

Response to Stephanie Springgay and Debra Freedman Making Sense of Touch

Phenomenology and the Place of Language in a Bodied Curriculum

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In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand. But this last-minute failure does not drain all truth from the presentiment I had of being able to touch myself touching: my body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it. (1968, p. 9)

In describing our sense of touch, Merleau-Ponty speaks to our fundamental orientation in the world, the prereflexive or precritical manner in which the human body sets the scene for intersubjective relations in and through touch. Being-with others is not, then, originally a matter of information exchange, as if we were seamlessly communicating data, the content of some abstract proposition or other. In this regard, educational curricula are often out of touch, and increasingly so as we adopt corporatized "accountability practices" that include quantifiable "learning outcomes," "key performance indicators," and the like.

Touching and being-touched for Merleau-Ponty stand in a phenomenological relation of ambiguity. It is impossible to say precisely when touching crosses over into being-touched, when activity become passivity, when the subject who touches becomes the object of the touch, and vice versa. We never possess the object in touch; we are equally possessed by it. Thus, there is a "miscarriage" in this relation, a kind of wild "reversibility" (p. 147), and a radical unknowing that becomes immaterial, as it were, through the material wisdom of the body itself. The body is neither cause nor effect; rather, we might say that the body occasions "the perception that dawns through it." Thus, intersubjectivity is not a sharing between a preestablished self and other, but it is first in and through that relation that self and other are meaningfully constituted, and without which a language of "self and other" would be incomprehensible.

Diane Borsato's art project *Touching 1,000 People* is likewise an occasion to make sense of touch and to explore the ways the touching-touched body might enter "the next moment" of curriculum studies. I wonder, then, how what I have called the "material wisdom" of the body might translate into something that could affect the curriculum in material ways. I am wary of the embrace of terms like *becoming*, *the in-between*, or of unconstructed notions of "proximity," "difference," and "performativity." Certainly, I do not deny the important ludic permutations that these concepts enable, and there is something to be said for unstructured play: it fosters creativity and curiosity (at a time when these are in short supply in the academy). But our theoretical tools must also be put to work, mate-

rialized, made practicable. Gilles Deleuze and Foucault once remarked: "Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another" (1977, p. 206). How, then, do we best ensure that our theories are not out of touch? How do we set them into motion? Deleuze continues, "No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall" (p. 206). In this spirit, I would like to dwell for a moment on what Merleau-Ponty calls the "miscarriage" of the touching-touched, to prise open the space of "the in-between" to expose the troubled face of this relation, and to amplify this inherent phenomenological ambiguity towards a practice—an ethic—of discomfort. I will suggest that in the "miscarriage" or "last-minute failure" of the touching-touched relation we might light upon a failure that is pedagogically productive, a site of critical resistance.

In a review essay discussing Borsato's work, the artist-curator Kathleen Ritter writes:

Borsato's minor physical contact—a gentle nudge, discreet grazing, or brush of the hand—turns the act of touching into transgression. The work is performative and temporal. It exists in the moment of its enactment.... Borsato's touching, the action performed outside of socially expected behaviour which I first imagined to be a careful and gentle brush on the shoulder proved to be, upon discovery, a somewhat uncontrolled and erratic flinging movement of arms that at times *hit* rather than *touched*. The act was not performed in a desire to be touched back. Instead it imposed a distance between Borsato and the subject of her movements; people invariably moved away from her as she touched them. (2005, n.p.)

Ritter adds a significant critical dimension to Borsato's work, helping to contextualize how and why difference is important in the intersubjective relation of touch. The resistance, or failure, "imposes a distance" and is telling; these are not just bodies, but gendered bodies, racialized bodies, bodies marked by their socioeconomic status, by their own histories, and so on. As Borsato herself writes, "I also began to recognize the differences in people's feelings of entitlement to space and how it related to what I perceived to be their age, cultural background, gender, and class" (2001, p. 65). The resistance is a wall, in Deleuze's sense, bringing into relief the myriad conditions under which bodies can appear as touchable or untouchable in the first place. In her recent work, Judith Butler describes these conditions as the "scene of address" (Butler, 2005; Murray, 2007). Here we might begin to distinguish the caress from the grope, for example, prising open the space between touching and touched, problematizing our interpretations, and calling out for a critical reading. It is hard to name the point when touching crosses over into being-touched, when a playful reversibility is performed and the performative uptake is "felicitous," in J. L. Austin's (1975) sense; but here, reversibility is interrupted, and we become painfully aware that an incommensurable being-in-the-world separates us, the touching from the touched, and that the space in-between is sometimes an unbridgeable gap.

Not so much a "space," now, we are confronted with a site that bristles with meaning, that "exists in the moment of its enactment," as Ritter says. I am suggesting that this site become a worksite, the occasion to bring the prior and enabling conditions of touch to language, to expression. This is what Borsato does with these rather private performances when she reflects on them publicly. She brings them to language, affectively. "I started to feel..." she writes, "I felt compelled..." "I found myself feeling responsible..." (Borsato, 2001, p. 65). In this vein, Ritter writes:

language is the vehicle in which the works travel back to the art community after the performance. The work comes to be known through language, myth, anecdote,

description, rather than through traditional exhibition methods.... In this way, the work is only available to its *other* intended audience—the art community—by its telling, at the artist's talk, published documents, rumors that circulate about the work, etc. (2005, n.p.)

Language is therefore crucial, and especially when communication “miscarries,” when it interrupts, discomfits, or transgresses—and this holds true not just for us when we touch and are touched, but for public art, for educational practices, and so on. The failure ought to prompt us to ask why, to bring-to-language, to struggle to express not just feelings, but the myriad prepersonal and precritical conditions that set the limits of my personal experience, my engagement, my encounter with the other. This is the critical work that emerges from out of a material, bodily resistance, a failure to know, to possess, or to master the world. It is through language that we ask questions; and it is through language that we learn the significance of our bodies, that we do not coincide perfectly with ourselves, that our right hand, when it reaches to touch our left hand touching, “always miscarries at the last moment,” a moment of unknowing, an existential gap, a lack, that teaches me how to be-with others, for this touch, too, this being-with, miscarries.

For Merleau-Ponty, this material dimension of human existence opens us onto language and the kind of conversation that Springgay and Freedman seem to yearn for in their chapter:

A genuine conversation gives me access to thoughts that I did not know myself capable of, that I was not capable of, and sometimes I feel myself *followed* in a route unknown to myself which my words, cast back by the other, are in the process of tracing out for me. (1968, p. 13)

My words exceed me, they circulate, between me and the other, crossing that unbridgeable gap where I dare not go; my words trace out for me a route unknown, and yet even though they trace out and light the way, I feel myself *followed*, by words that go on before but also tarry behind—or perhaps it is the other who follows, but if Merleau-Ponty is unclear in this, his language only underscores the verbal aspect of the other's being-with-me. In these relations, the body does not enjoy a self-immediacy; my relation to my body, just as my relation to the other, is mediated, uncertain, the occasion for reflection, for conversation, and for asking questions. My response to a “bodied curriculum,” then, would be a linguistic turn, of sorts. While the implicit dimensions of the body are necessary, bodies are not in themselves sufficient, and to the body I would add the need for an explicit language to think through the ways that that body is able to be present to itself and to others. It is in language that the self becomes a question to itself. Here once again I turn to Merleau-Ponty:

If we are ourselves in question [Si nous sommes nous-mêmes en question] in the very unfolding of our life, it is not because a central non-being threatens to revoke its consent to being [*son consentement à l'être*] at each instant; it is because we ourselves are one sole continuous question, a perpetual enterprise of rebuilding ourselves [*de relèvement de nous-mêmes*] on the constellations of the world, and of rebuilding things on our dimensions. (1968, p. 103, translation modified)

Here, Merleau-Ponty poses the question of our being a question to ourselves. His language opens a kind of unbridgeable gap, I believe, because if we ourselves are the *sole* question, there can be no other orienting question, no other, no Archimedean point from

which to pose the question that “we ourselves” somehow *are*. His is somehow an ironic assertion, too, because it is spoken by he who is, in these terms, unknown to himself, who speaks from within a continuous self-questioning, rather than from a position of knowledge or truth. And yet, the question is pressing because this question speaks directly to the “perpetual enterprise of rebuilding ourselves...and of rebuilding things.”

To *be* the kind of question that we ourselves *are* suggests the eternal enterprise of self-fashioning, learning and relearning who and what we are, and how we relate to the world and to others in it. The language of the subject’s self-questioning thus strikes me as crucial because it bears upon the rhetorical conditions, the speech conditions, the scene of address within which I find myself, and in and through which I will be able to *say* who I am—a being who speaks, and whose speech never fully coincides with his being, never completely fills that being with propositional or logical “contents.” The language itself performs a kind of opening, a doubling of the subject through grammatical reflexivity—*nous sommes nous-mêmes en question*: we are those beings who stand *in* relation to ourselves questioningly. And so part of the question lies hidden in the unremarked and unremarkable reflexivity of the grammar, in the relation between the self and itself as the self takes up the terms in and by which its relation to itself will unfold, hesitate, miscarry, and continuously seek new relations of being.

“There are two circles,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naïvely, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other” (1968, p. 138). At the risk of uttering a prescriptive statement, I will close by suggesting that education is nothing without the slight decentering of educational subjects, without at least a momentary suspension of naïveté, the inaugural moment of self-questioning and, indeed, self-doubt. If we are to make sense of the ways that the world touches us, and if we are to sustain discomfort in the face of the other, in the face of difference, then we must learn—and teach—the language of ethical critique. Bodies arrive on the scene with many dissonant conversations already underway. Dissonant as they may be, some will speak to and bolster my prejudices, others will include me, some may exclude, while still others will set forth in advance the terms by which my body will be experienced by me, how it will appear in the world, and how—if I am so entitled—I may touch or be touched. The ongoing task of our “bodied curriculum” is perhaps to find the language to enter these conversations, without necessarily reproducing them.

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