

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"Thus, belonging becomes a matter of intimate and precarious embodied relationality" (Tzelepis, 158).

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I want not only to think and speak about feminism's goals, I want a chance at embodying them, and I want to create possibilities, however fragile, for others to embody them too. Such moments of embodiment will feel, I believe necessarily, fleeting, hard to trust, not enough. "It is indeed the mark of all laboring," writes Arendt, "that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends upon it" (87). We labor, then, on many fronts at once, for our lives, and for the lives of those we can touch, though often we will never meet them, or they are not yet born, we don't yet know who they are.

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SUGGESTED TEXTS

Gesel Mason Performance Projects: No Boundaries; Antithesis: <https://www.geselmason.com/video>

Sasha Steensen, *Gatherest* (Ahsakta Press)

Lisa Olstein, *Late Empire* (Copper Canyon)

Aditi Machado, *Some Beheadings* (Nightboat Books)

Ralph Lemon, *Come Home Charley Patton* (Dance, film, book): <https://walker-art.org/calendar/2005/ralph-lem-on-come-home-charley-patton-geography-trilogy-part-3>

Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect Pedagogy Performativity* (Duke University Press)

Lisa Robertson, *R’s Boat* (University of California Press)

Barbara Browning, *The Gift, or, Techniques of the Body* (Coffee House)