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Book Review

Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense
by Richard Kearney
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 197 pages

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In many ways, *Touch* is Richard Kearney's follow up to *Carnal Hermeneutics*, a collective volume he co-edited with Brian Treanor in 2015.¹ For Kearney, following Aristotle, touch, etymologically traced to *tact*, is, as he states in *Touch*, the interpretive catalyst for all other senses and the "most refined means of transition and translation; the touchstone of carnal hermeneutics" (38). Tactful interpretation, or embodied awareness, precedes linguistic understanding. In other words, good taste is possible long before we can name it as such. However, the collective dependence on technologically mediated communication has, on Kearney's telling, threatened our relationships with ourselves and the others with whom we share the world. In short, Kearney asks readers to imagine a "commons of the flesh" marked by incarnation where embodied hermeneutics make way for the symbiocene in favor of excarnation and the Anthropocene.² Thus, tact as the reciprocal bedrock of interpretive possibility leads Kearney to offer a timely diagnosis of what he calls a global "crisis of touch" and a critical invitation to consider the healing possibility of tactile wisdom.

¹ Cf. Richard Kearney, "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics," in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds.), *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 15: "Life is hermeneutic through and through. It goes all the way up and all the way down. From head to foot and back again."

² "Incarnation is the image becoming flesh, excarnation is flesh becoming image. Incarnation invests flesh; excarnation divests it." (2)

Kearney begins his text with the claim that one can only live well to the extent that she learns to come to her senses again and again, and the first chapter unearths the etymological significance of touch as tact, savvy, flair, insight, and sound. This semantic distinction provides the opening for Kearney to demonstrate touch as the primordially endangered hermeneutic sense. Tracing tact in such a way, allows Kearney to underscore Husserl's "double-sensation" as the reciprocal and two-fold nature of touch (cf. 11). That is to say, I can touch and be touched by another, and there are good and bad ways to touch. Husserl's active-passive dialectic becomes then a touchstone throughout the text reminding readers of the hermeneutic and weighty ethical responsibility of tact. In the second chapter, Kearney sketches a brief philosophical phenomenology of touch. Aristotle's preference for tactile wisdom over Plato's optocentrism sets the stage for understanding a contemporary philosophical narrative of embodied hermeneutics. The chapter does not serve as a critique, but rather a foundational rhetorical strategy to establish the significance of carnal wisdom from the outset of phenomenological and philosophical inquiry. In addition to articulating a philosophical heritage that makes way for carnal wisdom, the second chapter, while not exhaustive, also serves as an excellent survey of central phenomenological themes and theorists. From Diderot to Irigaray and Kristeva to Nancy, Kearney tells a good story.

The philosophical lineage drawn in the second chapter provides a reasonable transition to the question that structures the remainder of the text. Kearney asks: "If we accept that no one goes unscathed in life, how might a therapeutics of touch help heal our hurts, even if it cannot cure them?" (60) Aristotle's notion of catharsis, or purged emotion, makes way for Kearney to remind readers of what he calls the double therapeutic (*pathos* and *muthos-mimesis*) of the wounded healer, who, rather than adopting a top-down Hippocratic medicinal therapy, instead chooses the holistic, tactile embodied, and uncertain salve of the Asclepian tradition. Moving from Greek myth, to Biblical stories, and mysticism, the third chapter is a narrative demonstration of the healing hope of tactile wisdom. Odysseus was recognized by the senses of his dog and his childhood nurse. Oedipus made generational amends and found healing through the pain of embodied vision after his eyes had been gouged. Chiron was the suffering centaur who heals the pain of others by touch. Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnate, tangible healer. Finally, mystic reverence and divine healing was frequently experienced and later expressed as embodied eroticism. Trauma spoken and shared thus becomes the very possibility of healing.

Recovery from trauma is the focus of the next two chapters of the text. Kearney walks readers through contemporary trauma therapies that recognize, as

Bessel Van der Kolk attests in his book of the same name, *The Body Keeps the Score*. The research highlighted around somatic therapies makes way for Kearney to reiterate his call for a commons of the flesh where sufferers are enabled to cultivate a shared memory of tactile compassion and healing (cf. 92). If trauma is stored in the body and touch is the catalyst for individual and collective healing, and if we are in a crisis of touch and excarnation, then Kearney is right in his urgent claim that finding our way back to tact is the “most vital task of our emerging symbiocene” (131). The trouble with any kind of remedy is that we are saturated in the technological and not likely to twist free of its firm clutches of our collective illness. How to attend to the crisis while still remaining in the world increasingly dependent on technological mediation, is the primary concern of the fifth and final chapter of the text. Moving the question of collective trauma and therapy into the space of the university classroom, Kearney recalls a seminar series he held at Boston College where students were asked to imagine the landscape of touch in the digital age of excarnation. Technology is here to stay, and we have become accustomed to excarnation. Kearney recognizes this challenge to the salve of incarnation and tactile wisdom, and, as he recounts the classroom discussions, concludes: “[in order] to live fully in tomorrow’s world we will need both virtual imagination and incarnate action” (132). Health, it would seem, is a matter of both/and not one/or the other.

The final pages of *Touch* serve as an addendum to the text written in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting Kearney’s claim from the start: we must, and our history suggests we will, return again and again to our senses. *Touch* is a thoughtful critique of a central concern of our time. While some might ask after the relation between touch and language and the hermeneutic primacy Kearney gives to tact before words, the critical importance of the crisis he alerts us to promises much in making strides together toward building and sharing the commons of the flesh he so hopefully imagines.