

## Erring Toward Experience: Violence and Touch

Might we conceive of touch as the original sin? In Genesis 3:3 (King James Version), God says unto Adam and Eve: “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden [...]Ye shall not eat neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.” To eat the apple, to be seduced by the snake, these are the obvious sins, the sins that condemn humanity forevermore to exist in a fallen state. But what of touch? Why is touch – the moment of decision – forgotten, cast aside, ignored? Is it not touch, this violent decision, this responsibility toward fallenness, that in fact condemns Adam and Eve to face the world outside the garden of Eden?

To make a decision is a political event.<sup>1</sup> It is a moment of response-ability, a tempered instance of reaching-out, a touching of that which I do not yet know, a touching of an-other in a reciprocal engagement with the unknowable. In the garden of Eden, the apple signifies all that is unknown. To touch, and then to eat the apple, is to make the decision to opt for the life of the earth over the life of the heavens. The touching of the apple is the violent entry into the political, if we conceive of the political as the moment of decision that engages us toward the world and therefore toward an other. Reaching out and touching the apple – opting for the finite instead of the infinite – is a violent decision because it implies a fall, a loss of ground, an unevenness between what can be imagined and what is beyond the scope of my experience. A certain violence takes place the moment I realize I must make a decision. A certain violence is omnipresent in the

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<sup>1</sup> “Politics happens in time, against time,” writes Bennington. In the quickness of time, a re-articulation of the political is the injunction to make decisions which are not based on pre-programmed scenarios. Decisions are not given, as Derrida (1990) reminds us, they are taken. Politics, when it begins to drift away from its metaphysical determinations, can be thought of as a timely process of “taking” decisions.

realization of the potential rupture between the endless vista of conformity heaven represents and the chaos of the world. The violent moment of decision in the touching of the apple is the moment when I realize that I have “fallen,” that there is no longer a separation between self and other, between Adam and Eve and the rest of humanity. As Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber write, “violence” could no longer be considered simply to “befall” its victims from without, but rather would be related to what is generally presupposed to be its other: the “inviolable” self. (1997: 2)

The Bible frames touch as both that which contaminates, “Or if a soul touch any unclean thing, whether it be a carcase of an unclean beast, or a carcase of unclean cattle, or the carcase of unclean creeping things, and if it be hidden from him; he also shall be unclean, and guilty” (Leviticus 5:2), and that which heals, “And whosoever he entered, into villages, or cities, or country, they laid the sick in the streets and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment and as many as touched him were made whole” (Mark 6:56). In either case, touch represents a certain violence of transformation. Violence, here, is the suggestion not of a transcendental category, but of a rupture within humanity as humanity understands itself, a rupture that induces both guilt and healing. For some, it appears, touch is the ultimate gift, for others, the certain demise into the filth of humanity.

Can I touch without violence? Can I think of transformation without being jolted by the violence of change? Can I even consider the reciprocal relationship that exists when I reach out to touch you (when I become other through touch) without being aware of the violence induced by my recognition of myself as other? As de Vries writes, “What would it mean to think of violence as an inescapable horizon or inherent potentiality of

any act, or of any refraining from action?” (1997: 18). Is violence not intimately engaged in the historicization of the body, of Being as such? “Discourse,” suggests de Vries, “whether infinite or not, whether ethical or not, demands some negotiation with its other – namely, violence – if it is to minimize the risk of allowing the worst violence to come to pass” (1997:24). Must the discursive body, the body in movement that reaches out to touch, always also be a violent body, and if so, can we recognize violence not only as the harbinger of guilt but also of experience? For the apple is about experience, even if this experience is that of the “baseness” of humanity.

Could we suggest, then, that reaching out to touch an other is a moment of acknowledgment, a moment of recognition of the will not toward God but toward the earth? Might we conceive of touch as a reaching out toward the everyday, toward the textuality and the movement of our bodies, of our lives, of our diverse experiences on the earth? Touch is not, it seems to me, a bordered practice: we know our bodies to exist always outside of their skins, beyond ourselves, in excess of our three-dimensionality. It is not the body’s spirituality that I am trying to evoke here, but the body’s surplus, its sensations, its smells, its visions, its joy, its pain. We are these excessive bodies and our history is, at least according to Christianity, that of touching the apple, of assuming experience only to attempt to circumscribe it by attempting to organize that same body, to categorize it and to censor this very touch that has led us to the conflicted madness of humanity.

Derrida writes,

[T]here is no phrase which is indeterminate, that is, which does not pass through the violence of the concept. Violence appears with *articulation*. And the latter is opened by the [...] circulation of Being. The very

elocation of non-violent metaphysics is its first disavowal  
(1978: 147-148).

The articulation, in this case, is the touching. In reaching out to you, I articulate to you a desire to touch you, a desire to engage in a reciprocity of the body in movement. As my sensation translates itself to you, you immediately convey to me a response to this touch. This multidimensional movement of desire is violent, for it presupposes a certain demand, a decision, an instance of response-ability which in and of itself is violent for it charges your body with the potential crime of wanting to re-embody itself with and alongside mine. In each of these contacts, a new body is born, an articulation is taken into consideration, a bite of experience is consumed, and the risk of a loss of footing is guaranteed.

Touching – this articulation toward an other – therefore occurs in a general economy of violence. This does not mean that it is violent in and of itself. What it means is that the risk of reaching out to touch you is an engagement in an ethico-political decision. This process of decision-“taking”<sup>2</sup> is always in negotiation with an economy of violence since it implies an articulation that is a rendering-other of myself. As Derrida writes, “Each little gesture of an other towards me obligates me to respond by sacrificing an other of an other, his or her [...] other gesture” (1995: 68). This response-ability toward an other is a demand of an other to return the gesture, for there is no such thing as touch without consequence. Touch induces a repetition, a response that is unique, since it is a reaching toward the unknowable. Touch is a reaching out toward the discursive silences and noises of the body, to the temptations of life on earth.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a term coined by Jacques Derrida that connotes the response-ability involved in the process of decision making.

Now that the link between touch and violence is becoming clearer, it is necessary to draw a map for violence and the political. It will then become possible to orchestrate a symphonic rendering of the link between touch and the political, a link which I believe will be useful in the rethinking of what it means to touch an other. Here, the political implies a relationship (in disagreement) with an other that calls for an important measure of difference and can assist in the dissemination of time and space. I would like to imagine this dissemination of time and space in accordance with the notion that the body exceeds its own boundaries, making it impossible for us to draw a sensual body as a stable entity within time and space. Time and space here become excessive even to themselves, an echo of the multi-dimensionality of sensation, of difference, of overlapping reciprocities. I would like to suggest, also, that perhaps the violence that erupts through the many ruptures and transformations involved in the sensing, touching body can be conceived of as different from and even more productive than the violence of the state imposed onto the “stable” bodies of its citizens.

Within the vocabulary of nationalism and the nation-state, violence reigns as the constant signifier of (in)security. To evoke a discourse of security, the threat of violence must persist. Manichean thought continues to attempt to resolve the issue of violence by associating it with an other who is generally understood, within the vocabulary of the nation-state, as the adversary. The positing of an other as adversary results in a tendency to construe violence as the intrusion of an other who must remain outside the bounds of the nation-state. Violence is thus articulated as the violation of the self-same by an external intruder. If we consider the body as congruent with the national body-politic, we might be lead to believe that any intrusion into the body would be a violence in and of

itself (even the touch of a virus, for example). Yet it seems to me that this vocabulary short-changes the body. Is the body not in excess of this very easy distinction between inside and outside? If so, might we not be suspicious of a political body that acts as such a stern guarantor of the limits of inclusion and exclusion?

Within the vocabulary of the nation-state, violence is not simply framed as the exclusive character of an other, but is even more powerfully conceived of as a means through which the self is constituted and maintained. Touch challenges this dichotomy, creating not a self and an other, but a third space, a reciprocal body-space that challenges the limits of both self and self as other. Touch refuses a simplified condensation of the encounter between me and you, refuses to speak only about the point of departure and the point of return. Touch grapples with the impossibility of fusion in the movement of desire that is directed toward you and, reciprocally, toward myself. The violence is not in the moment of apprehension (if touch is reciprocal, I cannot touch you “violently,” that is, without your consent), but in the decision to reach out toward the unknown. The violence exists in the reaching out toward what must remain unknowable. State violence, on an other hand, seems to rely on the pretence that the unknowable could simply be the unknown and therefore potentially conquerable through power.

In effect, then, God’s warning regarding touch is a directive to resist the temptation of the unknowable. For there is a difference, in the bible, between the injunction made through God not to touch given to the populace, which is always phrased in the conditional, “Then said Haggai, if one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean. And the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean” (Haggai 2:13), and the act of touching perpetrated always by Jesus, which is phrased in the active

tenses of the past, present and future, “And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all” (Luke 6:19). It appears that the only one who is allowed to challenge the unknowable is the saviour himself, the one who has been sent to heal us from the unknowable, the one who solves the mysteries of humanity through his miracles.

Might we then conceive of the touch of God himself, or the almost-touch we encounter on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, as the temptation to relay to God the unknowability of life on earth? In this scene between God and Adam painted by Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564), we recall the gesture of God’s index finger reaching towards Adam’s finger (see figure 1) without ever quite touching it. Did Michelangelo, whose work evokes touch brought to life through sculpture, know something about touch and its virile potentiality that most biblical scholars and art historians continue to ignore? Was Michelangelo, with his image of the almost-touch, perhaps trying to relay to us the impossible violence of that first touch, a touch that causes the fall from grace, the touch which, had God reached Adam’s finger, might have given God a real glimpse of humanity? For God cannot touch in this manner, that is, not if touch is a reciprocal act since God, as he is conceptualized in the bible, is the absolute other through whom every notion of alterity is transformed into the self-same and with whom reciprocity does not even come into play. God knows better than to touch: “God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die” (Genesis 3:3). For God, reciprocity is embodied in the very condition of touch, and it is reciprocity above all that Adam must avoid if he is to resist humanity.

Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle writes:

Aristotle erred in asserting that humans had hands because they were intelligent; Anaxagoras was, perhaps, more correct in stating that humans were intelligent because they had hands (1998: xiii).

An interesting aspect of Michelangelo's image of Adam and God with fingers almost touching is that it is difficult to tell who is reaching toward whom. In this regard, the fresco symbolizes touch in its most transparent reciprocity. I cannot touch you without you touching me in return. I cannot feel your skin without you feeling me. This, it seems to me, is imprinted on the ceiling of Sistine chapel: hands are dangerous, for in reaching toward an other, they can undermine the hierarchical difference between self and other, reducing this exchange to a moment of sharing which exceeds the two singularities, the two bodies in motion. These are transactional bodies, bodies engaged in the decision to touch or not to touch an other. In this particular case, the fingers do not touch. One interpretation would be that God does not decide to reach far enough toward Adam to actually touch him. Yet they are both reaching, which might lead us to believe that there is something more at stake in the moment of unreachability between the Self-Same and the unknowable.

In the consensus of interpretation, what we witness in Michelangelo's scene of creation is God infusing life into Adam, finger to finger. Traditional interpretation does not privilege this moment as one of near touch, for, in much of this literature, touch is conceived of as the sense that pertains not to the soul, but to matter, and hence a sensation that would have no place in the realm of God. In addition, as we have seen in the bible, hands are not instruments of deification (except when used by God himself) but of degradation and hence not generally associated with God himself. This tradition is carried through in Aristotle's work where touch is theorized as the sense of the earthly, a



sense foreign to God's otherworldliness. Indeed, as art historians have pointed out, if God chose to bestow his touch upon humanity, it was much more common for God to touch the male figure's head, shoulder or chest rather than his finger or hand. And if, by chance, touch were associated to God through the figure of the hand, it is not the index that traditionally would take precedence, but the thumb, for the thumb denoted the sovereignty of the creator, designated since Hippocratic medicine "the great finger."

What are God and Adam's index fingers reaching towards, if not the touch of an other? Perhaps one of the things taking place on this remarkable ceiling is the realization of the earthly impossibility of touching God. Perhaps there is, in this exchange between fingers that do not meet, a suspicion of the violence necessary for their meeting, the violence that would challenge the sovereign God to actually touch the chaotic masses who themselves have taken the risk to reach toward the unknowable and who are continually transformed through this contact with the body-in-metamorphosis. Is it possible that these index fingers reaching toward one another connote a larger and more explicitly act of reaching-toward, symbolized through the hand? Indeed, in Renaissance art the hand was often conceived of as a metonym for the human body (Mirollo 1984). In fact, the thumb (pollex, derived from the verb polleo) continues to be connected to the notion of political rule, symbolizing strength, power and potency. And it seems difficult to conceive of these notions of strength, power and potency without acknowledging the violence inherent in the grasping of political power, be it from the position of the sovereign or that of the populace. Must we then not concur with Nietzsche's suspicion that violence is not embodied by an other but is, rather, the medium that enables conceptualization itself?

Arrestation and the provocation – the reaching out toward and the touching of an other – exist in an economy of violence. Violence never befalls innocence. This is perhaps the point. The traditional biblical text would like to associate Adam and Eve to an innocence that is sullied by the experience gained through the act of touching, and then ingesting, the apple. But this claim of innocence is itself a violence, for there is no text that isn't always already written and therefore implicated in the violence of transformation. Adam's "innocence" before God's extended finger is a discursive innocence idealized to prevent us from acknowledging that to make a dichotomy between touch and innocence would be paramount to suggesting that our bodies exist as separate entities from our senses. There is no body without touch, as medical officials are quick to point out: a child left untouched is often a child left to die. Why this pretence, then, that Adam's state before the fall is one of "untouchability" in the face of God? And why, once again, God's finger extended toward Adam's in Michelangelo's fresco? Perhaps because Michelangelo, the artist who sought more than many others to arouse the human imagination to the sense of touch, displaying in his many sculptures the tactile sensuality necessary in modeling the human body, perhaps because Michelangelo could not conceive of a relationship between God and Adam that didn't begin with touch. Perhaps because it is time to consider the violence – the third space – created by that touch that has been neglected, the touch necessary for a deeper understanding of the manner in which we interrelate and invent the politics by which we live and die.

For Derrida, violence is equivalent to the operation of the trace (1974: 101). Violence is not something that supervenes upon innocence to surprise it, it is the originary violence itself. Violence is the textuality of the world, condensed to one story,

in this case the story of innocence, followed by the fall. Derrida asks: “Is there a experience, and, above all, a language, scientific or not, that one can call alien at once to writing and to violence?” (1974: 127). The supposition here would be that any act between self and other must be textualized, must be made into a writing, and this making, this very writing, is a violent act. Can one say the same for sensual experiences? Can I suggest that touch, as a movement of desire toward an other, is also a writing of the relationship between self and other? Touch inaugurates a violence since it compels us to write the relationship between self and other differently. Does this not imply that any attempt to touch the political is to engage violently with the discourse of politics? I think so. I believe that when I reach out to touch you, when you and I create a space for our bodies to react reciprocally, we make the decision to acknowledge a certain kind of violence. This violence which I encounter in my desire to touch you is not necessarily a violence toward you or toward the third space we create through our touch. This violence is the acknowledgment of a fall, of a loss of pure singularity and untouchability. This violence is symbolized through the entry into the realm of unknowability. “There is no ethics without the presence of an other, but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, difference, writing. A violent opening” (Derrida 1974: 139).<sup>3</sup>

Critiques of violence are not without violence. My exploration of a politics of touch is therefore a potentially violent encounter with an other. This is not a (potential) violence I want to condemn. For, if we think of a violence that moves in more than one direction – a violence quite different from that sustained within the hierarchical system of sovereignty and security ordained by the nation-state – violence need not necessarily be considered a threat to difference. Rather, violence can work as a reminder of that very

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<sup>3</sup> Of course we must not forget Eve, who also appears in the fresco.

difference that prevents me from being subsumed into the self-same. Violence can be a manner of writing a body that defies the imposition of stability, that challenges space and time through its sensuality. The body, seen as a potential site of a violence of touch can be conceived of as an exfoliation in the sense José Gil gives the term. The body exfoliates by always already unfolding into the spaces it occupies (1998: ix). This is a state of violence insomuch as it is an infralanguage that speaks through and across the body, creating multiplicities and discontinuities both in my living, sensing body, and in yours, when I reach out toward you.

The exfoliant body that reaches across time and space embodies a violence in its resistance to conform to corporeal expressivity, to the signs and codes that are immediately understood as the space and time a body should occupy within the (national) body-politic. When I touch you, what I cannot know is what infra(sensual)language our reciprocal touch will create. Nor can I predict how my touching you will challenge the presence of yours and my body in time and space. Of course, I can never predict the body “itself” either, hence the necessity of imposition of the “national body-politic” to establish a normative vocabulary of the body to which we accept to conform. What touch achieves in opposition to this state-centered dynamic of the body-politic is the potentiality of realizing that bodies are not containers of pre-ordained individual significations, but orbs of significance continually re-adjusting themselves to the infralanguages and movements of desire through which they interact.

When I touch you, I confuse the codes of our encounter by altering the space between you and me. I also alter something else, a quality difficult to delineate. For touch is first and foremost a sensation, a manner of incorporating the world, of

embodying the presence (and absence) of an other. Whether I touch my body or yours, I am reaching out toward an other beyond a language of comprehension. I cannot predict the effect on my skin, since I cannot know your reaction to my touch and vice versa. This is what makes touch so difficult to embody comprehensively, what makes touch ungraspable and indefinable in and of itself. There is no touch that does not reach out. And there are no sign-systems that can completely guarantee that the space I cross to touch you will remain the same after that crossing. Touch therefore is the embodiment of a sense that acknowledges the unknowable qualities of a body in motion.

Gil suggests that of all languages, it is only articulated language that fully realizes the code of translation: “Because it is a metalanguage, it can handle all the codes, create metaphors, move from one domain to an other; assemble them and pull them apart” (1998: 5). Body “language” does not operate as a metalanguage, however, “the body does not speak, it makes speech” (1998: 5). Because the body is sensual, it responds to various strata and textures of articulations and gestures, incorporating and excreting the myriad contradictions of any encounter, be it sensual and/or textual, with an other. It is therefore a fallacy to consider the body linguistically without acknowledging the complex layering of the senses, for the body is, first and foremost, a sensual apparatus of movement toward the world. This is not to undermine the importance of a textual language of gesture, or of a “grammar” of the body, but rather to underscore the importance of conceiving the body *as* movement.

If the body cannot be reduced to a language, how can we speak of the body? How can we articulate touch as a mechanism in and of the body? How can we locate the importance of the concept of touch for the political? And, ultimately, how can we

separate the body from the straightjacket of the nationally- and state-sanctioned body-politic? Perhaps we can begin by suggesting that space is “modeled” by the body itself (Gil 1998: 17). If space is no longer something the body “inhabits,” where space is conceived of as a pre-made container for the body, we can begin to think of the body as touch, that is, as a mechanism for reaching out across time and space. As Gil writes,

bodily movements impress in space the traces of essential corporeal form, and create configurations there (in the relation between things) for which the matrices and lineaments are made up from the morphogenetic forms and possibilities of the body (1998: 17).

It is therefore not a question of thinking of the body that touches (as two separate movements) but of the body as touch. If my body *is* touch, and both touch and movement signal a displacement toward an other, I can begin to conceive of my body as that which produces the spaces for its movements of desire. My body spatializes space insofar as my body remains alive to touch. The space inhabited by my body becomes the space of my body. When I touch you, I not only incite you to a reciprocity, I create space with you.

The space that is the body is not a stable, continuous space. It is a space hardened by lack of contact, awakened by the surprise of touch, a space alive with the incompleteness of its spacing (*espacement*). The body is a space and touch is its articulation. Touch articulates the body giving it a language through which it can begin to feel the world. The skin is a limit for touch, yet this limit is as finite and as infinite as the multiplicity of skins that make up the world. Touch also embodies difference, for it is through touch that I can ascertain the difference between my body and its surface. Touch enables a certain identification with the world. This *espacement* that marks the difference between spaces introduces my body to a becoming-space of time and a becoming-time of

space. This becoming is the constitution of a subjectivity that is in movement, a subjectification that is formed within the tactile hollows of difference.

According to Gil, “[e]xfoliation is the essential way a body ‘turns onto’ things, onto objective space, onto living things” (1998: 21). Touch might be considered one method of exfoliating the body, since touch crosses space via the body, re-creating a becoming-body while establishing diverse relations with all that surrounds our bodies. The desire to cross space – to touch an other – is a desire in movement as well as a movement of desire. This investment of desire resignifies the space that separates me from an other, awakening my body to the different sensations your body evokes in me. Through one another are revealed new sensations as touch expands to an infinity of combinations of skin upon skin, body upon body. This connection of touch that traverses time and space establishes a relation that in turn affects the form and space of all bodies including the “body-politic,” inviting the body as embodiment of a diverging chronotope to become other to that of the nation-state’s solitary spaces of confinement.

This negotiation of space is a political event. Certainly, its politics are in contradiction with a linear conception of state sovereignty. A politics of touch does not adhere to the notion of a strict interiority and exteriority. Rather, it expands the chronotope of the body through a counter juxtaposition of exfoliations and surfaces. The decoding process is no longer one made in a vertical relationship between the sovereign and the citizen, or the national and the refugee. Rather, the decoding process is an ongoing one that operates in and through the spacings of the body. It is a listening, a seeing, a tasting, a smelling of the senses of the body through touch, a providential integration of one surface into another only to realize that these singularities cannot be

meshed but must instead stand alone, side by side, in the third space they create together.

It is therefore a decoding not toward a final end, but toward a translation of time and space as regards the body, a decoding of space into space, of flesh into flesh. As Gil writes,

the decoding-body gathers up, brings together, unites, dislocates, spreads, and separates thanks to the spatial forms that contain in themselves (because they bring about) the properties of unification and division (1998: 24).

### A Means Without an End

The body as a sensory modality engages with an other through a touch that exudes potential violence in its desire to transform the space between self and other. What differentiates this from the national body-politic's organization of the body into the citizen is the fact that touch as a reaching-toward is a means without an end. There is no final destination where touch is concerned. The body is the intermediary through which I create, with you, the shared space of our touch, our subjectivity-in-process. Touch as a reaching-toward is a gesture of *espacement*, a moment of the inexorable violence of difference, of the unknowable. Touch is a movement toward an other through which I recognize myself differently, spacing time as I time space.

My gesture toward you is a momentary one. There is no touch that can last beyond the first moment of contact. To touch longer, I must touch again and again, for soon my skin forgets to acknowledge yours as my focus shifts elsewhere. To touch me you must return the touch to and from yourself in an ongoing process of exchange. Because it is temporary and immediate, the gesture is quickly cast aside. This is a political moment in the most ethical sense, for it demands a continual rearticulation rather



than a subsuming into the same. If I attempt to subsume you through touch, I will not reach you. Instead, I will inflict the worst kind of violence upon your body: your body will act only as the recipient of my directionality. Your body will become prey. If, instead, I acknowledge the ephemerality of the gesture, I risk an opening toward “the sphere of *ethos* of the most proper sphere of that which is human” (Agamben 2000: 57).

This moment of touch is a rare moment when the political and the ethical exist side by side. It is rare not only because it happens rarely, but also because it is haphazard, momentary, ephemeral. It is an ethico-politics that momentarily resists security, stability, classification. This ethico-politics, violent as it may be (since it is always the result of a decision), releases us momentarily from the dynamic of the state apparatus that, if it were to contend with touch as a means of codifying the body-politic, would make an attempt to imprison the third space within its grids of intelligibility. It is this ethico-politics that I am attempting to put my finger on, an ethico-politics that is, by necessity, always slightly out of reach.

Touch, as an ethico-political moment, breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes both the ethical and the political within the matrix of the nation-state. The mediality of touch is nothing more than a process made visible, a process geared toward the creation and dissemination of my own body through the reciprocity of your body. Because touch makes the means of reaching out visible, it can be envisioned as a counterpart to a political moment of encounter, a moment in which there is an emergence of the being-in-mediality of humanity. This moment is ethical not because of the intentions of the one who reaches out, but because the reaching out does not assume anything beyond the immediacy of the response, that is, beyond the creation

of a third space. “Politics,” writes Agamben, “is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings” (2000: 60). Even if I pull back and do not quite reach you, I have already altered the space that mediates our bodies. The gesture that is touch, whether it reaches you or not, becomes the communication of a communicability. This gesture does not speak in sentences, it speaks the body, reminding us that our skins are always in movement through time and space, shedding themselves, shedding our-selves.

The encoding of information through the body’s sense organs is achieved through a communication of the body with the environment. Sensory perceptions depend on the body organizing space and time in a certain way. Here, the body acts as that which invests itself in space as well as the investment of space by the body. The body thus becomes both a recipient of the information coming from its skin and an encoder of this information. The body becomes the translation and the translator of the senses. As Gil writes, “[t]he exfoliations of the space of the body, as abstract forms, integrate the information coming from a perceivable body and make possible its translation into a different object belonging to a different sensual sphere” (1998: 25). The exfoliations of touch on the variegated surfaces of the body-in-space/time result in the disappearance of the One and the appearance of a singular difference in motion which forever deconstructs itself. Exfoliating, the body dissolves into space, becomes space, re-emerges as space.

This is the metamorphosis of the body of which José Gil speaks, a “condition of the activity of code translation: each exfoliation is the metamorphosis of all an other forms in a spatial *one*” (1998: 38). One is the space of relation: there is no unified body. There are skins, receptive surfaces, gestural movements, desires toward an other. The

body is active rather than tautological, a definition of the body that departs quite radically from that of Aristotle, who sought to link the body to the categories of soul, life and perception.

Aristotle observes throughout his writings that the most common primary perception is touch. Touch, Aristotle suggests, is necessary to an other senses. The medium that corresponds to touch, according to Aristotle, is the flesh, and the element of touch is the earth. Aristotle somewhat complicates this understanding of touch by suggesting that the organ of touch “must be inside us” (*De Anima II*: 11, 423b). The invisibility of the organ that represents touch leads Aristotle to ask himself whether touch is one sense or several. This is an important question since touch is, for Aristotle, the first sense, the one most necessary for the maintenance of life: “The well-developed sense of touch is the condition of man’s intelligence” (*De Anima II*: 9, 421a 7ff). Touch for Aristotle is the sense one cannot live without, the sense that human beings have just for the sake of being, whereas an other senses, Aristotle suggests, “we have for the sake of *well-being*” (*De Anima III*: 13, 435a 11ff). Touch for Aristotle is the “common sense,” not something above, higher than the separate senses, but their common nature.

Touch as the “common sense” draws us back to the political realm of the state’s *res publica* and its consensus-based practices of inclusion and exclusion. For is common sense not associated with a politics that makes assumptions about its constituents’ knowledge-base? Does common sense not connote a certain appartenance within a pre-defined political group? Is common sense not the name one could give to most political systems inaugurated within the realm of state-sovereignty? “For the common good” is

the practice and the promise of consensus-based (Habermasian) politics, is it not? What, then, does touch have to do with common sense?

The internal vocation of state politics is the unification of aims and the organization of these aims into a unique spatio-temporal whole. State politics does not happily suffer tears in its social fabric: politics must be common, and where commonality cannot be located, a line must be drawn to create a fissure between the inside and the outside, between the known and the unknown, the self and an other. Thus politics takes care of the distribution of public power, inaugurating a political relation that is always a relationship of forces. This relationship of forces carries within itself the possibility of domination and violence that often comes to the fore as a result of an imbalance in social relations. Each body must be put in its place. The placing of the body is necessary in order for the distribution of power to adequately inscribe the social order with its own intelligibility. The body becomes intelligible insofar as it becomes common. Intelligibility as commonality is the primary political articulation within the language of the nation-state.

Yet there always escapes from the body-politic's grids of intelligibility a disarticulated remains. It is this remains that contests the sovereignty of the nation-state, even when resistance is not enacted with this purpose in mind.<sup>4</sup> A politics of touch is one of the mediums through which the body does resist the state. Touch as reaching toward the unknowable reminds us that we cannot know the body as the state claims we do, for no body is ever thoroughly articulated. Every body moves differently, in-difference to the state.

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<sup>4</sup> See final chapter for elaboration on Spinoza and politics.

Touching an other in a reciprocal gesture of unknowability underscores the incompleteness of the state which remains incapable of fully subsuming the body into its realm. Touch also emphasizes the difference between the violence of the body as multiplicity and the violence of the body as identity. What we know about the state is that it cannot operate without violence: state power cannot exist unless it holds the ultimate and exclusive right to force. The body, on an other hand, cannot exist if it is not touched. Could we say that the body is therefore about reciprocity, whereas the state is concerned with sovereignty? When the state takes over the body, it attempts to create a bond of reciprocity that is solely hierarchical. When the body leaves the state, what the body finds is the capacity to create movement through space and space through movement. The body departs from a sovereign territorialized bounded space to a space that traverses time, a chronotope that cannot be cleanly delineated but through which a juxtaposition and a convergence take place that multiply space through textual layerings. Space grows with the body and shrinks with the state.

Certainly violence still exists, but in this case the violence is not held exclusively by the state. Now the violence can be envisioned as a network of forces that produces effects of power and knowledge. Whereas within the system of state sovereignty infractions remain crimes against the state, the body that challenges the confines of state sovereignty shares in the potential for violence and therefore conceives of violence not as a moment of an external “be-falling” but as a moment of response-ability. This is an important shift, for when violence is the exclusive right of the state, everyone becomes guilty of being guilty, whereas when violence is a shared enterprise between bodies

through the complex means of touch, violence becomes the measure of a response which is also always a response-ability not only toward an other but also toward myself.

The state needs the body. If we dislodge the body from the state (a conceptual problematic always already in progress since the body is continually in the process of metamorphosis), the network of forces that sustain the image of the state immediately fades. The body never belonged to the state: the body always exceeds its containers. But there is a paring down of the body within the vocabulary of state-sovereignty that displays the body-politic as adjacent to the concept of the nation. Conceivably, the nation-state could be called the body-state. This is precisely the reason the state's body-politic is so focused on drawing an image of the body that must remain dependent on the imaginary of the nation-state. If we remove the body from the state, that is, if we imagine the body not as a container that returns to the state for sustenance, but that challenges the state's pre-determined enclosures of belonging and insecurity through its unpredictable states of metamorphosis, we are left with a state-less body. This state-less body touches across space and time not reaching towards striated grids of intelligibility but toward new networks of power/knowledge. This body is alive in its infralanguage, not in its silent recitations of the state's incantations of sovereignty.

## Violence

Hent de Vries asks:

Should one think of violence as a transcendental category – the very introduction of a “category” or “concept” of violence being the first act or declaration of war – or should one restrict this term to the interruptions that mark the contingent historical and political or psychological and symbolic instances of all empirical conflict? (1997: 14).

For Benjamin, there is a distinction between two kinds of violence: law-making violence and law-preserving violence (1978: 277). The founding violence is the one that institutes and positions law, the preserving violence is the one that maintains, confirms, and insures the permanence and enforceability of the law. This suggests a complication for the state: the state must conceal its own founding violence in order to violently preserve its laws. Violence is inbred into the concept, the formation and the dissemination of state practice.

Foundational violence is the companion to preservational violence. In relation to law, individual violence is prohibited and condemned not because it poses a threat to the individual as such, but because it profoundly threatens the very juridical order that sustains the state. “Law,” writes Derrida, “has an interest in the monopoly of violence” (1992: 33). This monopoly protects not legal ends, but law itself. Violence threatens from within, operating at the heart of state-sanctioned law-making practices. To think violence as that which does not emerge from the law’s exterior is to understand the implicit violence in state formations: “The foundation of all states occurs in a situation that we can call revolutionary. It inaugurates a new law, it always does so in violence” (Derrida 1992: 35).

Yet even within the state model, the body remains an agent of juxtaposition and transformation, for the body can never be completely contained within the vocabulary of the nation-state and its body-politic. Situated practices alter the body as the body alters these very practices. Feldman writes: “The cultural construction of the political subject is tied to the cultural construction of history. This intersection results in political agency as an embodied force” (1991: 2). Political agency here is achieved not as a given but on the basis of a practice that alters the body. In this regard, political agency is conceived of

as a relational state and an effect of situated practices. This view of political agency is supported by Nietzsche's concept of work, where agency is understood not as the state of the political body itself, but as the product of that body's work. It is important to hold to this supplemental relation of the passive and the active body in order not to fall prey to the mythologizing renditions of a body-in-process that focus not on the movements themselves but on the mythos of a stable, coherent body:

there is a need to interrogate the mythicizing reception of violence in order to trace the path by which ideological readings of violence engender the subject of the act and the extrinsic sight of legitimation in a single movement (Feldman 1991: 3).

What is often left unwritten in renditions of the body (-politic) is the notion of antagonism on which the body rests. This antagonism is a mechanism of the reproduction and transformation of subjectivity that produces both effect and affect, troubling the political rationalities sustained by the imaginary of the nation-state. Within this matrix of antagonism versus victimization, political enactment stands out as the intersection between local histories mapped onto the template of the body as well as bodily spaces that challenge the very writing of history (on the body). The multiple subject positions factored by political agency within the vocabulary of state-sovereignty are versions not of a metamorphosing body, but faces of the state. The body is thus rendered redundant. But the body always appeals this redundancy, for the senses that give movement to the body are never still enough to allow the body to fully become stabilized within a state-centred chronotope. The unified subject shifts between transactional and transnational spaces as well as from linguistic discursivity to somatic dissonance:



If social space and body space continually predicate each other and if both are subjected to an ongoing reconstruction by violence, the notion of a stable relationship of agency to nomothetic social frames, such as class, ethnicity, or political ideology, becomes problematic (Feldman 1991: 4).

Operating between these versions of the body-politic and the metamorphosing body (one always an extension of an other, even within the imaginary of state-sovereignty) is the notion of violence. For, as we saw earlier, touch does function in and around the body both within the state and in excess of the state. Violence is an important reminder of the manner in which the state holds the body to itself in order to orchestrate violence in a directionality it sees fit. The body becomes a container, a mediator or a mechanism of violence rather than violence acting as a measure of the reciprocity of a politics of touch. Within this problematic of the body as a Janus-faced mechanism and outlaw of the state, violence both reflects and accelerates the organization of state society, calling forth both its successes and its demise. For what violence always holds as its secret is its very indeterminacy, that is, the indeterminacy of its productivity, its force, of its knowledge and power, of its touch. In this sense, violence is always witness to the incompleteness of its own project. Violence is the constant reminder of the body's potential for metamorphosis, of its movements of desire and its multiplicitous sensations. Violence is not the guard in this case but the engaged observer, the conduit even.

This is not to suggest that violence cannot inflict terrible pain upon the body. I do not underestimate the horrors of violence perpetrated in the name of the state or even in the name of touch.<sup>5</sup> I simply want to point out that violence also exceeds the state,

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<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben uses the image of the camp as a metaphor for the position of the state in politics today. He suggests that the camp is the space which is opened when the state of exception (Schmitt) becomes the rule, that is, when the state of exception it itself taken into the juridical order. When the state of exception is willed by the state, a juridico-political paradigm is inaugurated where the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception: "The camp is a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have

despite the fact that the state claims ownership of its measures of “security.” A certain violence can perhaps be instrumental in undoing the state, in rendering the state body-less and therefore without the conduit for the production of either knowledge or power. This would not be a revolution against the state, but a state-less revolution, a revolution that exposes the state for what it is and risks a certain violence in the name of a decision to approach the skin of an other for no other reason than to reach toward touch, to become political, ethically.

The question of political qualification – who can be a political subject? – is simplified to: who will risk the touch of an other? This is a risk: the skin of an other will always lead me back to my own skin, a trajectory that may inspire nausea,<sup>6</sup> or even horror. Sensations are not governed easily, for they reach deeply into and around the body, creating space and altering the trajectories we thought we could delineate clearly, properly, between sensing bodies in movement. Sensations are prey to homesickness and to motion sickness.

The social fracture that ensues in response to a politics of touch is a floating dispersion of the centre. Sites of disavowal and disownership, of belonging and abandonment appear in the most unexpected places. Space is rewritten, re-sensed, only to be altered again. Within this shifting network of movements of desire, political agency is transformed into a political subjectivity-in-process which makes demands. These demands exceed the grids of intelligibility that would otherwise contain them. Their

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become indistinguishable” (1997: 110). Within the camp, the inhabitants are stripped of political status and thus reduced to “bare life.” “This is why,” writes Agamben, “the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen” (1997: 110). See also Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereignty and the Politics of Bare Life*. (trans. D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP).

<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre. *La nausée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1938.

violence is breath-taking. It is here that the political body re-emerges: “It comes into view as a *mise-en-scène* with its own genealogy of domination and resistance” (Feldman 1991: 6). This body is touched by the world even as it reaches out toward it. It is a politicised body that realizes that there is no story of movement which does not do a certain violence to the space it traverses. Violence can be horrific. But the body is political only when it can both receive and disseminate violence, touch, alterity. “The body, altered by violence, re-enacts other altered bodies dispersed in time and space; it also re-enacts political discourse and even the movement of history itself” (Feldman 1991: 7).

Violence is a mode of transcription, both textual and sensory. Reaching out, I do violence to my interiority. Touching you, I do violence to my-self. Receiving, I cut across time and space violently. Violence circulates from one surface to another, from one space to another, from one body to another, from one time to another. History is rewritten through violence not, in this case, as the history of the state-sanctioned practices operating in the name of (in)security, but as the textures of the body in time and space, a body that is not simply mine, which can never simply be mine, but must also be yours, your skin, your touch. “Struggles,” writes Feldman, “will occur over competing transcriptions of the same body and of different bodies. This contest over adversarial transcripts fractures the body as an ‘organic,’ ‘natural’ object and thus accelerates the body’s subjectivation” (1991: 7). The body cannot operate on “its” own. There is no body (other than the fabulated body of the state) that can operate separately from the chronotopes it creates and crosses. There can be no separation from the body’s marking

of an other and the body itself. History is the body. Spacing (*espacement*) is the body. The body is not political, it is the political instant of space being created in time now.

Feldman writes:

The spatial inscription of practices and power involves physical flows, metabolic transactions and transfers – exchanges which connect, separate, distance, and hierarchize one space in relation to another. The command of space further entails the setting aside of places of imaginary representation, eulogized, purifying, or defiling spaces that mobilize spectacles of historical transformation (1991: 9).

This, according to Feldman, “involves the setting up of novel codifying apparatuses such as the reorganization of the senses, mental maps, topographic origin myths, norms of spatial competence, and rites of spatial performance” (1991: 9). Space is what is at stake here, not *of* the body, but *as* the body. It is now that we witness the productive capacities of touch, even if we consider touch linked to a certain violence. Touch crosses space and/as the body, calling forth not only a reciprocity but attesting also to space-time as that which does not exist *between* bodies, but which is formed through the movements of these very bodies. Space-time, understood this way, is the very possibility of a sensory rearticulation of the political since space is no longer reserved for the vocabulary of the nation-state which cannot understand chronotopes otherwise than as pre-existent striated operations of identity and territory that feed its stabilizing imaginary. The state apparatus striates space-time in a refusal to acknowledge the continual creation and transformation of the sensing, moving bodies in its midst. Were it to do otherwise, the state would risk losing its hegemony over its body-politic.

According to Nietzsche, there is no difference between the body as a political structure and the political structure as the body (1968: 492). The body is the fractured

product of the differential effects of intersecting antagonistic forces. As Deleuze writes, informed by Nietzsche's comments on the body: "Whether chemical, biological, social or political [...] any two forces being unequal constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relation" (1977: 80-81). The body assumes not one form (not one touch) but as many forms as there are powers orienting it. "The intersection of forces (political practices) cohere into an economy of the body. The body is a cumulative effect of exchanges between agonistic forces" (Feldman 1991: 177). The body is not simply that which conforms to the state's grids of intelligibility onto which its politics of interiority and exteriority are transcribed. The body is a point of transaction, of transnation, of disagreement.

The state does not react calmly to such treason. The state continually reproduces its limits by transcribing alterity into a system of self-same bodies that perpetuate the task of policing the border between inside and outside in order to be certain that we cannot reach over that border to touch another who is not our-selves. The body is incited to remain that which is attached to the state lest its detachment result in political disqualification. The body functions as the recuperation of the integrity of the state, an integrity which is only "achieved" through violence. But the body finds ways to escape the grid of sovereignty. This occurs despite our-selves, since we cannot stop our-selves from reaching out to touch an other. We touch an other to see if our vision serves us right. We touch to feel if we, if you, exist. We touch, always, beyond the boundary of self and other.

Erring Toward an Other

The violence of a politics of touch can be conceived as a certain erring toward an other. Derrida writes: “Like pure violence, pure nonviolence is a contradictory concept” (1978: 146).

A Being without violence would be a Being which would occur outside the existent: nothing; nonhistory; nonoccurrence; nonphenomenality. A speech produced without the least violence would determine nothing, would say nothing, would offer nothing to an other; it would not be history, and it would show nothing; in every sense of the word, and first of all the Greek sense, it would be speech without a phrase (1978: 146-147).

Critiques of violence will remain violent in an attempt not to divest the idea of violence, but with the goal of producing a concept of violence that escapes the strict dichotomy between law-making and law-preserving violence.<sup>7</sup> A critique of violence embodied through a politics of touch can attempt, perhaps, to engage in the interstices of violence where violence does not seek to uphold law but to creatively propel contradictory readings of juxtaposition and relation. I denounce violence while negotiating the violence of the denunciation. The question is: Can I do so without mobilizing a violence of my own that projects a new kind of founding violence?

Derrida asks: “Can [critiques of violence] do justice without doing justice to this justice?” (1978: 147). The violence of the concept is what is at stake here. A politics of touch is violent in its very articulation. It is violent because it tears the fabric of state politics in order to ask about the relation between touch and violence. It is violent

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<sup>7</sup> Stathis Gourgouris suggest that the project of autonomy of the individual instituted in the Enlightenment inaugurates the modern subject as a “primarily legal entity whose external (social) boundaries are sanctioned by a set of ‘inalienable rights and whose internal imagination adheres to the belief that these rights are indeed inalienable (that they represent one’s irrevocable independence before the law, the safeguard of self-determination)” (1997: 121). This new law sought to institute and safeguard a rationality of violence. It did so by monopolizing the definition of violence based on the concept of rationality. “The Enlightenment made it possible to see that law is always authorized force, that law cannot be dissociated from the matter of its applicability (and thus enforcement)” (128). Force thus becomes immanent to law and the question of justice in relation to the law can no longer be avoided.

because it raises questions about the importance of erring toward experience in such a way that experience must remain untouchable as that which I have not yet lived. It is violent in the unknowability of its trajectories. Touch is not impervious to an economy of violence. Entering an economy of violence against violence is to engage the relation between touch and untouchability, between touch as the reaching toward and touch as an erring that never quite succeeds in finalizing its approach toward an other. Touch is a threat and a pacifier. Touch threatens as it marks the inevitability of its untouchability: I touch you as the one who will always, in some sense, remain untouchable. Your untouchability exists in an economy of violence from which I cannot safely emerge as long as I am in relation.

Touch errs. Being in relation is about the experience of erring which is at the heart of any desire to reach toward. It would be fallacious to argue that the body is always constant in its directionality. A politics of touch must be errant.<sup>8</sup> Social consensus is precarious precisely because it rests on an injunction not to err.<sup>9</sup> Consensus, as the mechanism of a democracy ordained within the state system, is the ultimate form of uni-directionality. This is a different violence than that of erring toward an other, since it is a violence that takes count only of the goal, and not of the process. Consensus ignores the fragility of an erring movement, pretending that its displacements are always

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<sup>8</sup> Hent de Vries writes: “Politics, as the struggle for a lesser evil, for a mitigation, reduction or even abolition of violence, the violence of the self as much as that of an other, should be considered an obligation no less than a necessity. Yet its pursuit of the better is always also shadowed and haunted by what – in itself or as politics’ other – resembles or measures itself against the apparitions and spectres of the worst” (1997: 42-43).

<sup>9</sup> See section on Errant Politics in Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories* (Minnesota UP, 2003), pp. xxvii-xxx1: “Errand politics subverts attachments that depend on the stability of territory and identity, rewriting the national vocabulary of belonging into a language of moments. To err within politics is to initiate a dialogue that transgresses monologic state sovereignty” (2003: xxvii)

known in advance. The violence of consensus is most dangerous, since it believes it cannot err.<sup>10</sup>

In a model of consensual politics, the citizen cannot have an unstable body, for that body would challenge the organized consensual imaginary of the body-politic. Any unstable body is eventually disqualified from state politics. An other, the outside, the homeless, the refugee or the stranger, none of these bodies “exist” within the realm of social consensus. How could they? These are bodies that err from the grids of intelligibility of state politics, these are bodies that resist the national imaginary, bodies without citizenship, without passports, without the commodities necessary to be allowed to count. They are, as Rancière writes, the uncounted, the uncountable. The ultimate violence of the state is precisely this: to pretend it cannot err. In its desperate attempts to maintain the coherence of its grids of intelligibility, the state as body-politic erases all forms of power/knowledge that might alert us to the porosity of its consensual apparatus. The body, every body, and most certainly the “nonexistent” body at the borders of the vocabulary of the state threatens the state’s strict dichotomy between inside and outside. These deviant bodies emphasize the porosity of their moving, sensing fleshiness, expressing with a certain violence the state’s encounter with its limit. Violence (of the state, against the state) makes the performance of this encounter visible, registering differences in kind.

Reaching out beyond the limit blurs the boundary between law-preserving and law-instituting violence. Law has an interest in a monopoly of violence. The violence it

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<sup>10</sup> “To err is to take a voyage, to wander. In French, *erre* signifies the track of an animal, lefty for us to discover in the sand, in a trace on the snow, on the earth. [...] Erring, I advance on a path that corresponds to no opening” (Manning 2003: xxviii). “To err is probably this: to go outside the space of encounter” (Blanchot 1993: 27)



unleashes threatens to lead to its demise and must therefore be kept well concealed within the nation's practices of securing: every system of law and order is predicated and maintained by a violence that could dissolve it. The state asserts that to be safe (free of violence), we must consent to state governmental practices. "Violence exists at the core of Constitutional power to the State (in the name of the People) to practice violence over the people, while the office of the judge includes a fully sanctioned and absolved 'homicidal quality'" (Gourgouris 1997: 132). As Robert Cover suggests, state violence is not explicitly stated in these cases because violence is written into the very idea of government (in Gourgouris 1997: 132).

Yet, beyond its envelope, the sensing body is anathema to the national body-politic, to its politics of consensus, to its violent politics of exclusion. "I am the continuous, necessary overcoming of myself," writes Nietzsche, "[...] nothing but struggle and becoming and purpose and contradiction of purposes" (*Zarathustra* 3:271, 2:179). I am my body, and I am the spaces I am continually creating and embodying as I reach out to touch you. I am the embodiment of homesickness that attests to the fact that ultimate stability (consensus) is impossible. To live, I must touch, or conversely, to stop touching is to die, it is to deprive myself of my body. Tactility is fraught with an ambiguity I cannot resolve. This ambiguity, this complex politics of disagreement, is perhaps the most difficult thing to sustain over time. This is the founding paradox of the national body-politic.

Divine Violence

The parting words of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* bring us back to God's word: "Divine Violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution, may be called sovereign violence" (1978: 300). God has spoken: to touch is to be violently expelled from the garden. This violence of the fall, the violence of sovereignty, is now transposed into the word. John writes: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1: 1).

The gospels, now carried by the word of God, would seem no longer to be threatened by the untouchable violence of the fall. God has risen and left behind the dissenters. Forever, God will speak, and his language will be the language of creation, the language of an exclusionary garden that negates the creative potential of experience. His words will trace within their wake the primacy of reason.<sup>11</sup> Yet touch and/as untouchability are still at stake, as we see in Mark 16. This strange encounter with the senses, often depicted as the "Noli me tangere" [do not touch me] episode, is my entry point as a second reading of the encounter between touch and untouchability in the bible. This reading of the untouchable will then lead me to Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where another rendition of the fall will seek to undermine any leftover dichotomy between good and evil, between reason and the senses, exposing the supplementary relation between touch and untouchability.

In the *Noli me tangere* scene, Mary Magdalene faces Jesus. As she reaches out to touch him, Jesus says: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17). Later in the scene, as the news of Jesus's resurrection

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<sup>11</sup> The Word (ο λογοβ). Logoβ is from legw, old word in Homer to lay by, to collect, to put words side by side, to speak, to express an opinion. Logoβ is common for reason as well as speech. Heraclitus used it for the principle which controls the universe.

is beginning to spread, Thomas remains unbelieving and beseeches Jesus to allow him to touch Jesus. Jesus responds: “Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing” (John 20: 27). In this scene, what begins to take place is the biblical relation between touch, presence, absence, faith and untouchability.

Interdiction of contact is the first injunction. Mary reaches toward Jesus as he appears to her. Asked not to touch, she does not lay her hands on his body. Thomas, who refuses to believe, demands to touch Jesus. After laying his hands on Jesus’s body, he calls Jesus his saviour. At first glance, it would seem that for Mary Jesus is untouchable, whereas Jesus willingly allows Thomas to touch him. Perhaps something more is at stake? If we think touch as a reaching toward that moves in the direction of experience rather than a pursuit of knowledge (a means to an end) might it not be Mary – as befits her role as the bearer of touch in the Bible – who in fact engages touchingly toward Jesus? If this is the case, would Thomas – as befits his role as the doubting disciple – not be seen engaging in the act most distant from a politics of touch, that is, in an act of discerning the “truth” through a laying on of hands? The injunction *not to touch* in the *Noli me tangere* scene is perhaps about defining the important political and ethical difference between reaching toward and the amassing of pre-definable knowledge.

“Do not touch me” signals a potential danger. It is an injunction that touches at the core. “Do not touch me” announces an immediate relationship between touch and untouchability, signalling not necessarily that “I am untouchable” but emphasizing the imperative that for touch to alter political and ethical vistas, knowledge must be arrived through experience rather than “truth.” “Do not touch me” touches not on a “fact” of

untouchability, but on the impossibility of a final reaching toward that would “know” me through touch. “Do not touch me” evokes the infinite separation between your finality and my finality. You cannot touch me unless you register that I will remain untouchable. To touch the untouchable (to hold my untouchability captive) would be to subsume me into your narrative of presence. What Jesus says to Mary is: I am here, untouchable, reachable in my present-absence.

Touch, untouchability, is evoked in the foundational absence that lurks in each potential relation. An impenetrable distance remains between me and you, a distance exposed by my desire to reach toward you, as we engage in a politics of touch. Incommensurable, this politics signals your difference not from me per se, but from any narrative that would attempt to bridge the impossible distance between our bodies. This is the distance of relation. Relation exceeds self and other, expressing the desire not to find a commonality in the particularities that differentiate us but to engage the difference as the untouchability that forever draws me outside my “self.” It is here and now that I realize that I have no self, that I exist in relation, that I am in relation to my own untouchability. My body is not One.

Over and over in the bible, Jesus is touched and his touch heals. This touch is a laying of hands,<sup>12</sup> an ingestion of an other not unlike the swallowing of his body in the form of the host. Only once does Jesus ask not to be touched, and this when Mary reaches out to touch him. This moment of touch/untouchability takes place when faced with a different (incarnated) body. Jesus’s resurrection alters the status of touch. He

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<sup>12</sup> The laying of hands in the Bible takes place in both directions: Jesus heals by touching others and others are healed by touching him. “For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole” (Matthew 9: 21). “So Jesus had compassion on them, and touched their eyes: and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed him” (Matthew 20:34).

seems to say: “Do not touch me, do not restrain me, do not think you can catch me or reach me, for I am leaving for the Father, that is to say, again and always toward death’s power, and I am leaving from death to death, I am melting into my nocturnal lustre on this spring morning” (Nancy 2003: 31). I reach out but I cannot touch you, I must have faith in your reason, I must believe in the untouchability that always precedes and exceeds my relation.

Strange inconsistency, then, between the desire to touch and the injunction to have faith. Faith precedes the fall. Into experience is out of faith. Is this always the case? Must God remain untouchable? According to Michael Hardt, incarnation is about abandonment to the flesh: “The self-emptying or kenosis of Christ, the evacuation of the transcendental, is the affirmation of the plenitude of the material, the fullness of the flesh” (2002: 78). Incarnation would be the body-flesh becoming touchable/untouchable at the nexus between the infinite and the eternal, the becoming-different of the modalities of existence. Incarnation as becoming-flesh would be not the eternalization of the untouchable but the touchability of the eternal. “Transcendence, the condition of possibility of being, should not be imagined as above or below the material – it dwells, rather, precisely as its very surface” (Hardt 2002: 79). Jesus incarnate appears to exclaim that there is no mediation necessary between the transcendent and the immanent. Transcendence and immanence are complimentary, they exist in the experience of the body of Jesus, in its immanent un/touchability. The only difference, perhaps, is that now touch can no longer signify a “possession” of the body as in the earlier healing narratives, but must instead imply a relation to experience’s untouchability.

Senses awaken in the relation between Jesus and Mary. She reaches toward him and registers his voice. She makes contact with him, not by touching him, but by accepting his untouchability. Thomas does not make contact. For Thomas, Jesus must be present. Jesus must be touched in order to confirm the materiality of his flesh. Touch is sidelined with knowledge here, with reason. For Mary, it is Jesus's imminent absence that connects him to her. Presence as absence is the experience of touch. Touch is of the body, it is the experience of the body's immanence, of its ability to re-generate, to re-appear differently. Mary locates not the body of Christ but the trace of his passing and the promise of his return.

Touch is not a confirmation, not an accomplishment, Jesus seems to say. Touch is reaching-toward flesh, but not as proof of presence. Touch is the promise that you can reach again and find me on the threshold of your senses. "The exposed flesh does not reveal a secret self that had been hidden, but rather dissolves any self that could be apprehended. We not only have nothing left to hide, we no longer present any separate thing for the eyes to grasp. We become imperceptible" (Hardt 2202: 80). Jesus exposes himself in relation (to Mary, to Thomas, to God) on a positive logic of emanation. Materiality is intensified. Your touch goes right through me because there is no "me." I am not eternal, I am eternally material. Material I am the metamorphosing body, exposing myself to you, to your touch that never quite adheres, that never quite reaches the one I am not yet, the one I will never quite become. "Flesh is the condition of possibility of the qualities of the world, but it is never contained within or defined by those qualities. In this sense it is both a superficial foundation and an immanent

transcendence – alien to any dialectic of reality and appearance, or depth and surface” (Hardt 2002: 83).

I reach toward your mystery, the magic of your flesh, the untouchability of the experience that we will become as we alter space/times together. Perhaps this explains the proliferation of paintings of the *Noli me tangere* scene.<sup>13</sup> These paintings, which seek to expose a certain unknowability in the relation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, focus in different and interesting ways on the hands. In some cases, hands connote a separation, in some a desire to touch, a reaching toward, a prayer, a benediction, a warning. There is no consensus on the nature of the touch that takes place. Touch and undecidability go hand in hand. Mary understands the untouchability of touch. Mary reaches toward it not seeking truth, nor the Word, but the con-tact that will engage her in a relation to the untouchable she already knows well. As Nancy writes, “Mary-Magdalene becomes a saint *par excellence* because she holds herself at the point where the touch of sense is identical to its retreat” (Nancy 2003: 72).

Genesis and the *Noli me tangere* episode share an engagement with the threat and potential violence of touch. In Genesis, the threat is that touch will propel Adam and Eve out of the garden into experience. In the *Noli me tangere* episode, the threat is more complex: if Mary touches Jesus, she relegates her faith to the promise of corporeal presence. If Mary does not touch Jesus, she accepts the incorporeality of touch as a potential violence toward the concept of presence. Thomas does touch Jesus, but only to justify his faith. Mary, on an other hand, accepts that Jesus is no longer touchable as a healer but must be reached toward differently. Jesus is thus relegated to the

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<sup>13</sup> Innumerable artists have depicted this scene. They include Rembrandt (Buckingham, collection of Elizabeth II, London), Dürer’s “*La petite passion*,” Titian (National Gallery, London), Pontormo (Casa Buonarrotti, Florence), Cano Alonzo (Budapest, D.R.) and Correggio (Prado, Madrid).

unknowability of presence as absence, and touch to a gesture in passing. Here, it seems that Jesus is both of the earth (having fallen toward touch) and of the heavens (moving toward a Godliness that would render him permanently untouchable). The figure who remains most interesting in relation to touch is Mary.

“It is a good thing not to touch a woman,” writes Paul (1 Cor 7:1). Gregg Lambert suggests that the body of woman in the early Christian community marks “the site of touching and the fear of being touched, [...] the site of this extreme contradiction [...] between a body that is open to the touch and a body that is determined by the prohibition against touching” (2004: 4). Mary Magdalene is no exception. In Mark 16:1 it is reported that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. Against all restrictions around touch, these women go to the grave to touch and handle a corpse.

Mary Magdalene is the biblical embodiment of flesh and of the carnal body. It is in the shadow of her fleshy body that Jesus reveals himself. It is with her that Jesus speaks of touch. It is toward her that Jesus becomes untouchable. It is with her that Jesus circumvents the violence of touch. Mary is touch embodied, she is the woman who reaches toward touch as untouchability. She is the body that opens itself toward the body of Jesus, allowing him to take leave, allowing him to take a place within her, to become her. For it is Mary who is asked to relay the gospel, it is Mary who is asked to know that to touch is always to reach toward untouchability. It is Mary who understands what is at stake in the complicated politics of touch at work in the Bible. As Nancy writes, “[t]his violent paradox is not to be resolved, it remains the location of a gap as intimate as it is irreducible: do not touch me.” Mary is the incarnation of this interval, the body of



woman who understands the violence inherent in the decision to touch or not to touch, who lives the complexity of the engagement with the unknowable, the indefinable.

### Return to the Garden

#### The Garden of Love

I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst.  
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And Thou shalt not writ over the door;  
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,  
That so many sweet flowers bore,

And I saw it was filled with the graves,  
And tombstones where flowers should be:  
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

(William Blake, *Songs of Experience*)

Blake's Garden of Love exposes the violence at work in organized religion. This is the Garden as it would perhaps look to Adam and Eve were they to return. To their eyes, it is a bleak sight. Open fields are replaced by a locked chapel. The abundant nature is no longer visible, having been overtaken by the stern architecture that underwrites the commitment to eternity. The gates are shut so that only the soul can cross the threshold. The touching, sensing, moving body seems to be condemned: "Thou shalt not" is written on the door of the chapel. Fields of flowers are replaced by graves and grave priests binding into briars the lost joys of the garden. This garden, seen through eyes that have touched the world, is a startling vision of hell.

Influenced by the tactile bodies etched by Michelangelo,<sup>14</sup> William Blake celebrates flesh and sensing bodies in movement in his writings and etchings. For Blake, the ideal human form is not to be found in the Garden of Love. The ideal form is not a disembodied spirit, not an eternal soul. The ideal human is a carnal, fleshy, sensing body. It is not fixed as a determinable or measurable form, as unitary or self-contained individuality. The body is indefinite, ever-changing, relational. In many ways, it is a Deleuzian or Spinozean body where life is understood not as form, but as a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles. In this relational body, the senses are defined as “windows”<sup>15</sup> (Europe 3:1,5) rather than surfaces, as openings which liberate the vast realms of experience. The window in Blake is not a transparent surface through which one gazes. It is an opening which exposes the world in all of its inconsistencies. Through the window, bodies move and senses are unleashed.

In Blake, the senses are not limited to specific organs. The senses are relational. The senses traverse space unrestricted, forever growing to encompass the expansive limits of an extended body. The more majestic the body, the larger the senses and the wider their capacities. Senses move the body beyond itself, inciting it to become more than its organs, calling forth a Deleuzian Body without Organs.<sup>16</sup> “A vast Spine writh’d in torment / Upon the winds” (9:37-8). Urizen’s body moves through space, more and less than the sum of its senses. “Though all [...] parts, belong to the same body, some are

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<sup>14</sup> According to Heppner (1995: 22-3), Blake not only imitates Michelangelo, but exaggerates those qualities in Michelangelo considered extreme and inimitable including the contortion and passion of his powerfully muscular bodies. Blake saw only Michelangelo’s engravings.

<sup>15</sup> The window in Blake is not a transparent surface through which one gazes. It is an opening which exposes the world in all of its inconsistencies. Through the window, the senses are unleashed.

<sup>16</sup> See final chapter for a more detailed exploration of the Body without Organs. See also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987.

insignificant in the relation to the landscape, and some proportionately large” (Connolly 2002: 89). A sense of exposure is tangible in Urizen’s description – veins, nerves, inner organs and fibres are exposed to the vastness: “Urizen is one with his environment as a cosmic man: there is no skin to make a border between himself and his world” (Connolly 2002: 90).

Parts of Urizen’s body grow out of themselves. Eyes shoot out from the brain, ears spiral from the orbs of vision. The senses escape the common *organization* of the body even as they transform it, fluidly reconnecting to bodies spaced and timed elsewhere. Tristanne Connolly writes: “Blake’s descriptions of the metamorphosis of the sense organs make it clear that the body we know is the result of the transformation” (2002: 78). When the inhabitants of Urizen’s world endure changes, their senses also change: “their eyes / Grew small like the eyes of man” (23: 35-6). Here, space and time are qualitatively altered alongside changes in the senses. “The sense organs seem to metamorphose swiftly, but each change occurs as an age passes over” (Connolly 2002: 89). Although the senses are often described separately in Blake’s poems, they are synesthetically joined in the body’s passionate participation in experience. They are not passive. The senses move the body toward a world that can only expand exponentially given the opportunity to work supplementarily in defiance of the dichotomies dictated by a biblical text that continues to preach the primary difference between good and evil. Passivity brings forth shrinkage of the senses as they attempt to constrain themselves to the *individual* body. Only in passivity are senses reduced, all but touch, which “is capable of rousing the greatest ecstasy [and] admits man into Eternity; therefore it is not “dead,” like an other senses, but only cursed” (Damon 1971: 408).

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is a series of plates that explores in detail the shortcomings of narratives that seek to dichotomize experience. Contraries prevail giving rise to the concepts of good and evil. “Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. / Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell” (Blake 1975: 3, xvi). As long as good and evil are opposed, the stakes are clear and God’s word – the sovereign voice – takes charge over insensate bodies. But perhaps good and evil are not opposed, warns Blake, who then points out the many errors found in the bible. Amongst them is the dichotomy between body and soul, wherein evil energy stems from the body and good reason is of the soul.

To restrain desire – not to reach toward an other – is to be weak. Only the weak are restrained. Desire is energy and “[e]nergy is eternal delight” (Blake 4, xvi). Desire attracts the devil: “When I came home: on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil forded in black clouds” (6-7, xvii). Desire extends the senses and the senses promise experience, but with experience comes temptation. The choice is violent, but not to choose is to remain passive and to allow yourself to be governed. Temptations are to be lived, to be experienced: “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. / Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity” (7, xviii). To live is to touch the world. Time is at stake, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” With time, as my body changes, my senses become more acute and my life becomes more complex. To live is to time space and space time, unleashing the energies of the sensing and transforming bodies in movement.

To live sensually is to discover the infinite in all things and to be persuaded by our beliefs. Nothing can be proven, there is no truth. Sensual enjoyment leads to

eternity, an eternity that exists in finitude, analogous, perhaps, to Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence. Knowledge is corrosive, printed onto the surface which always resists. Perception must be cleansed. Only the senses offer the window onto a finitude replete with experience. The printing house becomes the location for the Word, a Word which does not uphold the voice of the sovereign but seeks instead to etch corrosively on opaque metals and transfer onto translucent paper. Blake's word transforms experience by incorporating the sensual capacities of sensing bodies in movement, relating the narratives of super-sensory giants who are now imprisoned. Sensuality that is restrained to the surface must escape, must become Godly, must expand beyond the strict envelope of the body's skin. "God only Acts & Is, in existing beings of Men" (16-17, xxiii).<sup>17</sup>

"For every thing that lives is Holy," writes Blake at the end of *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (27, xxviii). Holiness is not bodilessness but its opposite. The more sense-perceptive, the holier. The body that emerges as the holy body is a body that is eminently touchable, though always slightly out of reach as it extends toward the world. The body is fluidly sensual, sensingly fluid, transforming itself beyond notions of discrete insides and outsides. The body is beside itself, corporeal, reaching, sensing, experiencing. This is not an innocent or a non-violent body. It is a body that experiences the world in touch with the potential violence that is the rupture toward the unknowable. As Blake writes in *Jerusalem*, "if Perceptive Organs vary: Objects of Perception seem to vary: / if the Perceptive Organs close: the Objects seem to close also" (30, 34). The world corresponds to the variations of the senses that perceive it.

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<sup>17</sup> "God is Jesus," writes Blake (*Laoc*, K 777). Jesus is the human God. "We are all co-existent with God – members of the Divine body. We are all partakers of the Divine nature" (CR 255). "Thou art a Man, God is no more [than Man], / Thy own humanity learn to adore, / For that is my Spirit of Life" (EG d:75). "God is Man & exists in us & we in him" (*On Berkeley*, K 775).

A sensing body is an infinite body. Infinity is not eternity. A sensing body does not return to the garden nor does it perform miracles through touch. A sensing body ruptures conceptions of time and space which are considered stable, reaching toward a continued metamorphosis of the body that violently spaces time and times space. Acute senses allow the world to appear to us in relation. Bodies are not physically altered by sense. They are qualitatively altered even as they modify time and space. Bodies emerge as multitudes, infinitely sensing in excess of their organisms, reaching toward songs of experience. “We live as one man; for contracting our infinite senses / We behold multitude; or expanding; we behold as one” (J 38 [34]: 17-19).