

# A Touch in the Present: Reactions and Rhizomes

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Deleuze and Guattari present to their readers the figure of a rhizome.<sup>1</sup> The rhizome is a plant that can both extend out and turn in: “The rhizome itself assumes diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers.”<sup>2</sup> “[A]ny point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.”<sup>3</sup> I find this image of the rhizome to be an apt description of my reactions to, and response to, the beautiful paper written by Sharon Todd: “The Touch of the Present: Educational Encounters and Processes of Becoming.” To some of her words, I felt immediate connections and the desire for extension—for reaching out—and beyond to where these ideas might lead. To other words I felt a sort of contraction: a pulling back and into myself over something that just didn’t *sound* or *feel* right. Above all, I hope this response is seen as a bridge or move toward further conversation and to a possible moment of—in Todd’s words— “attending to something, both in the sense of drawing our attention to it and in the sense of tending it with curiosity and affection.”<sup>4</sup>

## TOUCH AS THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE, AND, POSSIBLY, EDUCATION

Todd writes about “our embodied encounters with the world, as a touching and being touched by.” She argues that this ‘touching’ offers “new modes of being in the world with others, new forms of subjectification.”<sup>5</sup> She specifically defines touch as having a “generative, constitutive function” that plays a major part in our “formations of becoming.”<sup>6</sup> These words resonated with me. They propelled me on a journey of connections to the ways that touching the outside world—specifically the forests and oceans and mountain tops—have shaped who I am and who I continue to become. They brought to recollection moments of touch I have had with teachers; some I still cannot

make sense of. They pushed me to think of the many times I touch students (hugging is quite normal where I teach) and wonder how that touching creates moments of reaching out or folding in for my students. I was reminded of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where he writes "Of Bodies chang'd to various forms" and then expounds on the ways that bodies can change and become something else through touch and touching encounters.<sup>7</sup> Chaos is touched by the gods to create heaven and earth and all that are in them. Caeneus the warrior was raped by Neptune and then granted a wish—as recompense for the rape—to become a man (rather than a woman); a man whose body could not be touched by swords or arrows. Phaeton's sisters—the daughters of Apollo—are distraught at the death of their brother. They wallow on the ground in their grief, and the ground reaches out to claim them as its own, turning them into trees. In these stories, touch—feeling touched and being touched by nature, gods, and people—results in metamorphoses. These changes are never known from the beginning and always represent a line into something new; something dreadful and/or something fantastic. I believe that touch is powerful.

#### HELP, THOU, MY UNBELIEF

It is because I resonate with the argument that touch is powerful and can bring things, ideas, and even different versions of the self into existence that I also found myself taken aback at some of the ideas in the text. I feel like the father with the sick child in the Christian Bible when the Lord tells the father: "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth."<sup>8</sup> And the father responds: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."<sup>9</sup> My hope and doubt co-mingle.

It is in this spirit that I wonder about the ability of touch to ever escape enculturation or instant signification of one kind or another. Todd writes that touch and other sensual encounters can exist beyond the codes that our culture assigns to it; "we can experience something beyond what is given symbolically: something that resists dominant sensory codes."<sup>10</sup> Todd argues that touch "cannot be fixed or intelligible within given systems of meaning, since it itself is the very movement of signification."<sup>11</sup> I wonder: Is touch ever truly able to escape signification embedded in previous experience and social un-

derstandings? Can touching—*in this present*—ever truly escape signification? Does touch ever truly exist without simultaneously conveying some form of sensation-with-meaning that is beyond the touch itself?

There is a moment when I go running—especially when it is windy and dusty outside—where I feel prickles along my skin. In that moment, at first, I am unable to determine whether these prickles are the feeling of insects on my legs that need to be shooed away, or dust that is being whipped up by the wind and pelleting my legs, or merely the nerve endings in my sweat glands very briefly reacting to the heat and beginning swell of sweat. Even when I cannot name what the sensation is, I experience it as annoying. It is a sensation I hope goes away quickly. I experience a sort of judgement about whether or not the sensation is positive or negative simultaneous to, or concomitant with, experiencing the sensation itself.

In the society in which I exist—in *this present*—touch is completely coded and over-coded. Pre-school age children are taught about “good touches” and “bad touches” as a way of protecting them from abusive situations. People—women in particular—are primed to make instant judgements about touch as well. Is the touch consensual? Do I approve of the touch? Is this touch a violation? Does this touch have ramifications for the future? If I don’t stop the touch now will I have a say about how I understand this touch in the future? If I *do* stop the touch now, will I ever be touched by this person again? For good reasons, people are taught that they must make instant judgements about the nature of a touch. In this environment, can touch ever truly escape enculturating norms?

I also wonder about the part that judgement plays in our touches. I believe that, in general, touch can be a positive and momentous way to encounter the world. But touch can also be harmful, and Todd is very mindful of this. Todd writes: “Relations of touch are never wholly innocent but circulate within networks of other relations: the teacher’s touch might circulate within a host of other gestures and histories of signification, including care and tenderness as well as violence and abuse.”<sup>12</sup> While Todd is aware that touch can be both damaging and positively transforming, she nevertheless argues that

“one does not decide prior to the touch on the shoulder happening that it is inappropriate or not; that can only come about when it has occurred.”<sup>13</sup> I am unsure of this argument. If touch can be given and/or received as violence, is it not our duty—a statute of good judgement—to try and decipher, beforehand, whether the touch would be received as a form of violence or as a form of positive good will? While our judgement about the touch might be errant, it seems to me that there is still a duty to consider how the touch would be received because of the *potential* that the touch could do more harm than good.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

I love that Todd considers the ramifications of touch/ing and ‘becoming’ for teachers and classrooms. Todd writes: “For education, places such as classrooms are composed of multiple spaced times and timed spaces, each contributing to a complex matrix of relationality and touch.”<sup>14</sup> Todd expounds on the place of the classroom as “a holding environment for such encounters to manifest and to awaken to the potentiality they hold in the educational project of subjectification.”<sup>15</sup> It seems to me that Todd wants us to ponder the ways that her arguments shape what we do in our classrooms. I believe that attunement to the present and to sensory experiences can “offer new modes of being in the world with others,”<sup>16</sup> and I argue that this belief *should* change how I practice and understand teaching in the classroom. I want to generate the “feeling awareness” that Todd speaks of in my students.<sup>17</sup> This makes me wonder: can I *do* something to create these kinds of encounters or touching moments in the classroom? Do these moments happen without me doing anything? Is my job to teach attunement or noticing (tending to) these sensory-filled moments? How does one do that? My questions and reactions continue on like this—like Deleuzian plateaus: without “a culmination point or external end.”<sup>18</sup> For this, I give thanks. The paper touched-off several generative lines of thought for me.

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1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988).

- 2 Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 6.
- 3 Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 7
- 4 Sharon Todd, "The Touch of the Present: Educational Encounters and Processes of Becoming," *Philosophy of Education* (2020).
- 5 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 6 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 7 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book.
- 8 KJV Mark 9: 23-24
- 9 KJV Mark 9: 23-24
- 10 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 11 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 12 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 13 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 14 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 15 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 16 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 17 Todd, "The Touch of the Present."
- 18 Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 22.