

The Infinity of Touch

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I.

Touching involves the coming together of two or more entities. The act of touching suggests intentionality, a reaching out, the desire to be in contact with someone or something outside of oneself. To touch is to overcome, no matter how great or small, a gap, a distance, a void.

In an experimental lecture given at the beginning of this year, feminist theorist, Karen Barad, described the act of touching and its ability to bridge physical as well as psychic distance. Allowing matter is due as an active participant in the world's becoming, Barad works at the intersection of feminist, queer and quantum physics, engaging quantum field theory as a way to think through scientific practice and its relationship to ethics:

*When two hands touch there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence; a proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself, perhaps closer... So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others, other beings, other spaces, other times, are aroused.*¹

The Baradian concept of agential realism proposes a new ontology in which separateness is not taken as an innate feature of how the world is. Instead of independent objects with inherent boundaries, the primary ontological units in an agential realist approach are *phenomena*, understood as relationships of inseparability. In contrast with an interaction, an engagement that infers pre-established actors, Barad puts forth the notion of *intra-action*: an infinite exchange of things influencing, diffracting and working inseparably. This new ontology makes the radical proposal that there is no independent, self-contained existence, and instead, that entanglement is a precondition for being and acting in the world. And if, as Barad has suggested, the act of touching situates us intimately together, then working at the level of matter and through our perpetual unfolding, perhaps there is no other within the infinity of touch.

II.

The emergence of liberalism in the eighteenth century saw a limiting of broad governing techniques in favour of a free market economy on the one hand, coupled with population-subjects on the other, who were bound in their thinking and conduct to economic paradigms. In this new political economy the individual emerged as the focus of power.

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Karen Barad,
"On Touching the
Stranger Within –
The Alterity that
therefore I Am",
lecture for *The Poetry
Project*, March 2021.

Control of individuals was achieved, rather than through governance, through governmentality — where sovereign power and determination no longer remained solely with the sovereign, and instead, individuals were now responsible for their own physical and economic survival. This rhetoric of individualisation has paved the way for today's atmosphere of hyper-competition and overconsumption. Not only are human beings pitted against each other in the rat race for capital accumulation, but we have become estranged from the earth, the air and the water that surround us, and even from ourselves. This social cleaving plays an integral role within the functioning of contemporary free market economies.

Capitalism has imposed itself not only as an economic system, but as a psychological condition and reality that has divided our way of being. It is an existence evaluated by money alone, a system that has resolved personal worth into exchange value, an ontology centred on business, a form of relation based upon exploitation and othering. Postmodern capitalism has come to be understood as the fabric of who we are, and to end capitalism would therefore be to rupture contemporary human subjectivity as we know it.

But neoliberal capitalism is not innately us. We are not individualistic beings. We are sensual and we crave touch.

III.

Let us look then to the interstitial places that exist past the edge of landscapes and beneath city streets. Here, where boundaries are yet to be determined, we can touch freely. Stretching across geographic and digital expanses, and perhaps working in and through them, we must locate a new politics of entanglement that exposes our current reality as not only artificial but breakable. In defiance of the systems that divide us, we must locate new metaphorical and poetic ways of returning to each other and to ourselves.

Through touch we can come together, radically and infinitely.