Touching the Past; or, Hanging Chad

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Introduction: Getting Precedential

Carolyn dinshaw, in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern,*[1] develops and follows what she calls a "queer historical touch," risking partial connections between and across a heterogeneous array of historical agents, cultural artifacts, and epochs: from Margery Kempe to Lynn Cheney, *Canterbury Tales* to *Pulp Fiction,* Foucault in the archives to barbarians (well, queer medievalists) at the gates. She engages documents of historical fact and fictional texts. From this queer mix of genres and subjects, she derives a queer historical method whose founding assumption is contingency and driving metaphor, "touch." But Dinshaw does not rest on metaphor. Her metaphorics of touch itself displaces metaphor in favor of metonymy. This is not an idle move; the play of metonymy is a warrant against mimetic approaches to history, in which the past is mirror or it is nothing at all.

Dinshaw's touch, the queer historical method she proposes, pressed on me as I was racing to complete the first version of this paper in November 2000 for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. I was doing so against the endless droning of MSNBC's endless analysis of what, at the time, felt like an endless presidential campaign. While the vote counting continued, halted, continued again, until the Supreme Court's votes were counted once and for all, cable TV was my constant companion; like me, it was up at all hours with not much new to report. How many times did pundits—those "mediatized" historians of the sixty-minute hour (less time for commercials)—tell us, variously, that "we were 'witnessing history,'" "this election is one for the history books," or (and track the heteronormative claims of reproducing the nation) "we will be telling our grandkids about this one"?

[1]Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). Further references to this book will appear in parentheses in the main text.

I remain especially struck by this third variant, with its imperative to reproduce the self, the nation, history itself. "We will be telling our grandkids about this one" invokes a future to come in which I regale my as-yet-nonexistent grandkids (grandkids who will, presumably, be issued to me along with my social security check) with tales of the wild, year 2000 presidential election. The forecast anchors that future and this present in a certain past. Indeed, at the same time that some media millennialists worried that the tumult and rancor of this, as they said (over and over again), "first election of the new millennium" betokens ill for the nation's health, other commentators reassured by taking us back to the future—to the presidential past and the elections of 1960, 1876, and 1824.

This "other" history might guide us, help us make sense of "the now." The stakes of this glance backward were nothing less than the orderly transition of the presidency, of history itself. Looking back anchors the present and certifies the future.

Here is how historian Richard Norton Smith frames the matter in a *New York Times* op-ed. The title of the editorial, published on November 13, 2000, is, "A Sure Hand Can Save the New President." As he brings history to the nation, Smith leaves little doubt that the sure hand belongs not to the new president (whoever he might turn out to be), but to the historian. "Whoever is left standing," Smith advises, "will need to establish his political legitimacy. For guidance, he can choose from two very different historical models,"[2] the one-term presidency of John Quincy Adams (who succeeded to the presidency in 1824, despite having failed to garner the majority of either the popular vote or electoral college) or that of Rutherford B. Hayes (who lost the popular vote in 1876 but prevailed over Samuel Tilden after a disputed electoral college count).

The disputed presidential election of 1876 featured in numerous print and television analyses of the 2000 debacle. Just a day earlier (November 12, 2000), the Hayes-Tilden mess (and Florida's role in it) had been the subject of another *New York Times* article. This article appeared in a special section of the "National Report," titled "Counting the Vote." The special section ran from pages 22 to 33 and was further subdivided into a series of one-page focus areas, each containing multiple articles. For example, page 23 was devoted to "Counting the Vote: Views of a Dispute," and it juxtaposed a transcript of remarks made on Saturday by Gore's man, Warren Christopher; an article on the Bush camp's federal lawsuit to block hand recounts; another article telling us that Americans do not like ties (and as proof of this claim, the article reminded us of the sudden-death playoff or extra innings used to settle tie games in sporting contests);[3] and something billed as news analysis

[2] *New York Times,* 13 November 2000, A27.

[3] This sporting turn to decide the matter was utterly of a piece with an election in which one of the candidates (and now President) used to be an owner of the Texas Rangers. Just

of why a quick resolution of the disputed Florida election behooves "the Nation and Both Candidates, [as] Experts Contend."[4]

But I am particularly interested in a page organized around "Counting the Vote: Confusion Past and Present."[5] That page was broken into two articles, each with two captions: "The History: President Tilden? No, but Almost, in Another Vote that Dragged On" and "The Complaints: Some Say They Were Denied a Chance to Vote." The first article promised to give us not history, but "The History." It is the history of presidential elections past—and present. Indeed, the article's opening lines seemed crafted to maximize the identification—the confusion?—of past and present:

> The election was supposed to be close, as recent elections had tended to be. Still, everyone thought it would be decided on election night, not excruciating months later. No one anticipated that it would go down in history not for who won, but for how he won.
>
> But, sure enough, on the morning after Election Day, the candidates and the country woke up to a deeply disturbing and perplexing anomaly: they had voted for a new president but no one could tell them who it was.
>
> The year was 1876, when the nation was shaken by the most bitterly contested and one of the most controversial presidential elections in its history, a distinction that the messy election of 2000 now threatens to claim for itself.[6]

The historical essay that appeared on November 12 and Smith's op-ed of the following day would seem to have arrived at sharply different assessments of the 1876 election. For Smith, the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes, despite its inauspicious start, managed to achieve political legitimacy. By contrast, the article on the 1876 election presents a picture of a presidency that never recovered from its tumultuous beginnings. (Remember, this is the president whom Democrats dubbed "His Fraudulency.")

Yet, despite their different conclusions, both articles espoused a common view of history's meaning and direction. History has lessons for us now because history is continuous and transferential. Through its looking glass we come to find ourselves again and again. Both articles offer a comforting picture of history's unifying work. In so doing, they organize a continuous sense of the nation out of the past, tucking all uncertainties out of sight.

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before the general election, a friend complained to me that several of her coworkers were justifying their plans to vote for Bush on the grounds that it would be much more fun to go to a baseball game with him than with Gore.

[4] *New York Times,* 12 November 2000, 23.

[5] *New York Times,* 12 November 2000, 30.

[6] *New York Times,* 12 November 2000, 30.

This may be a distinctively American way of doing history, what MIT historian John W. Dower has called "a kind of Fourth-of-July historiography" (p. 179). However, when history is thus truncated, its contours and speakable subjects known in advance (and not "simply" after the fact), we have an injunction not to remember but to forget (p. 177). Forgotten or otherwise left out are those many for whom this way of doing (and reproducing) history offers scant comfort.[7]

What other kinds of relations to the past are possible? Must we choose between the comforts—the pleasures—of identification and the cold, hard facts of difference, if that is what they are? In her marvelous study *Getting Medieval,* queer medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw suggests another way of making contact with the past. She does so in part by resisting vision as the primary way to conceptualize history and relatedness. I want to focus some time here on the concept, and practice, of queer histories that Dinshaw develops in *Getting Medieval.* Like Foucault before her, Dinshaw has defiantly *not* written a book to please historians. And this is all to the good.

Touching History: A Queer Historical Method

Early on in *Getting Medieval,* Dinshaw tells us that her book is fundamentally about "making relations with the past" (p. 11). The attempt to forge "affective relations across time" is her historical method (p. 2), and it is a queer one indeed. Dinshaw gets medieval on traditional historiography by willfully risking anachronism: she moves between fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English controversies over Christian heresies and late-twentieth-century American controversies over how to teach and how to do history.

Throughout *Getting Medieval,* Dinshaw illuminates the wishfulness—and lurking danger—of any attempt to demarcate "dissent and orthodoxy, resistance and power" clearly (p. 99). Through her close engagement with the Lollard controversies, the cross-dressed John/Eleanor Rykener, and the married yet chaste Margery Kempe, Dinshaw traces "the perversion *within* the normative" (p. 149; emphasis added) and unmasks the

[7]Discomfort certainly makes an appearance in the section on "Counting the Vote: Confusion Past and Present." But the section parcels out its confusions "Past and Present" in an interesting way, implicitly aligning "The History" with "Past" and "The Complaints" with "Present." So, is history to the past as complaints are to the present? While the first article focused on the Tilden-Hayes election, the second article turned its attention to the present-day complaints of many African-American voters in the state of Florida who were inexplicably dropped from voter registries, intimidated by the police, asked for more forms of identification than were white voters, or otherwise hindered in their attempts to vote. Of course, these complaints have a history, a highly racialized one, that connects them uncomfortably to the 1876 election and the period of Reconstruction brought to an end *by* that election. The arrangement of the page makes the connections between "Past" and "Present" that the articles themselves seem unwilling to touch.

"impurity of . . . apparently pure concepts" (p. 189). For example, the Lollards, late-fourteenth-century followers of John Wyclif, attack the clergy, in part, by linking them to the "crimen Sodomorum" (p. 64). The accusation does not rest here but rebounds on the accusers. In a reverse charge, sodomitical associations come round the back to taint the Lollards in turn. Dinshaw is especially adept here in tracing the circulation and destabilization of knowledge, authority, and power. As she shows, where sodomy—what Foucault has famously called "that utterly confused category"—is concerned, "the rhetorical ploy of the reverse accusation" only produces more confusion (p. 67). For who has the authority to level the charge? What if, as the title of Dinshaw's discussion of the Lollards suggests, "It Takes One to Know One"?

This sodomitical excess threatens, even as it underwrites, the violent homosocial universe of Quentin Tarentino's *Pulp Fiction,* which is the focus of Dinshaw's final chapter. In fact, the title of Dinshaw's book is taken from a line in that 1994 film. In a scene midway through the movie, the character Marcellus Wallace, a black crime boss whose name couples two masculine first names, turns the table on the sadistic white Southerner who has earlier raped him. Marcellus shoots his rapist in the crotch and then taunts the man, who is writhing on the floor in pain: "Hear me talkin' hillbilly boy?! I ain't through with you by a damn sight. I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass" (p. 184).

Dinshaw goes on to show that within the world of *Pulp Fiction,* but not only there, the medieval "signals all the abject Others" whose designated place is no place at all. Nonetheless, she argues, for all the ass-covering wishfulness of this consignment, the medieval and all it represents cannot finally be contained. How does this medieval excess (this excess that is "the medieval") work in *Pulp Fiction*? At the same time that the film seeks to eradicate homosexual possibilities, policing the line between acceptable forms of male-male contact and those that must be punished even unto death (indeed, the film makes painfully clear that murder is the only kind of male-male contact that is *not* finally suspect), the film cannot quite get its "anal project" (the colorful vocabulary is Dinshaw's) straight. *Pulp Fiction* wants to demonstrate to "the (putatively straight) audience" what assholes are, and are *not,* for (p. 188). But its insistent preoccupation with the anus—from the obvious pleasure one man (John Travolta's character, "Vince") takes in sitting on the toilet to a family heirloom preserved for the son only because the father hid it away inside his tightly clenched buttocks (the family lockbox?)—recirculates the very anxieties the film seeks to keep at bay. The injunction to disappear thus implodes on itself. If the medieval represents the dumping ground of "abjection and otherness" (p. 205), it also offers resources for self- and community formation that exceed the limits of the knowable, what is designated as knowable.

(Shall we call this, with all due appreciation to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the "Epistemology of the Butthole"?)

What can and *should* be known is very much at the heart of another of Dinshaw's case studies: heated mid-1990s congressional debates about funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). During these debates, opponents of the NEH turned again and again to a 1996 summer institute on the topic "Sex and Gender in the Middle Ages," citing it as prime evidence of taxpayer dollars gone to waste. Over the course of this "debate," an interesting transference occurred: historical engagement with the ways earlier societies understood and organized sexual and gender "deviance" was recast as itself a deviant practice. The historian of sexuality, especially of "queer" sexuality, thus became one with her object of study. It seems that some kinds of knowledge are contagious. (Another term for this is "pedagogy.")

However, rather than refusing this picture of historians "contaminated" by their objects of concern, Dinshaw provocatively mines its possibilities. "It Takes One to Know One," then, is not just the title of Dinshaw's discussion of "Lollards, Sodomites, and Their Accusers" but is also an invitation to another way of doing history and, perhaps, ourselves. The inability finally and fully to tell the difference—between norm and deviation, self and other, and even past and present—is not to be bemoaned but, at least in the sure hands of Dinshaw, exploited.

Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me; or, Rocky Horror Historiography

Affect is a key concept for Dinshaw. Not only does she seek to forge affective relations across time, but she believes that queer history is constituted through such relations. What does she mean by this? In a lovely passage, Dinshaw takes us into the archives with Foucault and to his short essay "The Life of Infamous Men." The essay recounts Foucault's discovery, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, of historical documents in which "brief lives" and "real existences" flashed up before him. These are such lives and such documents as he would go on to collect—connect?—in *Herculine Barbin* and *I, Pierre Rivière*. These are such lives and such documents as made themselves felt.

In "The Life of Infamous Men," Foucault records the intensity of their impression on him, the shock of "lives so parallel no one could join them" (p. 138). He is unable to explain this impression, history's impression, in terms of "lessons to contemplate" (p. 137). He speaks instead of the "intensity" of these "singular lives" and their affective orbit—"that vibration which I feel even today" (p. 137).

"Vibration"—this is something of what Dinshaw means by affective relations across time. It suggests an electrification—contact—across difference, a sense of connectedness that crosses and disrupts borderlines of self and other. As she writes in the Introduction to *Getting Medieval,*

"[L]et us imagine the widest possible usable field of others with whom to make such partial connections. Let us imagine a process that engages all kinds of differences, though not in the same ways: racial, ethnic, national, sexual, gender, class, even historical/temporal" (p. 21).

Dinshaw is inviting us—daring us—to make queer contact across time. This invitation is less to see ourselves in the queer figure of a Margery Kempe than to identify with something of Kempe's queer *positionality,* her "disjunctiveness," or lack of fit in relation to the sexual, gender, and theological norms of her own day (p. 158). Accordingly, what links a Margery Kempe to a Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, is not the content of their queerness; they are not queer in the same way nor with the same consequences. Rather, Kempe and Dinshaw meet at the join of their disjunctiveness.

This is a queer geometry of identification, in which relation and relatedness do not unfold through mirroring, the assumed resemblances of identity, but are constituted through a "connectedness (even across time) of singular lives that unveil and contest normativity" (p. 138). These connections between incommensurable lives and phenomena are necessarily partial. It even seems to me that Dinshaw's preference for metonymy over metaphor is linked to this insistence on "*partial* connections" over the ever phantasmatic plenitude of mimesis (p. 35, emphasis added). If we insist on a mimetic historiography, we cut ourselves off from history and curtail the future (p. 179). We also romanticize identification, drawing a *cordon sanitaire* around, as Dinshaw writes, "the alterity within mimesis itself, the never-perfect aspect of identification" (p. 35). "Appropriation, misrecognition, disidentification" (p. 35): these are left out of view, although "we" do not remain outside their reach.

Identifying *with* Time

I want to return, for a moment, to Dinshaw's expanded field of historical contact. She writes, "Let us imagine a process that engages all kinds of differences, though not in the same ways: racial, ethnic, national, sexual, gender, class, even historical/temporal" (p. 21). One of the striking suggestions she makes here is the possibility not simply that we might identify across time (although there is nothing simple about that!), but that we might identify *with* time, in particular, with times different from "our own."

In "Ghostly Appearances: Time Tales Tallied Up," Geeta Patel offers a brilliant working out of this hypothesis.[8] Patel traces "the persistence [in the modern Indian context] of at least three ways of telling time at once": Christian, Christian-secular, and Hindu nationalist. She makes

[8]Geeta Patel, "Ghostly Appearances: Time Tales Tallied Up," in *World Secularisms at the Millennium,* ed. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, special issue of *Social Text* 64 (fall 2000): 47–66.

clear the links among ways of telling time, experiences of being in time (including being in time multiply), and relations of power: "[T]he production of a linear past-present-future relation (linear even as it curves back through the past) requires certain forms of subjectivity: a farmer who establishes a rural-urban progress narrative, a domesticated insinuation into gender in which a woman desires and represents both timeless tradition and modern commodities."[9]

Patel wants to "explore ways of narrating colonial temporalities differently," and she makes clear the political import of tracing the genealogies of temporality: "[I]n order to get to the before or the after of colonialism one must traverse it. Only through such narrations, and the affect that engenders them as painful, can substantive differences in subject positions become available. The questions that frame my discussion include: How can we think subjectivity through other possible times, given that subjectivities in the modern are inseparable from particular ways of narrating time?"[10] For Patel, then, the stakes—political and affective—of these multiple ways of identifying with, across, and in time are considerable. What she reveals are the links between how time is told and how bodies—subjects—are made and remade.

I am here setting Patel's argument next to Dinshaw's, forging contact between them, because both are arguing that affective relations—painful and pleasurable, enervating and energizing—are part of the process of forging alternative histories, alternative values, queer communities. Such bold contacts across time and in time are welcome relief from Christian triumphalist celebrations of the new millennium and Fourth of July historiography of the American presidency.

Preaching to the Perverted—Answering Back

I offer, by way of concluding, another partial connection to *Getting Medieval.* Toward the end of her discussion of the congressional culture wars over the NEH, battles in which an NEH-funded Summer Institute on "Sex and Gender in the Middle Ages" was repeatedly cited (and usually with no further argument than the citation itself) as chief evidence of just why the NEH should be *de*-funded, Dinshaw asks how we—queer medievalists, and queer scholars more generally—might intervene in such debates. After all, we hardly occupy the same positions of power—and funding authority—as a Republican in a Republican-controlled Congress (p. 180). She suggests that we take a page from Margery Kempe's book and "attempt to take up, occupy, and *use* the central—centrally abjected—position that has already

[9]Patel, 47.
[10]Patel, 47.

been so fully appointed for us" (p. 181; emphasis in original). But *where* to stage our "answering back" to power? And *how* to do so in ways that do not reinscribe relations of power, but transform our positions within them?

It seems to me that performance offers one such transformative practice.[11] The particular performance I have in mind here is Holly Hughes's *Preaching to the Perverted*. I have written about *Preaching to the Perverted* and the cultural work it performs at greater length elsewhere.[12] For the purposes of this discussion, I want to identify some, as it were, queer points of contact between, on the one hand, Dinshaw's conception of the queer uses of history for self- and community formation in the present, and on the other, Hughes's performative reenactment of an injurious history and her performative conjuring of community.

In 1990, Hughes was one of four performance artists—the other three were Karen Finley, John Fleck, and Tim Miller—whose grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were rescinded by John Frohnmayer, then Chair of the NEA. The historical backdrop to Frohnmayer's decision was the highly politicized controversies over the NEA's funding of allegedly "offensive" and "pornographic" art. The congressional firestorm resulted in new funding guidelines, which mandated that considerations of "artistic excellence and merit" be balanced by "general standards of decency and respect." These guidelines became the focus of a protracted legal battle in which Finley, Fleck, Hughes, and Miller were plaintiffs. Their case (*NEA et al. v Finley et al.*) wound its way up to the Supreme Court, where it was heard in March 1998. On June 25 of that year, the "Supremes," as Hughes colloquially invokes them, rendered their verdict. By an eight-to-one majority, the Court upheld the constitutionality of the "decency and respect" clause regulating government funding for the arts.

Shortly after the hearing—literally, the next day, April 1[13]—Hughes went to work "answering back," contesting the Court's logic but no longer on its terms or on its turf. Her response would take the form of a solo performance piece, the very genre that had first come under attack. In

[11]I am reminded of the power of performance to renew and transform community by Dinshaw's own discussion of Tim Miller and David Román's important cowritten essay, "Preaching to the Converted."

[12]Ann Pellegrini, "(Laughter)," in *Psychoanalysis and Performance,* ed. Adrian Kear and Patrick Campbell (London: Routledge, 2001). Much of my discussion of Hughes in the main text is extracted from this forthcoming essay.

[13]Hughes delivered a scathing and scathingly hilarious assessment of the Supreme Court's March 1998 hearing of *NEA et al. v Finley et al.* during a discussion at Harvard University on April 1, 1998. Hughes was at Harvard to launch "Queer at Harvard Month." I had co-organized this kick-off event with Tom Lee, from Harvard-Radcliffe's Office for the Arts, and thus had the real pleasure of witnessing the pre-history of the performance piece that came to be called *Preaching to the Perverted.*

Preaching to the Perverted, which Hughes first presented in a workshop version at New York City's Dixon Place in the summer of 1998 and has subsequently performed around the country, she returns to her own traumatic encounter with disciplinary power.

In a sense, Hughes outperforms abjection, but not by refusing or denying it. Her performance is a working through shame that forges new positions for both performer and audience to occupy rather than the ones designated to "queers" by the State. In the course of her performance, the audience plays the part Hughes once played when she was an audience member at the hearing of "her" case. The audience is thus brought to identify with Hughes's abjection, but with a crucial difference. They are not asked to make the same forced choice that had been presented to her: between social death and, what may amount to the same thing, forms of national belonging that depend upon the marking out and exclusion of a range of "excessive" others. In the space-time opened by Hughes's performance, those who have been defined as outside the nation's bounds—its extra-national subjects—come together to form and inhabit a counter-public. *Preaching to the Perverted* thus helps to forge what Douglas Crimp has called "collectivities of the shamed."[14]

Or—to think now with José Esteban Muñoz—we might say that *Preaching to the Perverted* draws its audience into a project of collective "disidentification." Disidentification, he cautions, is not a simple matter of "pick[ing] and choos[ing] what one takes out of an identification."[15] In place of the wishful fantasy of setting outside or somehow leaving behind all that has shamed and injured, there is the possibility, painful and necessary, of reworking those "politically dubious or shameful components" of identity, investing them with new life. Muñoz proposes performance as a rich site for just such collective reimaginings and remakings, and *Preaching to the Perverted* seems to me an especially powerful instance of this performed and performative renewal in which injury—perhaps identity *as* injury—is not so much left behind as it is worked on and through.

Both Muñoz's conception of disidentification and Hughes's enactment of it seem to me to vibrate and pulse with the queer possibilities Dinshaw holds out in *Getting Medieval.* By *Getting Medieval,* we might touch, with Carolyn Dinshaw, what was, what might have been, what might yet be. Thus, if these are salad days for historians of the American presidency, I yet prefer Dinshaw's queer historical touch. In place of the happy smoke screen of Fourth of July historiography, she has given us the queer vibrations of a different past—and different possible futures.

[14]Douglas Crimp, "Mario Montez, for Shame," in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays in Queer Culture and Critical Theory,* ed. Stephen Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

[15]José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.