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The Unthinkable Body

Challenges of Embodiment in Religion,
Politics, and Ethics

Edited by

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Before the Caress

The Expansion of Intimacy in Suspension

Rachel Aumiller

Many of us have had the recent experience of being pulled back and forth between two extremes. During the shortest days of winter during a pandemic, I have the experience of creating boundaries, of declining invitations, of withdrawing from the outside world. From a space of lived reduction, I fantasize about being together again. But when our reunion finally arrives, the sensation of togetherness is a bit jarring. Oscillating between being-in-isolation and being-together is itself disorienting. Periods of lockdown reduced our interactions to screen time. And without touch life began to feel abstract. Yet even now as we gather in person again, our togetherness feels restricted. We cannot be together exactly as we would wish. It's not simply the recent disappearance of several ill colleagues that reminds us that the situation is not really over. Nor is it the presence of a few persistent mask-wearers or distance-keepers that hinders our attempt to return to normal. The experience is like touching an estranged lover again as if for the first time after years of separation and silence. Our lost intimacy returns to us with the thrill of newness in what is deeply familiar. Yet togetherness itself recalls how deeply it was disrupted even when we pretend to be on the other side of conflict.

In response to global crisis, our collective consciousness oscillates between periods of obsessive attention and sudden spouts of willful amnesia. At one moment the presence of the pandemic seeps into every interaction and conversation. Suddenly the same crisis seems to withdraw from the skin of our shared experience without actually going anywhere. And yet the rhythms of our various collective oscillations are often out of sync, depending on one's local situation, which presents itself as universal. Offering a phenomenological account of a contemporary global event is challenging because the moment one steps forward to share one's careful reflection, the world seems to have moved on. It's especially disorienting to write about an experience such as a pandemic whose presence fluctuates with the seasons. In the depths of winter when infection numbers are at the highest, I write about the overwhelming sensation of isolation. But as I reach out to share this experience at in-person conferences in the spring, isolation itself withdraws. Being-together-again eclipses isolation, making me question the present relevance of a time before. Is it really necessary to return to the experience of isolation now that we are reunited? What is the relevance of a period of separation for our rekindled intimacy?

I continue to reflect on the sensation of isolation and the disruption of being-in-touch for several reasons. Firstly, despite my own desire to move on, the pandemic, of course, is not over and is only compounded by other epidemics and global crises. Secondly, the heightened experience of pandemic isolation resonates with many other experiences of haptic disruption or deprivation. I think of breakups, of the death of a loved one, of the experience of neglect or violation. Certain haptic experiences, as well as the experience of their withdrawal, bring an end to touch as we know it. The disruption of touch creates a hesitancy at the beginning of each new touch. Haptic hesitation distrusts touch itself. But I would argue that this very same hesitancy creates new possibilities for desire, intimacy, and transformative haptic relations.

I turn to Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of 'the caress' to consider an ethical mode of erotic touching that oscillates between hesitation and desirous sensation.¹ The caress questions its own right or rightness in each instance. Even while bringing bodies together, the caress holds open space for the uncertain desires and concerns of those it brings in touch. Levinas situates his caress between two bodies, a male and a female, the lover and beloved, a caresser and the caressed. However, recent contemporary cultural crises involving the question of touch have revealed the need for a mode of ethical intimacy responsible for more than two. The impact of the #metoo movement inspired renewed conversations around the ethics of intimacy and bodily autonomy. Although the stories shared often focused on experiences between two people, the aim of the movement was not only to hold individuals accountable but to transform local and global cultures of touch. The pandemic reiterated the demand for an expanded ethical mode that radically questions practices involving bodily proximity and contact, not only in intimacy, but in all aspects of moving through the world. The question of consent, already laden with ambiguity, becomes even more complicated with the reminder that the consequences of touching touch more than those directly in touch. This intimate 'we' who is formed by the caress doesn't escape accountability to other individuals and collectives for whom one is also responsible. Others who are not present remain vulnerable to the potential consequences of our private touch. Rather than simplifying haptic relations, the reduction of touch throws all instances of touching into crisis, revealing the inherently political character of the caress. Ironically, from a space of isolation, one is given the opportunity to meditate on the global reach of one's caress.

In her response to Levinas in "The Fecundity of the Caress," Luce Irigaray describes a kind of heightened responsiveness that begins from a space of isolation.² Irigaray also situates the caress between two lovers, adopting the figures of

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 84–94; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 254–77.

² Luce Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

the male caresser and passive feminine flesh in order to disrupt and transform touch within a traditional heterosexual framework. However, one of the most profound moments of the essay, in my view, occurs in a moment of isolation in what Irigaray identifies as “a caress before the caress.”³ Levinas’ caress depicts an erotic experience and ethical relationality guided by ambiguity and uncertainty. Irigaray’s “caress before the caress” offers an expanded ethics of intimacy for moments when we must hold each other at a distance. One’s relationship to this moment “before the caress” is critical because it informs and transforms the way we are together.

The term ‘before’ has three senses in the way Lyotard describes “the body as before the law.”⁴ ‘Before’ indicates an imaginary chronological moment in my timeline when I was yet undetermined by the other. I imagine that this moment recurs at the beginning of each new encounter. This time ‘before’ is also spatial. I stand before a new encounter. In this moment of undetermined desire or ‘erotic suspension,’ we cannot yet name what we are to each other or what we will become. We cannot yet predict whether the magnetism between our bodies will repel or attract us. Before also indicates something underneath all language and touching. Beneath our discourses concerning consent, there is another kind of negotiation that cannot be fully captured by language. Nor can it escape language. The caress before the caress indicates a relationship to intimacy underlying each instance of touching, which cannot be fully grasped by that touch. In the caress before the caress, I locate a queer, feminist ethics of intimacy, born from the experience of isolation, waiting, disrupted belief, and suspended desire. In relinquishing familiar forms of being-together, erotic desire transforms through, what Lucy Lippard calls, “the isolation of caressability.”⁵

In this exploration of the disruption and reduction of touch, I employ the term *haptic dogmatism* to indicate the way unconscious belief is embedded in haptic relations, rituals, and habits. Underneath our professed claims about who we are and what we stand for, there is another necessary layer of embodied belief that orients us in the world. These non-linguistic belief systems can be disrupted through experiences of injury and violation or crises that interrupt our daily routines and gatherings. The disruption of our specific forms of being-in-touch is a crisis of belief. It’s also an ontological crisis that momentarily or permanently frustrates our fundamental way of grasping ourselves through our haptic relations to others. I first locate haptic dogmatism within everyday embodied practices and relationships. But on a secondary level, haptic dogmatism also describes an attitude or active response to the disruption of one’s specific forms of being-in-touch. Some people resist disruption in the face of crisis, insisting on

³ Ibid., 136.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, “Prescription,” trans. Christopher Fynsk, *L’esprit créateur* 31, no. 1 (1991): 15–32.

⁵ Lucy R. Lippard, “Eros Presumptive,” in *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 217.

their fundamental right to come into touch as they please. In contrast to haptic dogmatism, I offer the term *haptic skepticism* to describe a response to the disruption of touch that dwells with the question of touch, allowing the specific form of one's desire to be momentarily suspended so that intimacy may take new forms.

The caress before the caress is a space of suspended self-certainty, in which touch may question itself. The crisis of touch, brought about by a pandemic, for example, magnifies the experience of ethical or epistemological uncertainty. But I would argue that the moment of erotic suspension before the caress exists within all moments of isolation and being-together. What happens when we erotically lean into suspension? The disruption of our usual forms of being-together may be an opportunity for transformed ethical relations, the expansion of intimacy, and heightened sensation and pleasure.

1. Erotic Suspension as Method, Experience, and Responsiveness

Even against the backdrop of world crises too numerous to count, life seems to carry on as usual. The demand to produce does not cease. At the same time, it feels as though life has slowed to a standstill. I'm paralyzed by the shock of the expected: another mass shooting, the reversal of Roe. The world horizon, which I can't bear to imagine, looks blank. I'm suspended in time. I'm also suspended between two contradictory experiences of time. I use the term *erotic suspension* to offer a phenomenological description of the sensations of being stuck, of the paralysis of judgment, the postponement of familiar forms of comfort and pleasure, and uncertain desire. Erotic suspension also describes the sensation of being caught between two kinds of relationships to other bodies and lived time: proximity and distance, progress and paralysis, intimacy and distrust, isolation and togetherness. The temporary suspension of in-person social activities during the pandemic slowed and sometimes halted the rhythms of dating and hookup cultures, provoking the question, what happens to erotic desire when life slows to a standstill? However, the experience of suspension during crisis is erotic beyond its connection to romance or sexuality. With Irigaray, Lippard, José Esteban Muñoz, Audre Lorde, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Sam Dolbear as my interlocutors, I return to Plato's understanding of eros as a fundamental drive that pulls an individual out of oneself, propelling one forward and outwards into the world. This drive toward self-extension or overcoming is equally about a transformed inward relationship that takes place in private as much as it does in intimacy or in a crowd. An ethics of intimacy that reaches beyond two, probing the global responsibility of our most private experience, requires this notion of eros as the evolving relationship between one and oneself and one and all. I begin by exploring the passive and active aspects of suspension as something that happens to us and as something we perform. The term erotic suspension makes me think of performance artists, who suspend themselves from their piercings. With this im-

age, I envision an aesthetic practice that yields new ethical relations through patience, caution, risk, pleasure, and discomfort.

Following Plato, eros is the desire for unity. It begins with the phantasy of self-fulfillment achieved through the proximity of bodies fused together in sexual intimacy or through other communal activities.⁶ When our familiar forms of being-together are taken away, eros takes the shapeless form of Thanatos. Eros is expressed in the intense longing for bodily reunion, but it is equally found in the sensation of being pulled apart, of being separated.⁷ The prolonged distance between us splits my sense of self in two, making me feel disoriented and incomplete. Is erotic suspension merely paralysis? Or can we find movement in suspension? Is suspension itself a kind of movement that generates new kinds of desires and relations?

The concept of suspension or *epochē* drives the history of phenomenology. But within this tradition, suspension oscillates between a description of a method that orients us in the world and a disorienting experience. Suspension oscillates between a practice performed at the beginning of an encounter and something that happens to us, bringing a belief or relationship to an end. In the early twentieth century, Edmund Husserl formulates suspension (*epochē*) as a methodological starting point.⁸ By suspending one's beliefs and disbeliefs (about what is true or real), the phenomenologist draws closer to her own experience as she leans into the world that envelops her body. *Epochē* is a relational activity that cultivates a heightened awareness of one's own sensations. It attends to the surface of experience, the skin as the site of beings-in-touch. But in the original sense of *epochē* used by the ancient skeptics called the Pyrrhonists, suspension describes a disruptive experience that often throws one's relationship to herself and world into doubt, resulting in an experience of momentary psychological paralysis, the experience of being-suspended.⁹ When we take these two senses of *epochē* together, suspension may be understood as a process of call-and-response. Suspension as a methodological starting point aims to bring us closer to our own sensational and affective experience, to each other, and the world. But closeness – whether in the form of attentiveness or a caress – often leads us to the experience of lived contradiction, conflict, and crisis.

⁶ A reference to Diotima's ladder, see Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989), 210a–12a.

⁷ A reference to Aristophanes' circle people split in two, see Plato, *Symposium*, 189c–93e.

⁸ Husserl's account of the phenomenological reduction in *Ideas* emphasizes touch as primary mode of perception rather than sight, see Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer, 1989).

⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

The complications of being-together frustrate our phenomenological accounts of who we are and what we mean to each other. My beliefs and accounts, my practices and rituals, that oriented me in the world are momentarily suspended. This second moment of being-suspended, however, also requires a response. How do we respond to the experience of disruption from a state of psychological paralysis and disorientation?

My reflection on erotic suspension during the pandemic oscillates between a first-person singular voice and a first-person plural. I use a first-person singular voice to reflect on suspension in isolation, in which it becomes clear that I can only know my own experience. In isolation, even my sense of my own reality becomes blurry without others to give me definition. Moving from isolation back to being-together, the first-person singular also describes experiences of touch that highlight my inability to fully grasp how another experiences the sensation of my caress.

Phenomenological description always begins in the middle of experience in the thickness of sensuality and relationality. But in another sense, it begins from a place of isolation, waiting in suspense for another's uncertain response. Unlike psychoanalysis, which attends to peculiar cases to shed insight on the structure of drives and desires common to all, phenomenology often tends to the most mundane and common descriptions of everyday life. It expresses the desire for connection, the desire to be relatable. To avoid the temptation of projecting one's experience as universal, phenomenology must hold itself open to doubt, recalling its modest origins in skepticism. Phenomenological description says, "This is what it's like for me ... to exist in this body, to move through the world, to come into touch." The description is layered with the unspoken question, "Can you relate?" The question must pose itself anew to each interlocutor or reader. I later locate a parallel to this method in the ethics of consent found in Levinas' caress. The question of the other's desire must pose itself anew – whether verbally or non-verbally – in each instance of touching. Intimacy can only be ethical if it makes itself vulnerable in this way, allowing itself to be called into question. In this sense, the method that I describe and employ is itself a caress. There's a heightened vulnerability in attempting to draw near to others while holding oneself open to doubt, since it is always possible that the other won't relate to the description of my experience or desires. 'I' may fail to locate its phenomenological viewpoint within an ethical 'we' who shares her desires and values. The stronger the desire for connection, the greater the risk of isolation.

A phenomenological approach that reaches toward new ethical relations adds an additional layer of vulnerability: it begins with a description of sensation and affect, layered with a description of an unfulfilled desire, layered with a question (Can you relate?), layered with a request (for a form of relationality and intimacy that does not yet exist). In isolation, 'I' wait(s) in anticipation for a being-together that does not yet have form. It says, "This is what I desire. This is how I want to be in the world with others or with you in particular. Can you relate?" At the same time, this notion of a self that begins from a place of isolation is imaginary. The

individual must make an ethical appeal – not to a community to come – but to her imperfect communities, which form her from the beginning despite her methodological starting point.

In his description of queer desire as situated between hope and disappointment, José Esteban Muñoz talks about dwelling in an “epistemologically and ontologically humble” state.¹⁰ This humble state describes a methodological approach that’s based in the lived experience of erotic suspension. He defines ‘queerness’ itself as the experience of suspension, in which desire reaches toward an undetermined form of intimacy and eroticism. As he writes in the powerful opening lines of *Cruising Utopia*:

“Queerness is not yet here ... We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality ... Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”¹¹

When Muñoz speaks in the first-person plural, he extends an invitation for companions that haven’t yet arrived. He speaks in a ‘we’ that is not yet. He also invites his imperfect communities to lean into the sensation of their current lack. Perhaps the companions we wait for will be found in the transformation of our existing relationships. Being-in-suspension seems to wait in isolation for a better form of being-together in the future. But in this moment of falling out of relation with each other and ourselves, a kind of being-together that we cannot yet grasp begins to take form.

In erotic suspension, desire simultaneously leans-in and pulls-away. It withdraws from what is while allowing itself to be pulled into the unknown. As Muñoz puts it, “Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness’s pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel.”¹² Leaning into the sensation of our unfulfilled and even unknown desires is a way of pulling back, of hesitating in our current relations. I pull back to question my desire while also attending to the hesitations, desires, and sensations of others.

2. Losing Touch: Self-Withdrawal and Expansion

During the pandemic we became familiar with living in a constant state of withdrawal, treating the other as a potential contagion, navigating our way through crowded streets while maintaining a calculated distance. I cast the proximity of

¹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009), 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 185.

the other into doubt, until they receive a negative test. In order to be certain, in order to be safe, I isolate myself. From a space of isolation, I can at least have some confidence in my own precautions. Yet self-certainty secured in isolation soon gives rise to the most extreme forms of self-doubt. The suspicion cast on the other falls back onto the self. Prolonged isolation amplifies self-doubt to more extreme existential levels, resulting in radical skepticism bordering on solipsism. In isolation it is difficult to know if my experiences are similar to that of others. Is everyone else also isolating? Am I the only one? Does everyone else also feel lonely and overwhelmed? Am I the only one? Skepticism can become a permanent position or manifest itself in a passing thought. If I exist only in my apartment, do I really exist?

I go on a walk with a friend in the flesh, at last. While maintaining a distance, I reach out and grasp her arm as if to confirm her existence. By confirming her existence, I'm filled with relief at the simultaneous confirmation of my own existence. We exist. Everything will be okay. A small touch can bring us to our senses. A little nudge can pull us out of the depths of spiraling introspection and self-doubt. Touch can set us in motion when we're experiencing a moment of epistemic or psychological paralysis. Without touch my very existence becomes abstract to me. Lisa Guenther's critical phenomenology of isolation in *Solitary Confinement. Social Death and Its Afterlife* meditates on the most severe experiences of touch deprivation.¹³ She reflects on why one's sense of self in isolation threatens to come undone:

“[T]here is something about the exclusion of other living beings from the space we inhabit and the absence of even the *possibility* of touching or being touched by another that threatens to unhinge us ... we rely on a network of others, not just to survive or to keep ourselves entertained but also to support our capacity to make sense of the world, to distinguish between reality and illusion, to follow a train of thought or a causal sequence, and even to tell where our own bodily existence begins and ends.”¹⁴

The experience of doubt in the deprivation of touch is the experience of falling out of relationship with the world and thus with one's self. As Guenther further clarifies in a footnote, “Perhaps in order to sustain a sense of my own body, I need not only to be able to touch myself but also to be touched by others.”¹⁵ In the context of the pandemic, our experiences of self-isolation and being isolated from one's self were, of course, extremely different. Some found themselves alone in their homes, while others were unable to escape the claustrophobic proximity of their family units. The capacity to self-isolate, whether alone or with others, was a privilege, yet the rise of mental health issues corresponding with periods of lockdown revealed the serious risk of the safety of isolation. We might question to what extent the choice to isolate at the risk of self-alienation is a choice.

¹³ Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement. Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 145–46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 261, fn 2.

The deprivation of touch throws all possibilities of touching into question. The more one adjusts to the sensation of haptic deprivation, the more each mundane instance of touch becomes a tiny moment of paralysis. Two awkward bodies fumble, as they speechlessly negotiate how to greet each other. Living in a state of reduced touch can itself become a negative haptic dogma (*noli me tangere*). ‘Holding the other at a distance’ is at once the safest and riskiest mode of moving through the world. The practitioner of reduced touch must oscillate between her fierce commitment to protect the known and unknown vulnerabilities of herself and of those who might be endangered by her proximity with the risk of losing her sense of self. By withdrawing from the risks of the unknown, an individual holds potential danger at a distance, but she also pushes away potential experiences of transformative touch. Those who have been violated by touch or who cannot afford risk may cling to this dogma out of necessity. This negative haptic dogma – *don’t touch me* – is often the result of another kind of haptic dogma that doesn’t question its own right to touch. The dogmatic insistence on one’s right to touch expresses itself in harassment and assault but also by communities who refuse to reflect on how their practices of being-together might place others at risk. Those who insist on the right to dominate or endanger another through their dogmatic relationship to touch force others to keep the world at arm’s length. When experience teaches us that the proximity of others is dangerous, the question of self-preservation becomes the forced “choice” between the risk of losing oneself in solitude or losing oneself to the dominant will or unreflective actions of others.

The dominant touch of the dogmatist who doesn’t question their right to touch not only threatens the bodily autonomy of others. This kind of haptic dogmatism deprives others of their ability to question their own undetermined desires surrounding touch. Haptic dogmatism deprives another of the active practice of erotic suspension, in which one stands before the possibility of touching or being touched with an attitude of active curiosity that questions what one might want to experience. In these moments of uncertainty, in which we oscillate between our desires and hesitations concerning how and with whom we might want to come into touch, we, above all, are coming into touch with ourselves. The destruction of an individual’s potential haptic relationships with others destroys the space in which she comes into touch with herself through doubt and undetermined desire.

Haptic dogmatism may take the form of violation, neglect, or the pursuit of pleasure at another’s expense. I also find a subtler form of haptic dogmatism in the stance of those who believe they know with certainty beforehand what they want from touch and are confident that touch will give them what they anticipate. This perspective belongs to someone who has never been made vulnerable by touch. Classical phenomenology and hermeneutics of touch is based on the Husserlian premise that touch is reciprocal. With each touch, I am touched back. Touch itself touches back. However, these same frameworks have an impulse to

reduce haptic experience to its epistemic value.¹⁶ Touch is, no doubt, epistemic, the condition for self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. I can only grasp myself by grasping the world. In the withdrawal of the touch of the other, I become blurry to myself. However, some experiences of being touched mirror the experience of not being touched by destroying the foundation of self-knowledge through active relationship with others. Experiences of neglect, alienation, and violation only expose the incomprehensible senselessness of abuse. There are also experiences of pleasure so intense and surprising that they may, for a moment, disorientate our fundamental grasp of who we are and how we relate to the world. The position of the phenomenologist of touch, who reduces haptic experience to knowledge, is that of the master who shields himself from vulnerability by maintaining a sense of control over touch. I question how the impulse to shield oneself from haptic skepticism, the recognition of uncertainty surrounding haptic experience, makes being-in-touch dangerous for those who are already alienated from touch, often due to their experiences of touch. How does the experience of a touch of doubt allow for the transformation of touch relationships?

The suspension of self in isolation can equally occur in solitude or with others. I do not take the risks of isolation lightly or prescribe needless suffering to already vulnerable individuals. But I question what can be gained when those in a position of privilege lean into self-disruption when crisis requires us to radically question our personal, communal, and global haptic practices and beliefs. In her essay “Eros Presumptive,” Lucy Lippard explores the emergence of a new self-relation in the aesthetic experience of abstraction.¹⁷ She specifically questions whether abstract minimalist art, which lacks determinable bodies, can have an erotic charge. She argues that in the absence of traditional objects of desire, erotic desire mirrors its object, taking unrecognizable shapes.¹⁸ When eros is deprived of familiar objects or avenues of desire, new kinds of sensations emerge. I extend Lippard’s analysis of the transformation of eros in the aesthetic experience of minimalism to the experience of isolation or limited contact. The negative space that separates us, that separates me from myself, also becomes a new medium through which we remain in touch without touching. Eros is maintained as a negative relation in the denial or deprivation of desire. In a risky zone of self-abstraction, I grasp myself by my own uncertainty. In the suspension of one’s usual forms of comfort and pleasure involving being-together, “the rhythms of erotic experience can be slowed to a near standstill and convey all the more effectively a languorous sensuality.”¹⁹ For a moment my existence seems to be without meaning or structure. But the threat of becoming an abstraction is at

¹⁶ See for example Richard Kearney recent phenomenology of touch grounded in hermeneutics: *Touch. Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021).

¹⁷ Lippard, “Eros Presumptive.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

once the opportunity to experience the sensation of being momentarily undetermined. Eros stirs in a negative space that otherwise feels like absence.

What new forms of auto-eroticism and shared intimacy can emerge in the friction between self-expansion and self-withdrawal, between self-certainty and self-doubt, between bodies-in-touch and bodies-at-a-distance? Amber Jamilla Musser locates the tension between self-expansion and abstraction in Audre Lorde's vision of the erotic as the force that sends familiar forms into chaos, giving birth to something new: "Lorde describes the erotic as 'a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings' ... The erotic is both something that belongs to individuals and something that cannot be contained by them."²⁰ I lean into the thrill of the unknown shapes of what I might become. Erotic suspension releases another and myself from my projections and expectations. It creates the possibility for us to appear on terms not yet known. It frees me, it frees her, not to not appear at all.

3. Ethical Uncertainty and Queer Hesitation Before the Caress

There are those who flee self-doubt during crisis by carrying on as if nothing has happened, clinging to their specific habits and traditions. Business-as-usual holds self-doubt at a distance. Yet, as Simone de Beauvoir argues, an ethical response to crisis demands *a touch of self-doubt*, a moment of suspension in which one questions, "Is this choice responsible and caring?"²¹ The uncertainty that frustrates epistemology fuels ethics, prompting us to continually question ourselves. Ethics has an erotic structure. It drives forward in its unfulfillment. To be ethical is to continually question what it means to be ethical in each instance without arriving at any certainty: "Morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning."²² The pandemic requires us to question the way how we come into touch. There are those who respond to the crisis of touch by dogmatically clinging to their rights and sense of rightness. More specifically, this certainty is an insistence on one's right to touch as one pleases.

The opportunity to doubt our touch in each instance – is this safe, responsible, caring, pleasurable? – creates the possibility for new erotic relations in the ethical practice of haptic skepticism, which throws the dogmatic domination over touch into crisis. We learn that touching is not just a personal or private matter. The ethical imperative to question the way we touch has global consequences. But how does one navigate touch from a space of uncertainty and disorientation? The

²⁰ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic. The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 54; quoted in Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess. Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2018), 63.

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, NY: Open Road, 2015), 74–78.

²² *Ibid.*

question of touch splits me into two. I've had to teach myself to withdraw, to hold the other at arm's length. At the same time, I long to pull my loved ones near, to dance with strangers, to expose myself to risk, to risk exposing others to my risk. My split desire is reflected in my conflicting ethical convictions concerning proximity and distance. During a mandated lockdown I am convinced of my obligation to isolate, but I feel equally compelled to join thousands of strangers to protest police brutality against Black lives.

I search for a mode of touching that holds open the question of touch, posed by touch itself. Levinas' *caress* oscillates between two contrary impulses: the urge to lean in, to draw near, to make one's desire known; and the urge to withdraw or pull away, to hold open space for the experience of uncertainty and the unforeseen. As Levinas writes, "The caress aims at neither a person nor a thing."²³ "The caress does not know what it seeks. This 'not knowing,' this fundamental disorder, is essential."²⁴ The caress hesitates in response to the heightened sensation of another's unknown desire and experience. "Erotic love oscillates."²⁵ From a state of erotic suspension, I withdraw my specific expectations, even while requesting intimacy, by pressing against the other's skin. The caress seeks consent not only before coming into contact but in each instance of touching. Intimacy requires a constant call-and-response that is both verbal and non-verbal, cultivating a heightened attentiveness toward another's responsiveness and hesitations. In the context of a pandemic, the caress takes on new global significance. It is our ethical imperative to limit 'inessential' proximity as much as possible. We are given strict regulations about how not to touch. But even these measures require interpretation. And in exceptional moments our ethical conviction may compel us to transgress these measures. In circumstances that require restricted touching, a caress that continually questions itself is more important than ever. The caress is a guide for sexual intimacy. However, the caress has equal value when we are out of reach. In response to Levinas' caress, Irigaray identifies the caress in a mode of not-touching:

"[A] gesture [that] is more modest than the caress. A caress that precedes every caress, it opens up to the possible space of ... respiration ... [of] conception. Greeting [the other] as other, encountering the other with respect for what surrounds [them] – that subtle palpable space that envelops each of us like a necessary border, an irradiation of our presence that overflows the limits of the body ... This caress would begin at a distance."²⁶

I eagerly lunge to embrace a dear companion but pull back just before our bodies meet. We fumble as we relearn how to greet each other. When greeting a stranger or acquaintance, I experience a new sensation of being released from cultural expectations to touch. As I approach an acquaintance, I simultaneously with-

²³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.

²⁴ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 89.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 271.

²⁶ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress."

draw my body from the expected handshake, hug, or kiss on the cheek. I draw near while pulling away. Instead of leaning into his body, I lean into the space that envelops my body. Like floating in a salt water pool, I experience the comfort of the space around me, the pleasure of resting in this body that is my own. But with my companion, I sense a moment of pronounced awkwardness with a body so familiar it sometimes feels like an extension of my own. Our mutual hesitancy feels like a betrayal of an easy intimacy we have nurtured over the years. In this split second of mutual hesitation, we sense that the world is no longer the same. When we pause to consider this new sensation, we sense something undetermined stirring in the negative space of loss. The disruption of our intimacy is at once an expansion of our intimacy.

The image of the withdrawn hand once indicated disinterest, distrust, or neglect. It now takes on new meaning, expressing respect for another's bodily autonomy and the desire to protect. The hesitant hand caresses me in its withdrawal by offering me my own moment of hesitation to explore my desires and needs. I pause to experience the sensation of my own vacillating desires and judgments. My hesitation simultaneously allows the other to explore her own desires, as she considers what she wants for herself and from me. Our bodies are suspended between possibilities of proximity and distance. Disruption is a thrilling moment of mutual becoming. Our mutual hesitation allows our care and pleasure to take new shapes. Our intimacy is confident enough to be momentarily shapeless as we hold ourselves open to the unknown.

Being before the caress is a relationship with the self and others that allows one's own erotic pursuit to be disrupted in the face of uncertainty. One of the most successful consequences of #metoo is that it inspired panic in those who have perhaps never seriously questioned their touch or the way they make their desires felt on the skin of others. The haptic dogmatist's fantasy of an invulnerable one-directional touch was spoiled by its first touch of doubt. The #metoo movement played a crucial role in shifting the risk of uncertainty and the weight of responsibility from those in a vulnerable position to those with power. For many of us the experience of uncertainty regarding one's own desire is deeply familiar. The practice of erotic suspension both in isolation and in togetherness is also familiar. Sam Dolbear describes the constant hesitation of queer desire as captured by Alex Baczyński-Jenkins's performance "Such Feeling":

"The performers' movements are slow, morphing and grinding into place through repetition and interaction. Glances are exchanged, lost. Just before the performers might kiss, they freeze, their eyes flicker. Intimacy is proximate but not yet possible. Every queer knows this. Growing up queer is a process of waiting: for the right people, the right place, the right historical conditions, the right moment."²⁷

²⁷ Sam Dolbear, "Apertures of Queer Prophecy. Alex Baczyński-Jenkins's 'Such Feeling,'" *Flash Art* 328 (2019), accessed January 19, 2024, <https://flash---art.com/article/queer-prophecy-alex-baczynski-jenkins/>.

The queer experience of erotic suspension can take the form of withholding one's touch even while giving in to the pull of one's swelling desire. Erotic suspension can also take the form of withdrawing the specific form of one's desire while leaning into touch.

I recall naïve experiences of the caress as a young teenager. Evangelical purity cultural in the 90s, the background of my upbringing, focused entirely on the relationship between girls and boys, allowing for a certain freedom in what were identified as same-sex friendships. The failure to acknowledge different forms of desire made it impossible for the touch between girls to fall under suspicion or guilt. A queer touch, as far as I knew, did not exist. Somehow still I knew to withdraw my desire even before I could come into touch with it myself. In an attempt not to betray the trust of the innocent touch between friends, erotic suspension was a betrayal of self. Despite Levinas' own normative heterosexual framework, the caress that withdraws from its own desire feels quintessentially queer, with both repressive and liberating aspects. I feel the power of the caress with queer companions in our care not to overdetermine each other through the force of our individual desires. Yet, this ethical mode of intimacy also reminds one of a life of repression. As Dolbear warns, there can be a conservative impulse to withholding one's desire for a time to come. "Waiting is necessary," he writes, "but so is its abolition, both personally and historically ... The queer revolutionary demand: to stop waiting, to undo the future by bringing it into the present."²⁸ My sense is that those who have been forced to practice erotic suspension are especially ready for the transformation that is possible through the disruption of touch. The last 15 years have been shaped by global movements and events that throw cultures of touch into crisis. Shared experiences – from the cultural revolution represented by #metoo to the recent pandemic – induced a state of shared haptic skepticism, which might be necessary for the liberation of forms of intimacy that have long been cast into doubt and prevented from taking form.

4. The Ethics of Erotic Suspension

Suspension is the paralysis of judgment, the experience of undecidability. At the same time, suspension is movement, the oscillation between contrary desires, the vacillation of ethical consideration and reflection. Erotic suspension is a moment of running in place as one experiences the sensation of possibilities swelling into existence. Suspension in isolation can be the practice of leaning into the disruption of what is familiar and habitual. We can practice leaning into the unknown while resisting losing ourselves to abstraction. In isolation eros may appear momentarily shapeless. Sometimes life feels blank. But this falling out of touch with the familiar holds open the space of the unknown. Coming into touch with the

²⁸ Ibid.

unknown has the critical and creative potential to transform relations when the time of our reunion arrives.

In our longing for the pandemic to end, eros takes the form of the desire to return to a time ‘before,’ when being-together was easy. Yet the disruption of touch in crisis reveals that being-together was never without harm or risk. A simpler time ‘after’ crisis is as imaginary as a time ‘before.’ The disruption of self-certainty allows us to recognize that we were always already immersed in delicate haptic relations too complex for comprehension. We cannot know the reach of our touch. Yet we are nevertheless responsible for the way we touch. The caress before the caress grasps the weight of this risk, responsibility, and thrill in each instance.

We do not yet know what forms our intimacy will take in response to the global crises on the horizon. The one thing that is certain is that togetherness will never look or feel the same. In grieving the loss of a former way of life, along with a former fantasy, I release my dogmatic attachments to eros in its familiar forms. As Irigaray writes:

“Life always opens to what happens. To the fleeting touch of what has not yet found a setting. To the grace of a future that none can control. That will or will not happen. But while one waits for it, any possession of the world or of the other is suspended. A future coming not measured by the transcendence of death but by the call to birth the self and the other.”²⁹

I can feel suspended in my isolation just as I can feel paralyzed in a crowd. The experience of oscillating between these extremes can itself feel like suspension. The sudden transition stuns me if only for a passing moment. From one perspective, erotic suspension may appear to be paralysis: the experience of grief, fear, uncertainty. From another perspective, at the same time, erotic suspension is movement. A kind of imperceptible movement disrupts our dogmatic and frantic relationship to the present, creating new rhythms, clearing space through which we may come into touch with something yet unforeseen.

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²⁹ Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress,” 120.

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