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Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory

Alia Al-Saji

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Abstract What does Husserlian phenomenology have to offer feminist theory? More specifically, can we find resources within Husserl's account of the living body (*Leib*) for the critical feminist project of rethinking embodiment beyond the dichotomies not only of mind/body but also of subject/object and activity/passivity? This essay begins by explicating the reasons for feminist hesitation with respect to Husserlian phenomenology. I then explore the resources that Husserl's phenomenology of touch and his account of *sensings* hold for feminist theory. My reading of Husserl proceeds by means of a comparison between his description of touch in *Ideas II* and Merleau-Ponty's early appropriation of this account in the *Phenomenology of Perception,* as well as through an unlikely rapprochement between Husserl and Irigaray on the question of touch. Moreover, by revisiting the limitations in Husserl's approach to the body—limitations of which any feminist appropriation must remain cognizant—I attempt to take Husserl's phenomenology of touch beyond its initial methodologically solipsistic frame and to ask whether and how it can contribute to thinking gendered and racialized bodies. The phenomenology of touch, I argue, can allow us to understand the interplay between subjective, felt embodiment and social-historical context. In opening up Husserl's account of touch to other dimensions—intersubjective and affective—sociality is revealed as residing within, and structuring of, touch. Such touch can allow us to think embodiment anew.

Keywords Husserl · Feminism · Body · Touch · Sensings · Affectivity · Sociality · Gender · Activity/passivity · Subject/object

A. Al-Saji (✉)
Department of Philosophy, McGill University, 855 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal, QC H3A 2T7, Canada
e-mail: alia.al-saji@mcgill.ca

What does Husserlian phenomenology have to offer feminist theory? More specifically, can feminisms of embodiment find resources in Husserl's account of living bodies for rethinking traditional philosophical representations of "the body" in its passivity, instrumentality and subordination to consciousness? In the past three decades, feminist thinkers from diverse philosophical backgrounds have forcefully argued that the project of critically reconceiving embodiment is one that feminist theory cannot afford to ignore.[1] If, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, the body has been the silenced side of a dichotomy upon which the supremacy of the (masculinist, patriarchal) mind has been constructed—and if woman has been representationally correlated with that body—then feminisms that disavow embodiment risk upholding the dichotomy that has traditionally subordinated women.[2] This is not to say that feminism should accept the body as traditionally defined (as the negative mirror or other to mind). What Grosz calls for is a rethinking of embodiment that overcomes the dichotomy of mind/body and, I would add, activity/passivity and subject/object. This work has been done by feminists drawing on different philosophical methodologies: phenomenological, psychoanalytic, Bergsonian-Deleuzian, etc. My paper aims to continue this rethinking of embodiment in a specifically Husserlian phenomenological vein that has so far been largely disregarded by feminists. This despite several calls in recent years to look at Husserl more closely,[3] and despite potential openings from within Husserlian phenomenology owing to the posthumous publication of manuscripts on affectivity and time. In general, feminists have seen more potential for rethinking embodiment in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, though they have also rightly been critical of Merleau-Ponty's failure to address sexual difference.[4] Exceptions are to be found in the works of Gail Weiss and Sara Heinämaa, both of whom have shown how different aspects of Husserlian phenomenology can be re-read in productively feminist directions.[5]

In this paper, I first address why I think feminists have had reason to be reticent about appealing to Husserlian phenomenology for support. Second, I elaborate the resources that I think Husserl's phenomenology of the living body (*Leib*) and his account of touch, in particular, hold for feminist theory. My reading of Husserl proceeds by means of a comparison between his description of touch in *Ideas II* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's early appropriation of this account in the *Phenomenology of*

[1] Notably, in the English-language context Butler (1993), Gatens (1996), Grosz (1994), Lloyd (1993), Young (2005), and Weiss (1999). This list is by no means exhaustive.

[2] Grosz (1994, pp. 3–4).

[3] See Fisher and Embree (2000). Of particular note is Linda Fisher's contribution "Phenomenology and Feminism," in which she calls on feminist critics to look more closely at Husserl's analyses of the body in *Ideas II* (ibid., pp. 31–32).

[4] Ibid., pp. 3–4. See, for instance, Olkowski (1999).

[5] Weiss (1995) has addressed the potential richness of Husserl's account of horizon and indeterminacy. She defends Husserlian phenomenology's appeal to "rigor," its attention to both the *what* and the *how* of experience, against feminist critics who would discount phenomenology altogether. Weiss is clear on both the promise and danger of phenomenological methodology for feminism (see Weiss 1999, pp. 39–43). More recently, Sara Heinämaa has shown the important influence that Husserl's *Ideas II* had on Simone de Beauvoir's work, and hence its potential advantages for feminist theorization (Heinämaa 2003, pp. 27–37).

Perception, as well as through an unlikely rapprochement between Husserl and Luce Irigaray on the question of touch. Third, by revisiting the limitations in Husserl's approach to the body—limitations of which any feminist appropriation must remain cognizant—I attempt to take Husserl's phenomenology of touch beyond its initial methodologically solipsistic frame and to ask whether and how it can contribute to thinking gendered and racialized bodies. The phenomenology of touch, I argue, can allow us to understand the interplay between subjective, felt embodiment and social–historical context. In opening up Husserl's account of touch to other considerations and dimensions—social, intersubjective and affective—I find a sociality within, and of, touch. Such a touch can allow us to think embodiment anew.

1 Feminist doubts

At first view, Husserlian phenomenology seems to uphold a disembodied structure of consciousness. The tendencies to logicism and transcendental idealism found in early Husserlian texts reinforce a view of consciousness as an empty and abstract pole of intentional activity, and inscribe Husserl within a history of philosophy that has suppressed embodiment. In this context, feminists have reason to regard with suspicion not only the phenomenological picture of consciousness, but more seriously, the Husserlian methodology of reduction that generates such a theory of disembodied consciousness.[6] After all, the phenomenological reduction claims to bracket not only the object-in-itself, but also, on the subjective side, the empirical ego—with all that this includes of concrete body, personal historicity, and, not mentioned by Husserl, gendered and racialized difference. The consciousness that results is not only an empty, pure ego, it is also a universalized (masculine) consciousness that has been produced by the exclusion of (feminine) body, and hence implicitly relies on the elision of sexual difference. The phenomenological method's claim to "neutrality" thus appears rooted in a form of double forgetfulness that serves to normalize, and validate, the standpoint of the phenomenological observer.[7] Not only is the empirical ego explicitly put out of play, this exclusion is based on a more profound forgetting of embodied dimensions of difference—dimensions of sex, race, gender, culture and class—which, without being universal, already structure subjectivity and potentially motivate the activity of reduction. It could be argued that this self-forgetfulness reinscribes Husserlian phenomenology within the "natural attitude" it has sought to bracket. Depending on one's aim, this can be taken to show the impossibility of the reduction, or the need to carry the project further.[8] In the latter case, the "true" reduction would reveal such operative

[6] For an articulation of these suspicions, see Oksala (2006), in particular her presentation of what she terms the "classical" reading of Husserlian phenomenology.

[7] The danger of this belief in neutrality has been pointed out by Weiss (1999, p. 42).

[8] Both interpretations have been offered of Merleau-Ponty's claim in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* that "[t]he most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. xiv; 1945, p. viii. Hereafter cited as PhP with English then French pagination). See, for instance, Sara Heinämaa's argument that this claim is not an abandonment of the phenomenological method of reduction (Heinämaa 2002, pp. 129–148).

dimensions to be constitutive conditions of experience (without assuming their universality or ahistoricity).[9]

Thus, when Husserl does address embodiment in later texts such as *Ideas II*, is it not a generalized (masculine) body that is presented?[10] This representation of embodiment derives not only from the phenomenologist's own (masculine) experience, but also from his necessary forgetfulness in the natural attitude of the structure and intersubjective constitution of that experience—a self-forgetfulness that Husserl himself evokes at the beginning of *Ideas II* (p. 55).[11] It does not, then, seem to be *bodies* that one finds in Husserl, but *a living body* (*Leib*) that is defined eidetically, within invariable parameters. At worst, the body Husserl describes is accidental and external to consciousness, at best it is the body of a transcendental and universal subject. Hence, at first view, Husserlian phenomenology seems to be unable to respond to Grosz's demand in *Volatile Bodies* that philosophies of embodiment acknowledge *bodies* in their multiplicity and unquantifiable difference.[12]

A further concern arises when one looks more closely at Husserl's rare accounts of sexuality, in particular the short text entitled "Universal Teleology."[13] The advantage of Husserl's theory is its attempt to conceive sexuality as an "intersubjective drive" (UT, p. 335), a social bond understood within the context of human community. (UT, p. 337) Husserl puts forward the idea of intertwined intentionalities, each of which takes as its goal the other—a unity that is constituted from the reciprocity of feeling. (UT, p. 335) But Husserl's account also repeats assumptions about sexuality imported, it would seem, from the patriarchal and masculinist "natural" attitude on sex. Thus, the essential sociality of sex is reduced to a desire for procreation. After initially admitting that sexuality may be an "indeterminate" drive, Husserl moves to theorize sex teleologically as a kind of hunger to be fulfilled, which has "its modality of realization in the mode of copulation."[14] (UT, p. 335) It is within the framework of reproduction that the significance of sex for human community is understood, a heterosexist assumption that imaginatively excludes other forms of sexuality. In addition, although Husserl suggestively alludes to the mother–child

[9] The claim would be that the reduction has not been carried out in a sufficiently critical manner. In taking the transcendental ego to be its ultimate discovery, what are left invisible are structures of experience that have been "naturalized" to this ego. Here, the point is not simply that the transcendental ego still carries traces of the empirical ego; it is that there is no ontologically prior level of subjectivity that can be so conceived. Thus, the aim is not to try to find an ego unmarked by naturalizing and historicizing processes, but to use the reduction to critically reveal the naturalization and contingency of subjectivity—the way in which structures, meanings and norms of being are socially and historically sedimented so as to make our experience what it is. This may be understood along the lines of "generative phenomenology" as Steinbock (1995) develops it, drawing on Husserl's *Nachlass*.

[10] Husserl (1952, 1989) Henceforth cited as *Ideas II*, using German pagination. I generally use "living body" or, where context permits, "body" to render *Leib*, and designate *Körper* as "material body".

[11] In "The Philosopher and his Shadow," Merleau-Ponty points to the importance of this self-forgetfulness in constitution (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 173).

[12] Grosz (1994, p. 19).

[13] Husserl (1981, pp. 335–337). Henceforth cited as UT.

[14] For the imaginative inadequacy of such a teleological view of sexuality and its reductive construction of female sexuality, see Irigaray (1977, 1985) and Irigaray (1993b). Though Irigaray's argument in these texts is not aimed at Husserl, I believe it can be applied here.

relation as "obtaining before a developed constitution of the world" (UT, p. 336), and though he is careful to say that "[t]he intersubjective 'act of reproduction' 'motivates' natural processes [of pregnancy] in the life of the other" (UT, p. 337), his view of sexuality as procreation has the effect of naturalizing "biological" reproduction to motherhood and of excluding other modes of being a mother or primary caregiver. Significantly, there is little mention of embodiment in this theory of sexuality (except for a brief allusion to "the physiology of pregnancy"). (UT, p. 337) Sexuality is "viewed transcendentally" and hence understood by Husserl as an intentional form of consciousness (UT, p. 335).[15]

2 Re-visiting touch in Husserl's theory of embodiment

Is it still worth looking to Husserlian phenomenology for resources to rethink embodiment? Besides the obvious point that a feminist reading of Husserl would not be a blind appropriation, but a selective and nuanced reading with, and sometimes against, the text, the important question is, I believe, whether Husserlian phenomenology can be considered a self-identical and totalizing enterprise.[16] Reading Husserl's manuscripts and notes points, I think, to a self-questioning and fluid thought in genesis, rather than to any fully worked-out system. In the posthumously published manuscripts such as *Ideas II* and *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis,*[17] Husserl often thinks against himself, revises his position, and considers alternatives without committing to any one. It is this style of thinking and writing that can make Husserl a potential resource for feminist theory.[18]

Thus, rather than looking to his theory of sexuality, which remains anchored to a philosophy of consciousness, I believe that it is in Husserl's account of sensation and affectivity that his originality with respect to embodiment can be found. Whatever Husserl's intent, his phenomenology allows us to see the body differently and to conceive of bodies in more nuanced, fluid and dynamic ways than is initially apparent. In particular, I see in Husserl's work several sites for productive, feminist re-reading. I offer a study in what follows of one such site: the theory of *sensings* found in Husserl's description of touch in *Ideas II*. My concern is not simply with the potential of Husserlian phenomenology to offer a methodological framework or toolbox for feminist theory. My concern is more deeply with how certain of

[15] See Merleau-Ponty's comment on Husserl's "Universal Teleology" in a working note dated from February 1960 in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 238–239). I agree with Merleau-Ponty's fundamental insight in this working note that Husserl's potential can be found in his turn to affectivity and *sentir* rather than his study of sexuality which remains subordinate to a philosophy of consciousness as acts.

[16] For feminist strategies of reading, see Olkowski (2000, pp. 3–4). See also Fisher in Fisher and Embree (2000, pp. 31–32).

[17] Husserl (1966, 2001). Henceforth cited as APS using German pagination.

[18] Husserl's writings have the character of a thought in process: tangents and possibilities are indicated even when excluded, doubts are expressed without necessarily being resolved, and the work is repeatedly resumed. This non-closure reflects the way in which Husserl's texts aver their own difference, permitting readings of "the other Husserl" to take place. This is what makes his texts promising sites for feminist appropriation or intervention.

Husserl's "discoveries" and descriptions of embodiment can allow feminist phenomenologies to rethink bodies beyond dichotomies of subject/object and activity/passivity, thus opening new avenues for understanding the complex interplay of social positionality and felt embodiment.

2.1 Husserlian *sensings*

Husserl discovers in *Ideas II* an experience crucial to embodiment that has no name in philosophy and that he calls, in the plural, *sensings (Empfindnisse).* Sensings occur at the intersection of touch and kinaesthesis. This neologism represents Husserl's attempt to rethink sensation as multifaceted and dynamic (rather than hyletic) and to understand the ways in which bodies are tacitly aware of themselves, i.e., become *lived* bodies. The term *"Empfindnisse"* brings together the notions of both *Erlebnis* (lived experience) and *Empfindung* (sensation).[19] *Empfindnisse* are sensuous experiences that are lived through but not objectivated. They are the lived body's reflexive, non-intentional experiences of itself, while being at the same time the ground, or other side, of the lived body's intentional experiences of the world. Husserl first mentions *Empfindnisse* in the following example:

> Moving my hand over the table, I get an experience of it and its thingly determinations. At the same time, I can at any moment pay attention to my hand and find on it touch-sensations, sensations of smoothness and coldness, etc. In the interior of the hand running parallel to the experienced movement, I find motion-sensations, etc. Lifting a thing, I experience its weight, but at the same time I have weight-sensations localized in my Body. And thus, my Body's entering into physical relations (by striking, pressing, pushing, etc.) with other material things provides in general not only the experience of physical occurrences, related to the Body and to things, but also the experience of specifically Bodily occurrences of the type we call *sensings.* Such occurrences are missing in "merely" material things. (*Ideas II*, p. 146)

Sensings give the particular self-awareness that characterizes the lived body at a level prior to its being objectified as mine. It is a tacit bodily awareness that is lived through without self-ascription or objectification.[20] This reflexivity can be made explicit by directing a ray of attention through it, and in this way a phenomenological description is possible.

With *sensings* the concept of sensation is productively redefined, away from Husserl's earlier understanding of sensation in terms of senseless and undifferentiated

[19] See Welton (1998, pp. 44–48). For more on *sensings,* see also Levinas (1998).

[20] This is because the experience of my body as mine, in contrast to that of another's, cannot arise on the basis of *Empfindnisse* alone, but requires a context of intercorporeity. *Empfindnisse* are founding of, but not sufficient for, my sense of "my" body. Hence the chapter on touch in *Ideas II* (section two, chapter three) calls for a supplement in the subsequent chapter on empathy (see Sect. 3 of this paper on the incomplete constitution of the body without others).

hyle calling for apprehension.[21] First, an element of movement and change is introduced into sensations by their incorporation of and dependence on kinaesthesis; the kinaesthetic infrastructure gives *sensings* a temporal continuity and flow.[22] According to Husserl, kinaesthesis, or the body's self-awareness of its own movement (e.g. "[m]oving my hand" or "[l]ifting a thing"), has a motivating relation to the way in which the body senses itself and the world, and hence to the appearance of the sensed. Movement and touch are intimately linked, tied together not by natural causality but by the phenomenal conditionality of an "if–then" structure (*Ideas II*, p. 57).[23] This means that *sensings* are at once internally differentiated—in terms of "two correlatively related functions" (*Ideas II*, p. 58)—and dynamically continuous, since these functions are held together by relations of motivation. More so, this motivational system should be expanded to include the affective pull of the world that solicits my movements in the first place, so that bodily movement, while "spontaneous" (*Ideas II*, p. 152), is itself situated and conditioned by context.

Second, the emphasis on touch can be seen as an emphasis on affectivity. In presenting (or intending) aspects of the world through what Husserl calls presentational-sensations, the *touching* body also feels itself *touched* by the world (*Ideas II*, p. 145). Presentational-sensations have as their other side affects (ibid., pp. 146–147). Experiencing the weight of the thing raised by my hand means feeling the correlative pressure sensations in my hand (ibid., p. 146). Through touch, body and world are given in necessary proximity and reciprocity. It is due to this intimacy of touch and because the entire body is a touch surface, continuously in contact with itself and its surroundings, that touch has primacy for Husserl (*Ideas II*, p. 148). The body is that sensible and concrete surface *in touch with* the world—a surface with folds and depth, a surface that is perhaps more fluid than solid and that expands and contracts depending on its involvement with the world. Through touch, the body is a surface that is sensitive to the world and affected by it. As with the dependence of touch on movement, the belonging of touch to the world is not a causal relation but a phenomenal "if–then" conditionality (*Ideas II*, p. 155). Although Husserl speaks mainly of "physical" events that are undergone by my body ("if my hand is touched or struck, then I sense it") (ibid., p. 155), the affectivity of the body can be taken as the point of departure for understanding its social, and not merely material, positionality (as I will argue in the next section). Specifically, this affectivity means that, while perceiving or being-acted upon by the world, the body feels and undergoes this experience in terms of *sensings*.

"Sensings" is a concept that, I think, can be used to undermine the dichotomies of activity and passivity and of subject and object as applied to living bodies. It offers a conceptual tool for feminism in its theorization of embodiment as

[21] Husserl (1982, pp. 172–176 using German pagination). More precisely, *sensings* can be understood as a transformation in Husserl's understanding of *hyletic sensation,* away from *hyle* as formless stuff in need of interpretation and towards an acknowledgement of the sensed as intrinsically meaningful. (See Zahavi 1999, p. 118).

[22] For more on the centrality of kinaesthesis to Husserl's understanding of sensation in *Ideas II*, see my article (Al-Saji 2000).

[23] For example, if I move my hand over the table, I sense its smooth, cold surface (and I have corresponding affective sensations on my hand), but not if my hand is injured or my finger has a callus.

affectively lived in whatever it does or undergoes, as dynamic and resistant while at once objectified. To see this, we need to turn to Husserl's account of how sensings are localized and come to constitute a living body. Husserl's description of the peculiar phenomenon of "double sensation"—the experience of one hand touching the other—illustrates this:

> Touching my left hand, I have touch-appearances, that is to say, I do not just sense, but I perceive and have appearances of a soft, smooth hand, with such a form…. But when I touch the left hand I also find in it, too, series of touch-sensations, which are *"localized"* in it, though these are not constitutive of properties… If I speak of the *physical* thing, 'left hand,' then I am abstracting from these sensations (a ball of lead has nothing like them and likewise for every "merely" physical thing…). If I do include them, then it is not that the physical thing is now richer, but instead it *becomes Body, it senses.* (*Ideas II*, pp. 144–145)

Although the experience of my hand lifting the weight (cited above) already involves the localization of sensings on or in the body (as affects in the hand), the localization of sensings in the form of an *appearing living body*—a body that is not only felt from within but also perceived from without—becomes possible through the "special case" of the body touching itself. (*Ideas II*, p. 144) What is significant in Husserl's account is that this self-perception gives the body to itself as living body (*Leib*)—as a field or spread *of sensings*—and not as a mere extended, physical object. This is because "[t]he touch-sensing is not a *state* of the material thing, hand, but is precisely the *hand itself*, which for us is more than a material thing." (*Ideas II*, p. 150) Not only does the touching right hand feel itself to be sensing and living, but the touched left hand appears as *Leib*, and feels itself as such. As Husserl notes, *"[o]n* this surface of the hand I sense the sensations of touch, etc. And it is precisely thereby that this surface manifests itself immediately as my Body." (Ibid., p. 150)

2.2 Subject and object

Here, a comparison may be drawn to Merleau-Ponty's initial presentation of the phenomenon of "double sensation" in the *Phenomenology of Perception.* Though critics have assumed Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's versions to be the same and taken Merleau-Ponty's account to be superior because of the attention he generally pays to the lived body (and because of the richness of his later work on touch), I will argue that Husserl's account in *Ideas II* avoids several dichotomies which characterize Merleau-Ponty's appropriation in the *Phenomenology.*[24] This not only

[24] Merleau-Ponty deals with the question of "double sensation" repeatedly, and evocatively, in his work. The first attempt, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, claims to be a reading of Husserl's *Ideas II* and it is specifically this description of one hand touching the other that I find problematic. Later versions can be found in *Signs* (Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp. 166–167) and, famously, in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 133, 141). In these formulations, Merleau-Ponty attempts to give an account of the reversibility of touching-touched which avoids subject/object dichotomies. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment (within which the structure of touching-touched is understood) has shifted in these later texts from the framework of a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of the *flesh.*

brings Husserl's description of the sense of touch surprisingly close to Luce Irigaray's, it also presents his concept of sensings in a new light.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty describes "double sensation" as follows:

> [I]f I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place. Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. (PhP, pp. 92/108)

> We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of 'touching' and being 'touched.' What was meant by talking about 'double sensations' is that, in passing from one role to the other, I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching. In other words, in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. (PhP, pp. 93/109)

Merleau-Ponty reads the touching-touched experience as a relation of subject and object—of for-itself and in-itself which are mutually exclusive to one another. In this context, my hand can be either absolute subject, "alive and mobile," touching and exploring the world; or it can be touched by my other hand, and descend into a passivity that does not even feel itself as such. It seems that the touched hand loses its affectivity; it cannot feel its being touched *while my other hand consciously palpates it.* At that moment, the touched hand becomes an object, a "bundle of bones and muscles." Its power to touch, and its awareness of itself, is there only in memory and anticipation, waiting for the next instant when it can regain this power and, touching the other hand, reduce it to the status of an object.[25]

This is a puzzling account. We learn from Husserl that the same hand cannot feel itself at once touching and being-touched in the same place on its surface; these sensations alternate "with a different direction of attention." (*Ideas II*, pp. 146–147) There is therefore a lack of simultaneity of sensations in the *same* locus on the same

[25] This is how Merleau-Ponty interprets Husserl's famous claim at the end of the chapter on touch in *Ideas II* that the lived body is "a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing" (*Ideas II*, p. 159)—in Merleau-Ponty's words, not "completely constituted" (PhP, pp. 92/108). Because the hand as subject escapes objectification—as touching it cannot be touched—a lacuna is opened up in the body. For Merleau-Ponty, this does not prevent the other hand from being touched and objectified; it is just not both hands (the whole body) that can be objectified at once. I will offer an alternative explanation of this "imperfect" constitution below.

hand.[26] But Husserl clearly holds that sensings are doubled in the body when one part of the body touches the other. These sensings do not fuse, nor is it a matter of the same sensation transferred back and forth. There is rather a doubling of sensings, localized in *two* sites of the lived body—a doubling that is indeed constitutive of the differentiated and lived structure, the felt *two-ness*, of the body. As Husserl describes this, "the sensation is *doubled* in the two parts of the Body, since each is then precisely for the other an external thing that is touching and acting upon it, and each is at the same time Body." (*Ideas II*, p. 145) Significantly, in Husserl's account both hands, whether touching or touched, continue to sense, though with different directionalities.[27]

How can we understand the difference in Merleau-Ponty's formulation? What Merleau-Ponty wants to emphasize is the non-coincidence of the sensations of touching and being-touched, but the price he pays is to eliminate the experience as a doubling of sensations. We are left with one sensation, albeit ambiguous, which alternates between the two hands, as they exchange the roles of subject and object, of activity and absolute passivity.[28] This is due, I believe, to the model of consciousness that frames the example of "double sensations" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*—consciousness understood as objectivating intentionality. Such an intentionality cannot be directed to itself in the living present, but can only grasp itself, objectify itself, as past or as other (this is not the lived through reflexivity of *Erlebnis*). As Merleau-Ponty notes, "[t]he body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates 'a kind of reflection.'" (PhP, pp. 93/109) This reflection is not the bodily coexistence and reversibility of sensings found in *Ideas II*. It is a reflection carried out by consciousness, which in its present remains absolute subject, and for which its own objectification constitutes a paradox.

The lived body is, however, a subject in a different way. Never absolutely subject, nor mere object, the sensing body lies on the other side of this dichotomy and this paradox. This is because the tactile experience of localization works differently from reflective consciousness. The question is whether being touched in fact renders one an object, i.e., is the schema of subject/object an appropriate framework for understanding touch (and for sensings in general)? For Husserl, the fact that the lived body can be touched by the world, and can touch itself, does not mean that the touched part of the body is transformed into a mere object. This would only be the case if being-touched meant becoming inert, insensible—becoming a material body, or *Körper*, that could be perceived from without but had no ability to

[26] This does not mean that my left hand cannot feel the tips of its fingers touching the surface of the table, while the back of the left hand feels itself scratched by my right hand. (A simple experiment will confirm this.) The fact that one of these sensings may be more prominent than the other does not reduce the other sensation or affection to nothingness. The hand has its own affective relief (to employ a term from Husserl's *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis).*

[27] "In the case of one hand touching the other,… we have then two sensations, and each is apprehendable or experienceable in a double way" (*Ideas II*, p. 147). Specifically, "each part has its own sensations" (ibid., p. 147).

[28] In other words, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on absolute non-coincidence (either touching or touched, subject or object) results in the elision of the heterogeneous and non-oppositional difference between sensings (and within the body) that would allow touching and touched to coexist without collapsing into a single sensation.

sense itself.[29] But being-touched implies neither the reification of the body nor the suspension of its subjectivity according to Husserl.[30] Being-touched implies more than presenting the appearance of a soft, smooth hand that is part of the world; it means that this hand has at the same time the affective sensation of being-touched, an experience of which objects or *Körper* are incapable (*Ideas II*, pp. 144–145, cited above). Being-touched or sensed from without makes a difference to my body, affects it, as it senses this from within. And this is precisely what is involved in being a lived body or *Leib*.

Thus the lived body is, for Husserl, both sensing and sensed, subject and object—or rather I would argue that these dichotomies are rendered indeterminate through the concept of sensings.[31] It should be noted that Husserl sometimes speaks of the lived body as "object" in *Ideas II* (pp. 145, 147). This seems to imply that the body is like "external" objects—that it is given as a spatiotemporal or material thing "constituted through a sensuous schema and manifolds of adumbrations." (*Ideas II*, p. 149) Yet Husserl is clear that one's own body cannot be immediately and completely given through such perspectival distance; it is "a here which has no other here outside of itself, in relation to which it would be a 'there.'" (Ibid., p. 158) The constitution of the body as an object for tactual or visual self-perception is not only necessarily partial—due to the limitations in seeing one's whole body directly or touching it all at once, limitations that render it "a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing" (*Ideas II*, p. 159)—this self-perception is also different in kind from the perception of external objects. This difference in kind owes to the nature of touch-sensings, which constitute the tacit self-awareness and lived-ness of the body. Sensings are not the material determinations or qualities of the *extended* object, body; they are "nothing given through adumbration and schematization." (*Ideas II*, p. 150) Sensings, rather, are on *this* side of objectivity. Although their affective and kinaesthetic structure means that they motivate and condition the appearance of objects, sensings cannot themselves be given as "objects." This difference in kind between the givenness of the body and the perception of "external" objects allows Husserl to say that the lived body is not a thing like others in the world (*Ideas II*, pp. 144, 158). When he speaks of it as an object, then, Husserl already understands the body to be an object that possesses sensings, and this immediately transforms its status: the body (or any part of it) is never *mere object.*

The body is, rather, a sensing-sensed object, a living and lived-through object. It is in this sense that Husserl can speak of an appearing Corporeal body, or *Leibkörper* (*Ideas II*, pp. 144, 155). By bringing together the concepts of living body (*Leib*) and material body (*Körper*), normally opposed, this term points to the

[29] To say that my body is being touched by objects (rather than touching them) would require, according to Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception,* such a situation: "I can say that they [objects] 'touch' my body, but only when it is inert, and therefore without ever catching it unawares in its exploratory function." (PhP, pp. 93/109).

[30] As Zahavi notes, "the localization does not suspend or negate the subjectivity of the body." (Zahavi 1999, p. 107).

[31] As Levinas points out with respect to Husserl's project in *Ideas II*. "The attention paid to psychophysical and psychophysiological investigations ends up discovering a corporeal sphere refractory to the subject/object schema… It ends up discovering a Spirituality… inseparable from localization." (Levinas 1998, p. 147).

materiality and exteriority of the life of the body. Although Husserl underlines the difference between lived bodies and merely material things in *Ideas II*—*Leib* being the ground of the constitution of material nature and objectivity—lived bodies are yet embedded in the material world and affected by it. They are bodies that are both material and lived, both subject and object.

Since objecthood does not exclude subjectivity for Husserl, the body need not fall on one side or the other of the subject/object dichotomy (as it does in Merleau-Ponty's examples above).[32] The body is, rather, a field or spread of sensings. The difference between the two hands, touching and touched, is not a matter of subject and object roles, but of different sensings differently localized and simultaneously lived in the body. For the body of sensings is plural. It can do several things at once. It is a subject through affectivity and movement as well as through perception—all functions which coexist and intertwine in the body in a relief that defines different layers or ways of being subject. My argument is, then, that the body constituted through touch can be understood as a subject not defined in opposition to an object. Moreover, as I will show below, it is a subject whose activity hinges on, and cannot be disentangled from, passivity—a point that brings Husserl surprisingly close to Irigaray. This owes to the peculiar structure of touch for Husserl—its continuity, affectivity, reciprocity, and flow.

2.3 Affectivity, passivity, activity

The continuity and spread of touch on the surface of the body—the fact that touch is not compartmentalized to a particular organ of sense (despite Husserl's emphasis on hands[33])—means that there are no breaks in the field of touch, as there are in vision when I close my eyes.[34] This does not imply that the tactile body is a homogeneous surface structure. Rather, tactile flesh has thickness and folds, interpenetrating with and permitting the localization of other "senses" (as in Husserl's example of the localization of the eyes, which he claims occurs primarily by means of touch, *Ideas II*, pp. 148–149).[35] The tactile body could be characterized as a qualitatively differentiated scene—a relief where touch-sensings overlap and intertwine. Within

[32] In contrast, Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Husserl in *Signs* highlights this blurring or duality of the body as "a 'perceiving thing', a 'subject–object.'" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 166) It should be noted that to the degree to which the passages from the *Phenomenology* cited above are in tension with this later appropriation, they are also in tension with the *Phenomenology's* ostensible project of conceiving the body as a perceiving thing.

[33] Though I have chosen to emphasize the way in which touch functions as a non-specialized contact of the body with the world, a different, and more critical, reading of Husserl is possible based on the exemplarity of the hand and the immediacy of self-touch in his descriptions. Cf. Derrida (2005, pp. 162–172).

[34] "We must also note that the fields of sensation in question here are always completely filled, and each new stimulation does not provoke a sensation as if for the first time, but rather, it provokes in the sensation-field a corresponding change in the sensation." (*Ideas II*, p. 155).

[35] The surface of the lived body folds on itself in places. For the mouth is also a touch surface, as is the tongue which localizes *Empfindnisse* that are produced through the intertwining of taste-sensations, touch and texture-sensations, and kinaesthesis. In addition, the surface of the body has a certain depth: "When I press the surface of the Body 'around the heart,' I discover, so to say, this 'heart sensation'… It does not itself belong to the touched surface, but it is connected with it." (*Ideas II*, p. 165).

this relief, "objects" in touch with my body cannot be isolated or sharply delimited as they can be in the visual field, where a figure can become isolated as *Gestalt* form and detach from the background. The intervals and gaps between things, which are usually invisible to vision, are present for touch, and have positive existence. The imperceptible fluid media surrounding objects can still make a difference to touch; the hand as it passes through air or water feels the breeze or wave, as well as the lightness or density of the medium. And the medium of my own flesh has tactile existence for itself. In touch everything is given against the ground of the body and embedded relative to it; for the lived body is constituted as a tactile field.

The tactile body is, however, more than a field of coexistence, where the touching of one hand coexists with the other hand's being-touched (in Husserl's example of two hands touching); it is also a temporal and diachronic field. The intertwining of touch with movement insinuates this temporal horizon. Kinaesthesis, which motivates the direction and order of touch-sensations, gives these sensations as a concrete flow. (*Ideas II*, p. 158) But the affect of being-touched can also call for kinaesthetic elaboration and thematization of that which has, so far inattentively, touched me and been retained on the cusp of my bodily experience. This opens up a futural, or protentional, dimension to the tactile field.[36] It is this anticipatory power to which Merleau-Ponty appears to allude in his example of the two hands: "in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile…" (PhP, pp. 93/109). The question here is how to understand the passivity of the touched hand and its affective power.

Turning to Husserl's *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* can deepen our understanding of the affective structure of touch. What gains prominence within the tactile field are not "objects" in the usual sense (as syntheses of perspectives), but *affections* that are differentiated relative to one another, and that exercise different affective pulls: a pain that calls my attention versus an itch which I learn to ignore. This reference to "affection" brings with it a certain ambiguity, one that was already contained in the description of the affectivity of touch above: in touch the body *feels itself touched*. In other words, affection can be understood from both subjective and objective points of view. Affection can be described as the force of the sensed, the touch or pull of an "object" on the body. But it can also be understood as something subjectively undergone by the body, which feels itself being affected and being-touched, and turns toward that which is affecting it.[37] In this sense, affections are not yet objects. Rather, affection motivates a ray of intentionality that strives, through kinaesthetic processes, to disclose that which affected me and to constitute it as object—to make

[36] Lanei Rodemeyer emphasizes the future-oriented, protentional temporality that structures affectivity for Husserl (Rodemeyer 2006, p. 159).

[37] "By affection we understand the allure given to consciousness, the peculiar pull that an object given to consciousness exercises on the ego; it is a pull that is relaxed when the ego turns toward it attentively, and progresses from here, striving toward self-giving intuition" (APS, pp. 148–149). Also, "[w]here the object is concerned, we can also characterize affection as the awakening of an intention directed toward it [i.e., the object]." (APS, p. 151).

that which was only implicit come to perceptual focus.[38] It is hence possible to say that affection has as its other side kinaesthetic and presentational-sensations. This reveals affection to be a level of subjectivity that precedes the explicit constitution of objects, a level where passivity is on the verge of turning into activity.

More precisely, however, not all affection becomes responsive in this way. Affections towards which my body has turned define the sphere of *receptivity* for Husserl—the lowest level of intentional activity[39] (*Ideas II*, p. 335)—but *affectivity* is both more and less than this. Affectivity is less than thematized affection, since it defines that passivity which must be pregiven for any activity to take place (APS, p. 84). Such passivity is not absolute inertia, but already feeling or tendency. Affectivity is also more, since not all affection is attended to. Husserl distinguishes "actual affections," which motivate my body to pay attention to something, from unnoticed affections or "tendencies towards affection," which remain unconscious or implicit (APS, p. 149). The difference here cannot be understood to belong to the content of affection alone; rather, "[w]e stand in a relativism of affective tendencies" (APS, p. 150). The main condition for the "prominence" of an affection is, then, contrast. But contrast remains a contextual matter for Husserl, dependent not only upon the interrelation of affective forces within the field of experience, but also upon the direction of my interest, sensibility, and desire which condition what constitutes a *prominence for me*.[40] (APS, p. 150) Contrast can thus be understood to be configured in terms both of a spatial context and of a temporal, habitual and historical, horizon; it is open to reorganization when these contexts shift. To speak of an affective relief constituted through contrast is to indicate that affections are neither isolated and indifferent to one another, nor static in their meaning and motivating force. In the temporal flow of experience, what were mere tendencies can be "awakened" through associations, while prominent affections may fade away or be "drowned out" by others.

In Husserl's narrative (of the tabletop and of the two hands in *Ideas II*, pp. 144–146), the touched hand belongs to the sphere of receptivity. Its experience can be located at the turning point where an as yet indeterminate touch on, and of, the body becomes thematized and localized in terms of the sensation of "being-touched."[41] Beyond the noticeable affectivity and receptivity of both touched and touching hands, Husserl is able to recognize the affective existence of the rest of the tactile body. The tactile field of the body is not simply made up of affections to which I explicitly attend (e.g. the painful callus on my writing hand), it also consists of affective tendencies that are present without being thematized (e.g. "the pressure

[38] As Zahavi notes: "To be affected by something is not yet to be presented with an object, but to be invited to turn one's attention toward that which exerts the affection." (Zahavi 1999, p. 116).

[39] Ibid., p. 116.

[40] As Christina Schües points out, "for Husserl, similarity and contrast are not objective relations, but phenomenal givens which achieve a form of sensible pre-constitution insofar as similarity and contrast make possible the intuition of succession and configuration, which then bring on a thing-apprehension." (Schües 1998, p. 151). See Ahmed (2006) for the hidden significance of orientation in Husserl's phenomenology.

[41] Though, in this case of thematized affection, the ray of attention does not make the body into a mere object.

and pull of my clothes," *Ideas II*, p. 145). From *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis,* we know that these tendencies are not nothing for Husserl. Though they may be implicit and unconscious, they configure the tactile body as a felt schema or affective relief—as a differentiated system of affections. Parts of my body, which are not directly touched or attended to, cannot be construed as inert; they still have affective existence. This is not only because affective tendencies could become prominent in the future; it is also because that which now has prominence depends on these tendencies to put it in relief. In other words, tendencies already function to define the relativism of the affective field.[42] In contrast, Merleau-Ponty's narrative of the touched hand in the *Phenomenology* seems to construe the passivity of this hand as inertia (PhP, pp. 92–3/108–9); it is hence neither affection nor tendency in Husserl's terms. Though Merleau-Ponty wants to acknowledge the way in which passivity is the condition of possibility for activity—by positing activity as the future of passivity—his narrative belies this. Indeed, the protention of future activity is represented not as a feeling found within the touched hand, but as an anticipation belonging to an "I" who is identified with the activity of touching rather than the passivity of being touched. It becomes difficult to understand how affectivity, let alone receptivity, could emerge from such a nil of activity as is the touched hand, "this bundle of bones and muscles." In this vein, Husserl had questioned how a passivity that was nothing could become affection in the next moment.[43] Husserl's solution lies in destabilizing the binary of activity and passivity, so as to understand their intertwining. Between absolute passivity and clear-cut activity a range of bodily experiencing then becomes conceivable. This was also Merleau-Ponty's project, but it is one with which the model of perception, employed in the examples of self-touch in the *Phenomenology*, stands in tension.

The continuity and spread of touch on the surface of the body implies an intricately woven affective and temporal contact within the body and in its relation to the world. In this sense, that which is touched affects me, touches me, prior to—or correlative with—its being recognized as a particular object. Touch can therefore be distinguished, not from all vision, but from a particular model of vision and more generally of perception, which Merleau-Ponty seems to be relying on in the passage on "double sensation" in the *Phenomenology*. In that passage Merleau-Ponty attempts to conceive touch on the model of exploratory, objectifying and surveying perception (a kind of perception he will criticize in his later work in favour of the more affective and implicated painter's vision). Touch is thus presented as an active and possessive power. The touching hand, alive and mobile, is thrust towards things and grasps them, rendering them its objects in a directed striving for knowledge.

[42] Husserl notes: "Certainly, we do not always have an affection that is actually noticeable. But if we reflect upon the essential character of affection which is obviously relative, whereby something noticeable becomes unnoticeable, and something unnoticeable can become noticeable, then we will hesitate in interpreting something unnoticeable as something that does not exercise an affection at all." (APS, p. 163).

[43] "But that something should gain an affective force at all where nothing of the sort was available; that something which was not there at all for the ego—a pure affective nothing—should become an active something for the first time, precisely that is incomprehensible." (APS, p. 163).

This seems to occur without the hand itself being touched, since "[i]nsofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can… neither be seen nor touched." (PhP, pp. 92/108) As a result, there is no reciprocity between touching and touched—the touched having been reduced each time to the inert passivity of an object.

But touching is not only an exploratory function that the subject employs to determine the contours of its world; it is a receptivity and, as such, the whole body is already responsive to the world's qualities and moves itself accordingly.[44] In this sense, touching and being-touched are not hierarchically organized sensations or situations of the body. Touching is inseparable from the susceptibility to be touched. When one hand touches the other, the relation enacted is not one of mastery, but of symmetry and reciprocity between the two hands. This is not an exchange of subject and object roles where one has dominance over the other (as in Merleau-Ponty's examples); nor does it imply the sameness of the sensations within the two hands (despite what Husserl sometimes says in *Ideas II*, p. 146). It is a reciprocal touching that each hand senses in its own way, a symmetry where neither is purely active nor passive. There are two sensings, different in kind, localized reciprocally within the two hands as they share the experience of touch. The possibility for such an experience of touch is best described by Luce Irigaray:

> Which brings about something very particular in the relation feeling-felt. With no object or subject. With no passive or active, or even middle-passive. A sort of fourth mode? Neither active, nor passive, nor middle-passive. Always more passive than the passive. And nevertheless active. The hands joined, palms together, fingers outstretched, constitute a very particular touching. A gesture often reserved for women (at least in the West) and which evokes, doubles, the *touching of the lips* silently applied upon one another. A touching more intimate than that of one hand taking hold of the other. A phenomenology of the passage between interior and exterior.[45]

Neither pure activity, nor absolute passivity, the touching-touched hands have the peculiar status that distinguishes sensings for Husserl. They are characterized by a receptivity which is itself a level of activity.[46] These active–passive hands go beyond and undermine the traditional dichotomy of activity and passivity, subject and object. For Irigaray, this reenacts the touching of the two lips, or two pairs of lips, which she takes as an image for female sexuality (undermining the

[44] Touch can of course also be an objectivating perception—an exploratory movement that seeks to define the contours of things. But I want to argue that experiences of touch can be conceived on another model, one that allows the possibility of a non-objectivating touch. (Touch as object-perception would then be a kind of misperception, a touch that forgets its affective roots.).

[45] Irigaray (1993a, p. 161; 1984, p. 151). For a discussion of Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty on touch, I refer the reader to Grosz (1994, pp. 103–107).

[46] It should be clear at this point in my account that the concept of passivity, and hence that of "being-touched", have different senses for Husserl than for Merleau-Ponty. While Merleau-Ponty's notion in the passages from the *Phenomenology* cited above relies on the idea of being made *object*, Husserl sees passivity as the lowest level of activity of the *subject*. According to his Leibnizian understanding, "[t]he lowest Ego-spontaneity or Ego-activity is 'receptivity.'" (*Ideas II*, p. 335) That is, activity and passivity are for Husserl intertwined. (In Merleau-Ponty's later course notes and texts, a different concept of passivity is to be found than that in the passages from the *Phenomenology*).

phallocentric image of woman as lack).[47] In the touching of the lips there is no way to distinguish activity from passivity, "what is touching from what is touched."[48] The lips embody a caress, a touch which is affective without being inert, invisible without being privative, and double without hierarchy or objectification.[49]

In the above passage, Irigaray describes a particular gesture of the two hands: joined at the palms with fingers stretched, a kind of face-to-face of the hands. However, Merleau-Ponty considered not only this gesture (PhP, pp. 93/109), but also another, which he took to be interchangeable with this one. In the second gesture, one hand takes hold of the other whose attention is directed to things; it performs a grasping motion (PhP, pp. 92/108). But these two gestures are not the same; they do not provide the same experience, nor the same model for touch. And my analysis of Merleau-Ponty's account of touch in the *Phenomenology of Perception* has shown the difference that a gesture can make.[50] Husserl also uses the example of one hand touching the other. But in comparison to the passages from the *Phenomenology*, Husserl's examples cannot be easily divided along lines of activity and passivity; the hands resist immediate categorization, giving a potentially more nuanced theory of touch. In Husserl's example of the right hand touching the left, being-touched is not presented as an interruption of the left hand's previous activity. It is rather an augmentation and expansion of the left hand's being—allowing it to feel itself, to have sensations elsewhere on its surface, and to be localized as lived body or *Leib*. (*Ideas II*, pp. 144–145) Correlatively, touching is not without its affective sensations: "The hand that is touching… likewise has its touch-sensations at the place on its corporeal surface where it touches (or is touched by the other)" (*Ideas II*, p. 145). Moreover, the touching-touched experience is often described by Husserl from the point of view of the touched hand, which becomes *Leib* and becomes subject in being touched (see *Ideas II*, pp. 145, 146, 154).[51] Whereas for Merleau-Ponty being-touched interrupts the subjectivity of the hand, identified with its intentional activity, for Husserl this generates a subjectivity inseparable from passivity and affectivity. "Objectification," in this sense, also makes subject. What

[47] Irigaray (1993a, p. 11; 1984, p. 18).

[48] Irigaray (1985, p. 26; 1977, p. 26).

[49] "As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other." (Irigaray 1985, p. 24; 1977, p. 24).

[50] This becomes clearer when we consider, in the next section, the significance of touching and being-touched in intercorporeal experience. The greeting, the handshake, the kiss and the caress are all gestures that are inscribed within social contexts and that define intersubjective experience in significant ways. Touch may help nurture the subjectivity of another, or may turn into a relation of dominance. (For an analysis of the significance of the caress, see Irigaray's reading of Levinas in "The Fecundity of the Caress" (Irigaray 1993a, 1984)).

[51] To give an example: "The localized sensations are not properties of the Body *as* a physical thing, but on the other hand, they *are* properties of the thing, Body, and indeed they are effect-properties. They arise *when* the Body is touched, pressed, stung, etc., and they arise there *where* it is touched and at the time *when* it is touched" (*Ideas II*, p. 146). Despite the particular gestures described here (and in particular the omission of the caress from the list), my point is that it is the experience of the touched hand that is highlighted by Husserl.

we find in these descriptions is a different theory of touch. A touch that is more receptive than exploratory and, reciprocally, the possibility of being-touched without being made a mere object. This is what is allowed for in Irigaray's and, I believe, in Husserl's accounts of the touching of the two hands.

3 Husserlian feminism in question: The sociality of touch

My aim has been to read Husserl differently, not only to reveal an "other Husserl" whose thought on embodiment and affectivity has become a generative focus for phenomenologists in recent years,[52] but also to inflect this other Husserl in a feminist direction. In this vein, I have argued that an analysis, which is at once feminist and Husserlian, can carry out the task of overcoming the conceptual dichotomies of subject/object and activity/passivity in order to think bodies differently. The critical feminist project of rethinking embodiment is able, I believe, not only to find resources in Husserlian phenomenology, but also to provide a reconfiguration and re-enactment of this phenomenology beyond its initial frame. To do so, however, this project must be at once attentive and critical. As Gail Weiss has shown, although there are risks for feminists in adopting a phenomenological methodology, these problems are not insurmountable.[53] In order to protect against them, the limits of Husserl's approach need to be made visible. In the context of my reading of *Ideas II*, it is the solipsism of Husserl's account of touch that needs to be addressed.[54]

Husserl's description of the constitution of the lived body through touch is initially framed as a solipsistic consideration in *Ideas II* (p. 144). This starting point puts Husserl in tension with a feminist, and specifically Irigaraian, recognition of the role of intercorporeal and loving touch in the constitution of subjectivity; the limits of the rapprochement between Husserl and Irigaray are located herein. A partial defense of Husserl is possible: the initially solipsistic method can be read as

[52] Namely, Natalie Depraz, Anthony Steinbock, Donn Welton, and Dan Zahavi, to give a non-exhaustive list. Husserl's genetic (and generative) phenomenology has a large part to play here. Though these readings are not feminist, they contribute to opening the field of Husserlian phenomenology to alternative visions. It is Donn Welton who coined the term "the other Husserl" (Welton 2000).

[53] Weiss (1999, pp. 41–43).

[54] The transcendental subjectivism of the phenomenological reduction represents a more general challenge for feminist appropriations of Husserlian phenomenology. As noted in Sect. 1, the reduction can be read in different ways. (1) The primacy of the phenomenological over the naturalistic (or natural scientific) attitude for Husserl—and the relative adequacy of the personalistic attitude in comparison to the naturalistic—allows lived bodies to be extracted from biologistic and naturalistic discourses that would relegate them to inert materiality and mechanism, to third-person processes. (See Heinämaa 2003, pp. 27–37). (2) The eidetic reduction can be read not as the search for essential sameness, but as a recognition of shared and generalized, contingent structures of subjectivity. As Linda Fisher proposes, this general account searches for "structural invariance *within* variance" (Fisher and Embree 2000, p. 29). (3) Rather than locating shared or normalized structures, the critical role of the reduction may be its ability to uncover the naturalization of what are taken to be "normal" ways of being. Johanna Oksala argues that, though such a reduction would be transcendental (in revealing the constitutive conditions of one's own system of normality), it is not a reduction to transcendental subjectivity alone. It must reveal contingent, sedimented schemas tied to language, history and culture. (Oksala 2006, pp. 239–240).

pointing, by means of its self-avowed gaps, to the need for an intercorporeal conception of embodiment. For the solipsistic approach reveals the impossibility of fully constituting one's body in isolation; the solipsistically constituted body remains, in Husserl's words, "a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing." (*Ideas II*, p. 159) In the next chapter of *Ideas II* (section two, chapter four), Husserl turns to intercorporeity, examining the role of empathy and vision not only in other-perception but also in the formation of one's bodily sense of self, or body image, as mediated through the perception of other bodies. (*Ideas II*, p. 167)

Despite this corrective, and provisional though Husserl's solipsism may be, it raises three lingering concerns. First, positing initial bodily formation as self-constitution abstracts from concrete developmental processes of childhood experience and overlooks the role of the mother or primary caregiver in such development. Although Husserl seems cognizant of the mother's and caregiver's primary role in the formation of the child's sense of self and of other—acknowledging the importance of the mother's "heard voice" in a footnote in *Ideas II*[55]—the structuring role of other-touch is elided in Husserl's account. Where Husserl acknowledges an other-touch, or hetero-affection, this is identified with the touch of the world on my body (e.g. the tabletop's touch on my hand). Within the solipsistic frame, the living touch of the maternal body, to which the localization, sustenance and sociality of the tactile body seem to primarily owe, becomes a methodological blindspot.[56]

Second, the affect of being-touched, produced through my body's own movement (e.g. my hand moving across the tabletop or touching my other hand), seems different in important ways from feeling oneself being-touched by another. We have to do with phenomenologically asymmetrical experiences of touch. Though the first is conditioned by my felt self-movement, or kinaesthesis, the second is dependent on another's movement. This is hence experienced not as motivated but as undergone. It includes an unpredictable and unwilled dimension that gives my felt body as not of my own making, as both mine yet other. This does not mean that the body is constituted as object or inert thing, for being-touched is still *felt* as passive, subjective undergoing; Husserl's notion of receptivity as minimum of activity applies here. It does, however, mean that decentered and intercorporeal dimensions of the constitution of tactile embodiment, dimensions irreducible to self-touch, are elided by Husserl's solipsistic approach.

Finally, it is unclear what effect solipsistic abstraction has on the theory of the lived body thus conceived. We must ask whether Husserl's prioritization of self-touch over other-touch, and of touch over vision and hearing, can be sustained once

[55] "[I]n the child the self-produced voice, and then, analogously, the heard voice, serves as the first bridge for the Objectification of the Ego or for the formation of the *'alter'."* (*Ideas II*, p. 95n).

[56] It remains a question whether Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty's example of one hand touching the other may be transferred to Husserl. In "To paint the invisible," Irigaray describes Merleau-Ponty's example of self-touch as an attempt to constitute a self-enclosed body, "cut off from others, giving himself to be seen as a separate 'object'… exclud[ing] his mother by closing up through tactile self-affection… In order to forget the time when he was touched without touching." (Irigaray 2004, p. 396). Husserl, in contrast, acknowledges the hetero-affectivity of touch and takes being-touched as a phenomenon in its own right. His solipsistic framing of touch means, however, that being-touched is construed as contact with the world rather than with other living bodies.

this abstraction is put aside. Notably, it should be asked whether the position of intercorporeity, empathy and vision as supplementary to the study of touch in *Ideas II* allows their central and constitutive role in structuring lived embodiment to be thought.[57] Even if we acknowledge that touch cannot be conceived prior to a social context, the role of sociality and intercorporeity in tactility still needs to be addressed. By way of a response to this concern, I will examine the ways in which Husserl's theory of touch can be employed (or reconfigured) to think the relation between felt embodiment and social–historical context.

To be precise, the merit of Husserl's account of touch consists in its theorization of a dynamic and non-essentialist embodiment that runs prior to dichotomies of subject/object and activity/passivity. Too often the body is considered a neutral slate where differences of gender, race, class, and sexuality (to name but a few axes of social construction) are imprinted or inscribed. The model that I believe is made possible by Husserl's analysis of sensings and localization (though not developed by him) is one where social forces not only mark bodies, but bodies form themselves intercorporeally within the social, cultural, and political field. This is not a top–down inscription (culture or discourse imprinting nature or body), nor a bottom-up causality (biology causing representation). It is rather a question of bodies that are affectively differentiated and intersubjectively constituted as forces in social interaction. For Husserl, sensings and, in particular, affects are what first open up the dimension of subjectivity for bodies. But the subjectivities that emerge are motivated by other conditions and develop through further dimensionalities. Sensings, then, can help us answer the question of how objectification and social positionality are generative of particular modes of embodiment and lived experiences, without those bodies being the mere mirrors of their oppression. An understanding of the lived body as a network or system of sensings allows us to answer this question without presuming *either* that the body preexists its situation, its positionality within a social world, *or* that social norms have ontological priority to bodies, which they come to imprint as form to matter.

It should be noted that my use of sensings to understand embodiment does not constitute an appeal to an uncritical, or unproblematized, experience—to an immediacy that, Joan Scott has argued, "precludes analysis of the workings of [the ideological] system and its historicity."[58] It is rather an attempt to overcome another dichotomy, sometimes repeated in feminist theory, between lived experience and discourse, body and social structure.[59] It is an attempt to think together lived experience *and* its situated nature. In other words, feminist phenomenology can

[57] This question draws on Derrida's reading of *Ideas II* in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Derrida's concern is with the way in which visibility, and worldly extension, are taken to be supplementary to the tactility of hands in Husserl's analysis. This supplementarity hides their role as constitutive outside (Derrida 2005, p. 179).

[58] Joan Scott levels this critique at methodologies that rely on a direct appeal to experience (Scott 1992, p. 25). This objection is sometimes repeated against feminist phenomenology: phenomenology describes experience but cannot critically point to its underlying social conditions.

[59] Central here is Linda Martín Alcoff's response to Scott (Alcoff 2000, pp. 44–51). Moreover, the body-representation dichotomy is undermined in different ways in the work of Gatens (1996), Grosz (1994), and Lloyd (1993). Though presented as a critique of this dichotomy, the work of Butler (1993) arguably also intensifies it. (See Colebrook 2000, pp. 76–93).

show how we have the bodily experiences that we do given the social and historical structures of which we partake—and how our bodies are not mere constructs, epiphenomena of ideological systems, but the encumbered and thick nexus of meaning (often implicit) through which sociality, historicity, materiality and subjectivity intertwine. Bodies (speaking, thinking, feeling, objectified subjects) are, then, more than mere objects. Bodily experience can be the ground of our awareness of social structures of oppression and the site where complicity, subversion or resistance are enacted. Here, we need to reflect on how social–historical context is implicated in the phenomenology of touch—to ask after the sociality *of* touch.

In affirming the interdependence of self-affection and hetero-affection,[60] the Husserlian theory of affectivity can be read as presenting one avenue for thinking the sociality of touch. The receptivity of my body—the affections towards which I turn—are a matter of contextual contrast and interest, as we have seen. I think that historicity, sociality and culture can be understood to condition this contrast in at least two ways: (1) The affective relief of the world can be understood as a sedimented social space. This space has not only been configured by the repeated movements, actions and gestures of multiple bodies within it—mapping out possible routes for my body while foreclosing others—it is also a space mediated by representations, discourses, and structures of power. (2) My body finds itself situated within this social world, an intersubjectively and historically constituted affective relief, to which it is called to respond in already mapped (though not fully determinate) ways. Social positionality is inscribed in the lived body through habit. Habit works differentially; habit is at once a function of my body's location within different systems of oppression and it is generative of my concrete embodiment as receptivity, felt capacity ("I can"), and style. My body's way of touching, what it feels available to its touch, and how it responds to being-touched are configured accordingly.

It is in this sense that women's bodies, in many modern Western cultures, are perceived to be more touchable than others, to be objects for a reifying and sexualizing, particularly masculine, touch.[61] In response to this possessive touch, feminine embodiment seems habituated to a certain defensive, tactile self-containment. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's work on feminine spatiality, we may say that, within a social field where it constantly risks unwanted and intrusive touch, feminine embodiment becomes constituted as occupying a narrow and enclosed space, inhibited from touching upon the space of others.[62] What is important to notice is the way in which a particular mode of touching becomes normalized as the model of touch (as in Merleau-Ponty's examples in Sect. 2). Thus,

[60] Zahavi (1999, pp. 123–124).

[61] Bartky (1990, p. 68).

[62] Young (2005, pp. 44–45). I am extending Young's analysis of women's habituated bodily "self-reference" in "Throwing Like a Girl" to the tactile body (Young 2005, pp. 35–37) in order to understand how a feminine body can constitute itself in terms of a form of protective self-touch—by holding my body tightly, keeping my limbs close around me, and avoiding contact in public spaces, for instance. It should be clear that I attribute this confined embodiment not to female bodies in general, or in themselves, but to the social space that positions female bodies as mere "objects" available for masculine touch. As shown in Sect. 2, this grasping and reifying touch is itself a deformation of what touch can do.

exploratory and reifying touch, which treats what it touches as a mere object, becomes the norm for touching (assumed neutral but in fact naturalized as a capacity of male, white, heterosexual and "able" bodies).[63] Within this schema, being-touched is identified with a passivity that cannot at once be subject.[64] While recognizing the deformative violence of reifying touch on women's bodies, it is important to understand the experience of *undergoing* or *feeling* oneself being-touched to already imply a certain subjectivity, a passivity inseparable from activity. Gender, but also race, sexuality, class and culture are what bodies do and feel, not only how they are positioned and objectified socially. This is not to deny the alienation produced by social objectification. In undergoing (or feeling oneself at risk of) being touched, objectification comes to be felt (or "interiorized"[65]) as the tactile sensible exposure of my body—a lived ground that can motivate gestures of protection, conformity or subversion, but also of empathy, feminist reflection and activism. The protective gesture of holding one's body close, limbs touching—as well as the gesture of two hands touching described by Irigaray above—can thus be read as more than the passive effects of an oppressive situation. Though they are certainly products of objectification and habituation, they also reveal possible ways of living, thematizing, and subverting or confirming such an alienating situation *at the level of felt embodiment.*[66] These gestures of self-touch are hence neither natural to female bodies, nor purely ideological effects of their social positionality; they are ways for bodies that feel themselves objectified to live through and respond to an oppressive social context.

In this vein, it is important to question the identification of subjectivity and activity with one mode (or metaphysics) of touch, an identification that elides other experiences of touching and being-touched, in turn constructed as deficient or marginal. Rather, it is objectifying touch in its forgetting of the indeterminacy, affectivity and heterogeneity of touch that distorts touch, positing the mutual

[63] Touch is not only gendered but also racialized in modern social contexts. Interracial touch is sometimes represented as exoticism, sometimes aggression and transgression, and at other times pollution, depending on who is touching whom. This requires a consideration of how racialized feminine bodies are positioned as objects of discovery and exploitation for male, imperialist touch. Though it is usually read as a desire to expose Muslim women's bodies to the male gaze, the colonial French project to unveil Algerian women, with its emphasis on the exotic, could also be read as a desire for tactile possession. (See the analysis of the everyday attitudes and violent dream content of French colonial subjects in Fanon (1965, pp. 44–46)). In addition, see Ahmed (2006, p. 107) for the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality orients touch, and can be disoriented through it.

[64] This at once excludes the subjectivity of touched bodies—or bodies positioned as "feminine"—and posits the affective closure of "masculine" bodies to being-touched, constructing them as absolute subjects that owe no debt to passivity. What I am pointing to here is the way in which the economy of touch works to constitute both feminine and masculine embodiment in patriarchal society.

[65] "Interiorization" may be an inadequate term to designate this process, since it is a term that presupposes an inside-outside or consciousness-body split.

[66] Crossing one's legs, for instance, is not only a gesture of defensive, enclosed self-touch, but also one that is produced through reinforced social habituation—as a socially sanctioned route to respond to the objectifying male gaze and touch. Often, then, the lines between conformity and protection blur.

exclusion of touching and being-touched in one body.[67] Here, we may ask whether touch can continue to be spoken of as a generic sense—the same touch instantiated in different contexts.[68] If sociality, historicity and culture are not external to touch, but configure its shape, texture and sense from within, then it is not simply the social context of touch that is in question. What is at stake is the social reference and positionality *constitutive* of touch[69]; the relation of touching and being-touched, whether inter- or intra-corporeal, has to already be conceived as social. Touch, then, is not a solipsistic "sense." It is not first self-given only to be afterwards molded by social relations. If touch were not already openness to, and a call for, sociality (as co-conditional with it), then its situatedness within the social world would remain accidental to it. In this sense, sociality and historicity should not be understood to fracture touch, but to structure it from within.[70] These dimensions are not merely mediating of touching and being-touched, they are formative of how touch takes place. To say that touch is mediated by sociality is to assume two things, touching and touched, between which a relation is needed. But touching and touched are generated through their relation, an interval which is spanned by the affectivity of touch-sensings. Touch cannot be abstracted from the sensings which embody and materialize it. In this sense too, a revolution in the economy of touch requires social change. But if touch is already insinuated within social space, then the power of touch to render indeterminate the schemas of subject/object and active/passive can also work to destabilize that space—neither alone, nor mutely, but in the form of gestures that seek to touch against the grain of dominant and objectifying norms.[71] Another hitherto forgotten touch, to which both Husserl and Irigaray point, can then be recognized at the core of embodiment.

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[67] Thus the critique, drawn from Heidegger, of the metaphysics of objects as a historicized Western construction should not be limited to vision. It is important to recognize how a particular objectifying touch—where touching is absolute subject and touched is mere object—has become naturalized in our culture; this covers over and renders determinate the indeterminacy of subject-object that is the promise of bodily touch. It is hence not sufficient, in order to rethink embodiment, to appeal to touch over vision, as in Iris Marion Young's imaginative construction of "Breasted Experience" (Young 2005, p. 81). Touch, too, must be subject to feminist critique.

[68] As has been asked by other readers of Husserl, notably Derrida (2005, pp. 161–162, 180).

[69] I borrow the term "social reference" from Weiss (1999, p. 47). Linda Martín Alcoff, Kelly Oliver and Gail Weiss address this question of the relation between subjectivity and social context or positionality, thinking social horizon not as external to but as formative of subjectivity. My work owes to theirs. See Alcoff (2006), Oliver (2001) and Weiss (2008).

[70] This is an attempt to negotiate two different accounts of the place of sociality in felt embodiment: that of Jacques Derrida where language, sociality and others are the "constitutive outside" that *fracture* the immediacy and self-givenness of touch (Derrida 2005, pp. 180–181), and that of Dan Zahavi for whom sociality *accompanies* but cannot be said to mediate my relation to my own body (Zahavi 1999, pp. 134–137).

[71] Frantz Fanon points to this socially transformative power of touch at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* when he asks: "Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?" (Fanon 1967, p. 231).

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