Knitting as an Aesthetic of Civic Engagement:

Re-conceptualizing Feminist Pedagogy through Touch

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**Introduction**

We are in the midst of an explosion in the popularity of knitting. Shifting the traditional stereotype of what a knitter should be, the youth of today have taken up knitting as a tactile and embodied form of connectivity. In a rapidly changing and unpredictable world, characterized by, among other factors, the unprecedented expansion of global flows and patterns of social interaction, youth are increasingly involved in complex forms of interconnection. This has important implications for the ways that feminist pedagogy is re-conceptualized, lived, and practiced. Many feminist scholars, such as Leila Villaverde (119) and Sharon Rosenberg (234), have begun to unsettle pedagogy, seeking ways to create sustained engagements that rupture the limits of meaning making. My own “unworking” (Nancy 27) of pedagogy is tangled up with these new cartographies, as I attempt to bring the materiality of the body into the feminist classroom.

I arrived as a women’s studies professor rather by chance, having practiced for many years as a feminist artist with a scholarly background in visual arts and education. It is from these intersecting perspectives that I embarked on a bit of a pedagogical experiment with my undergraduate students. I decided we would all learn to knit
together. As the semester unraveled so did my thinking about feminist pedagogy and its relationship to the body. This paper grows out of this experience. It examines the embodied and tactile acts of visual culture and youth activism, and it re-conceptualizes globalization, collectivity, and feminist pedagogy from the perspectives of relationality and touch. Initial questions include: How might we understand collectivity, pedagogy, and globalization through visual culture? How might we understand the connective potential of the circulation, participation, and performance of visual culture in youth cultures? And how might such examinations bring about a re-conceptualization of feminist pedagogy—as pedagogies of touch—that enfolds bodies, tactility, and activism with changing global youth cultures?

In order to examine these questions, I will first analyze activism as art, and in particular theories regarding new youth subcultures of resistance. I then discuss two activist knitting projects and consider how they encourage interpersonal or political engagement that is embodied, tactile, and connective. These projects serve as contextual examples, highlighting the ways that youth are re-conceptualizing feminist pedagogy as embodied and relational. Following these examples, I focus my attention on an activist knitting project that emerged in my undergraduate women’s studies course. While some scholars believe that today’s youth resistance seems obscure, transitory, and disorganized (Harris 1) my examination of youth’s lived experiences demonstrates that youth have new ways of taking on politics and culture that may not be recognizable under more traditional frameworks. It is in these unfamiliar and unrecognizable gaps, I argue, that an understanding of feminist pedagogy, as pedagogies of touch, takes shape.
**Activism as Art**

Many of us harbor an image of the knitter as a grandmother in a rocking chair. However, youth knitters and uncanny forms of knitting have gained in popularity in the twenty-first century, giving a twist to the traditional afghan, baby booties, and sweater. In Canada, for example, youth gathered for a “Rock and Knit” fest in a local bowling alley; there are countless blog sites attesting to the growing interest in knitting unusual patterns and objects, and stitch ‘n’ bitch clubs are increasing in popularity on university campuses. While the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement and third-wave feminism are contributing factors to the knitting revival (Wills 20) other reasons include a new approach to connectivity and resistance.

Youth resistance, although commonly framed around a “subculture” paradigm that posits a “heroic” notion of resistance and a static or fixed category of youth affiliation, has more recently been replaced with theories of neotribes, youth lifestyles, scenes, and new communities, which are more transitory, fluid, and not organized around a single resistant identity. Neotribes, argue Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (13), are loose groups of young people who come together momentarily over shared interests and create moments of sociality. Moreover, the shift from subcultures to neotribes reflects the movement from locally bound to globally connected youth cultures. These new perspectives on youth cultures, asserts Anita Harris, are examples of youth citizenship “in that they represent ways young people can get together and debate social issues, enact alternative social arrangements and create spaces for alternative transitions and alternative political forums” (4).
Third-wave feminists have also sought to expand notions of resistance. Broadening a sense of what “action” is, third wavers suggest that youth “have complex relationships with popular culture that require them to negotiate, infiltrate, play with, and undermine feminine cultural forms rather than simply reject them” (Harris 7). Cultural resistance becomes a mutable, creative, and negotiated space that is a political activity in itself.

In the arts, resistance has also taken on a new form. Activist art has commonly been understood to be an art form that carries political content. Today, however, a new form of artistic activism is taking shape. Inspired by the Situationists of the 1960s, activism as art often fails to look like art and might not involve any pre-existing form of creative activity (e.g., painting, sculpture, or theatre). Activism as art often harbors what Darren O’Donnell refers to as “an aesthetic of civic engagement” (26), whereby art is based on social relationships that make culture and creativity a central part of civic life. It is the processes of participation that are the works of art themselves. For instance, O’Donnell, a Toronto-based artist, is well known for his public “Q & A” sessions, where members of the public interview and ask strangers questions with the sole purpose being the asking of questions or the art of inquiry. It is not the answers to the questions or composite characters drawn from the Q & A sessions that become works of art, but the act of inquiry itself. Socially-engaged art, writes Claire Bishop (12), is concerned with the desire to create active subjects through participation, collaboration, and community-building. Activism as art focuses on the collective elaboration of meaning and aims to produce new social relationships and thus new social realities (Bourriaud 19). Such an
understanding of civic engagement in and through the arts is evident in new youth cultures.

Growing up immersed in a consumer culture, many young people are discovering their own powers as producers, turning their media-saturated childhoods into media-literate action. Exploring new ways to subvert dominant codes and to express alternatives through emerging technologies and creativity, youth connect and learn from each other in previously unimagined ways. As Carly Stasko, a Toronto based zine artist, writes: “Through culture jamming I was able to express my own resistance and critical awareness so that as I traveled through my environment I could feel authentically engaged and empowered” (207). As a form of culture jamming, knitting involves youth in performance, experimentation, evaluation, reflection, and interpretation, or what Elizabeth Ellsworth refers to as a pedagogy in the making, “harboring and expressing forces and processes of pedagogies as yet unmade, that provoke us to think or imagine new pedagogies in new ways” (p. 6).

The theories and methodologies emerging in critical youth studies and relational art practices need to be reflected in the ways we theorize, understand, and practice feminist pedagogy. Pedagogy then becomes an ongoing event – a lived experience articulated with, in, and through the body. Such an understanding shifts our thinking from youth as having bodies that pedagogy acts on, toward a re-conceptualization of pedagogy as bodied. In developing pedagogy as bodied, I turn my attention in the following section to two activist knitting sites, examining them in relation to embodiment, connectivity, and pedagogy.
**Knittivism**

“knittivism: n 1 a doctrine emphasising vigorous or militant knitting activity, e.g., the use of knitting in mass demonstrations, urban interventions, in controversial, unusual or challenging ways, esp political, causes. 2 the systematic use of knitting for political ends. knittivist n and adj.”

Knitta is a Houston-based graffiti knitting crew who combine the idea of a knitted tea cozy with gestures of street graffiti. They tag street lamps, public statues, handrails, gates, and other public and private property with impractical hand-knit cozies. Advocating knitting as an adventurous experience, Knitta encourages knitted tags as acts of pleasure, confusion, and surprise. Handmade and irreverent, their work engages in transforming the modern city with an aesthetic that is both alarming and cozy. Speaking about their work, the Knitta members say: “We go beyond simply wanting attention. We prove that disobedience can be beautiful and that knitting can be outlaw” (http://www.knittaplease.com/KNITTA_PLEASE.html). The uselessness of their actions—some critics have suggested they should focus their energy on knitting blankets for the homeless—is intended as an examination of the “thingness” of things. The “thingness” is not the object itself per se but its excess, its temporality, and its sensuousness. Bill Brown, in theorizing things, writes, “thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)” (5). Thingness, he suggests, points towards the objects’/things’ materiality, while simultaneously naming something else. Tags become a re-examination of mundane objects as signifiers for sensory information, knowledge, and memory while highlighting the interwoven nature of our perception and the interplay
between art and life. Thingness asks questions not about what things are, but about their “subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts” (Brown 7). Knitting as a relational and embodied activity invites thingness to interconnect and intertwine subjects through various bodied encounters. If we consider knitting as a place of learning that de-centers pedagogical practices, then bodies become implicated in the processes of meaning making. Knitted tags approach pedagogy as unsettled—as events that are “in the making”—open and never fully achieved. This, suggests Ellsworth, “creates the opportunity for a pedagogy in which we come to know the world by acting in it, making something of it, and doing the never-ending work and play of responding to what our actions make occur” (56). Knitting becomes a pedagogy of interrelations.

Cat Mazza, the artist behind the knitting organization “microRevolt” (www.micrevolt.org), started knitting on her long commute to work at a non-profit art and technology center in New York City. Interested in knitting and feminized sweatshop labor, she finds the intersections between textiles and technology compelling. Some of her work includes knitting corporate logos into garments, an act she says “simultaneously glorifies and assaults corporate logos’ symbolic power” (Gschwandtner 121). Her website functions as a campaign against sweatshop labor by encouraging others to logoknit and by educating them about sweatshop labor. Since 2003 she has been collecting small knitted or crocheted squares that act as signatures on a petition for fair labor policies. As a tactile and embodied form of signing a petition, the fourteen-by-nine foot blanket in the shape of the Nike swoosh gestures towards an aesthetic of civic engagement, where art forms do not exist as static images but are experienced as processes and as movement. Learning becomes a means of participating in the world
through movement. When we consider learning as being in motion, we are confronted with a pedagogical encounter imbued with forces, oscillations, intensities, and energies, exceeding the limits of knowing, being, and creating.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (190) molecular theories as small gestures of resistance, Mazza has since developed a computer program that automates knitting patterns. Knitpro lets users of her website turn any image into a chart that knitters can read and map into a pattern. Additionally she has designed a program that takes digital video and alters it into images of various stitches. Her documentary “Talking Stitch,” in which she interviews people working in anti-sweatshop activism, turns talking heads into moving stitch patterns that are flat, pulsating, abstract textiles. Her site features a blog where posted links to projects made by other DIY activists and crafters are networked, providing a viable, sustainable alternative to mass production. This microeconomy is intended to create an alternative to sweatshops while also connecting people one stitch at a time. Collectivity, according to Michael Smith, is the foundation upon which the transglobal is based, and Smith proposes that in order to understand the future of urban change we must focus our attention upon communication circuits, no matter how complex, by which people are connected to each other, make sense of their lives, and act upon the worlds that they see, in which they dwell, and through which they travel (311). This collectivity occurs as we arbitrarily gather to take part in different forms of cultural activity. However, the performed collectivity that is produced in the very act of being together in the same space and compelled by similar activities produces a form of mutuality that is not always based on normative modes of shared beliefs, interests, or affiliation. In other words, collectivity alters a hegemonic perception of community,
where community is understood solely through roots of origin, and replaces it with a process of “becoming community”—a mobilizing force that has no end (Nancy 23). In a pedagogical sense, collectivity does not depend on dialogue where each person engages equitably in sharing her or his experiences and thoughts; rather, it acknowledges that collectivity is fragmented, unstable, and not given.

Collectivity in this sense is engaged with what Hannah Arendt calls the “space of appearance” characterized by speech and action or a coming together for a momentary expression and then coming apart again. Arendt’s “space of appearance” is not a physical space demarcated by buildings, environments, or tasks, but one that comes into being through relational embodied understanding of actions and of the bodies/subjectivities created through these actions. Rather than an understanding of self and other as oppositional, community becomes imbricated and reciprocal, offering a reconceptualization of self and other in which these previously distinct parts constantly inform each other and their relationship. The potentiality of this “space of appearance,” writes Arendt, “is that unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men… but with the disappearance or the arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever. (qtd in Rogoff 117). Collectivity, in this sense, implicates pedagogy “in the promise of an indeterminate, unspecifiable future and an unlimited open-endedness” (Ellsworth 122). This coincides with community-based artist and scholar Stephani Etheridge Woodson’s consideration of art as a research methodology as well as a complex process of learning and identity formation. Artistic practice functions as
both the object/subject of study and the interpretive space through which to explore collective and embodied ways of knowing. The arts, she argues, assist participants in “becoming aware of their own power as cultural makers and (re) makers” (291).

Attempting to bring together theories and practices of youth cultures, relational art, and embodied pedagogy, I gave my undergraduate students sets of knitting needles and yarn. I invited them to learn to knit alongside me as we discussed weekly readings, film clips, and contemporary feminist art practices. What emerged from this experience was a knitivism project and a re-conceptualization of feminist pedagogy as tactile, bodied, and collective. In the remaining section of the paper, I discuss the students’ knit-in project and propose an experience of teaching and learning through pedagogies of touch.

**Pedagogies of touch**

For the past five years I have taught at a large university in two departments—art education and women’s studies (I have since moved to another institution). The joint appointment allowed me to bring together my interests in a bodied curriculum and pedagogy with gender and youth studies, and feminist visual culture. As a teacher, I desired to create a classroom space in which theory is lived not only in the classroom but also in relationships and encounters between people. Favoring classrooms that foster listening (Jones 57), accusation (Mayo 170), and critical dialogue (Ellsworth 297), I invited my students to experience bodily ways of knowing, through such things as performance art or media production.

One semester I arrived in my undergraduate women’s studies class with a bag full of red and pink yarn and some inexpensive needles. My intent was simply to disrupt the
normative ways that students shared and discussed common readings and other class-related texts. I wanted to insert the body into the classroom practice; to have us “do” something with our hands, not simply our minds. I also didn’t know how to knit and thought it might be interesting for the class to work on something together where I was not perceived as the expert. The students, all women, were surprised that a feminist teacher, and in a women’s studies class, was asking them to engage in what they saw as a stereotypical feminine pastime. Some were thrilled at the opportunity to learn to knit, while others were embarrassed, if not slightly incensed that their tuition was being put towards such frivolous and gendered acts. Not one of the students in the class had ever considered knitting as anything other than a gendered act. Through weekly readings, discussions, and presentations on the history of knitting, contemporary knitting, and activists, the students began to realize that knitting could in fact be done to challenge and subvert gender norms. One student reflected on this change:

Knitting in a Women’s Studies class created an interesting dynamic. Not recognizing the possibility of redefining the act of knitting, I originally thought that learning how to knit seemed somehow the antithesis of the progress of the feminist movement. However, once we learned how to knit, it became simply a peaceful activity in which we could all partake while discussing feminist pedagogy. Throughout our study of feminist pedagogy I came to view our knitting as an opportunity to redefine gender stereotypes and together, as a Women’s Studies class, we were able to figure out a way to not only re-define the act of knitting but use it as a form of activism to support political issues.
She continued: “Knitting is stereotypically viewed as a gendered activity performed only by women within the private or domestic realm. By taking knitting into a public realm we were inevitably challenging this stereotype. Moreover, because knitting is often expected to remain within the private realm, it lends itself well to activism because it draws attention.” Viewing knitting as a site of women’s collective voice in action, another student noted: “Not only were we able to disrupt space by performing a private act in public but we were able to (somewhat) challenge gender roles and dynamics at the same time.”

One student, however, refused to knit the entire semester, disinterested in the textile craft. She claimed she did not knit because she was not good at it. While many of the students embraced their dropped stitches and droopy tensions, this student was not able to move beyond the boundaries of perfection, a condition enforced through normative and disembodied education that focuses on memorization, standards, and the acquisition of skills. For most of the students, as the semester unraveled so did their thinking about knitting and its relationship to feminist pedagogy, and eventually the students created their own activist knitting project—a knit-in for Darfur (the above student did participate in the knit-in—she did not knit but made all of the publicity signs and posters for the event).

I had not imagined a student-organized activist project when I put the syllabus together, but toward the end of the semester the class asked if they could organize and participate in a knitivism project. The class brainstormed a number of “causes” including sweatshop labor and sexual violence. In the end the class decided to focus on Darfur because they had collected the most amount of research on the topic (something I had
expected them to do on each of the causes they wanted to support); it brought together issues of sexual violence, human rights, and gender; two students in the class had personal experiences that related to the topic (they had taken classes that specifically addressed the genocide in Darfur and/or they had taken a service learning class from the women’s studies department in Tanzania); and the class believed that the general student population at Penn State did not know very much about Darfur.

At the end of the semester I asked students to write a short critical reflection paper on their understandings of and experiences with knitivism. I informed the class that I would use these papers to develop my own understandings of feminist pedagogy and that I would also include segments of their writing in my academic writing on the subject. I have also continued to interview many of the students who continue to be involved with knitivism on campus. The theories and research I cite in the paper, and the two knitting activists referenced, were all introduced to the class throughout the semester, so while this paper is told from my perspective and theoretical analysis, it embodies the very acts and conversations that we shared in the class. For example, one student wrote:

Contributing my time and energy to the knit-in for Darfur truly changed my life; it changed the way I look at the world. Through Women’s Studies 401 and my research, I found that there is a significant relationship between feminism, art, and activism. The diversity of artistic methods, central ideas of feminist activist art, notions of public and private, notions about gender and the significance of feminist activist art are all themes worth reviewing, discussing, and responding to. These themes also directly relate to the experience of participating in the knit-in for Darfur.
At the end of the semester three students from the class formed an on-campus club for knitivism. The club, with over fifty active members, has organized a number of different knit-ins over the past year including one on sexual violence on campus (raising money and knitting scarves for the local women’s shelter); a twenty-four-hour knit-a-thon for Darfur; and one to raise money for the local homeless shelter. Students in the class and in the knitivism club are interested in knitivism because it is “peaceful” and different from what they imagine “traditional” activism looks like. In the majority of their written reflections on knitivism and in interviews students emphasize the peaceful nature of knitivism and state that they choose to be involved in this form of activism because it does not look like traditional forms of activism, which they associate with marches, protests, and angry voices.

In order to prepare the class for knitting in public I had the students engage in a variety of public knitting events, such as knitting on local buses, in the student union building, and tagging trees on the University campus. One student reflects:

From the moment we began to knit on the Blue Loop I could feel myself taking up space. I actually felt uncomfortable (at first) because I was afraid other riders would resent me for taking up a seat. However, the longer we were on the bus, the more comfortable I felt, and the more I felt that I had a right to sit on the bus and knit. At the knit-in, I am sure that many passersby were baffled by the simple act of knitting. Many believe that knitting is something that is done in private by older women; however, we were able to change those assumptions. By knitting in public and peacefully disrupting a space, we brought a private act into a public
setting. In doing so, we generated much attention and hopefully a greater awareness of the genocide taking place in Darfur.

Although not all witnesses to the public knitting knew about the feminist thinking behind knitivism, many people did stop and talk to the students because knitting in public was so unusual for the campus. It was through these informal conversations that the students were able to communicate their understandings of feminist pedagogy and activism to the public. In addition the students were featured in the campus paper and on the campus TV station, providing them with further opportunity to talk about knitivism, feminist pedagogy, and their efforts for change in Darfur. The knit-in, which was held on the lawn outside the central library on campus, attracted knitters from the local community and students who wanted to learn to knit or join the knitting cause. There were twelve students in class, but often more than thirty people could be seen knitting on the grass at one time. The students raised enough money through dollar donations to send over a dozen solar cookers to Darfur.

The knit-in, writes one student, served as “an unconventional, non-confrontational way of disrupting and redefining space”. The students contextualized their actions as subtle, passive, and unobtrusive. Knitting, one student says, “embodies change and provokes thought by disrupting social and spatial norms.” Many of the students began to understand activism as a “way of life,” whereby “we didn’t simply protest about the need for humanity to treat one another with more genuine care; rather we embodied that idea and acted upon it through knitting.” Another student says, “Our knit-in worked on the ‘lifestyle’ level as we enacted the change we wished to see.” Care in this instance refers to relational acts of being-with; an intercorporeal act that implicated self and other in the
process. Similarly, the change that the student refers to here is the embodied relationality of knitivism that she hoped would transform other Penn State students’ understandings of Darfur, activism, and knitting.

Materializing bodily experiences in the classroom initiates new possibilities, new ways for “bodies to matter” (Butler 12). This type of work may open up the possibility of pedagogical practices that attempt to work across the contradictions between self and other, private and public, body and image, bearing witness to these contradictions while inviting students to bring them together, to examine them, to experiment with engaging them differently in the world. Shifting the terms of representation, knitting and all of its tensions and contradictions may eventually produce transforming ideas—ideas that may work towards thinking about the world relationally, where “the goal is not to undo our ties to others but rather to disentangle them; to make them not shackles but circuits of recognition” (Gonick 185). Knitting as an active reworking of embodied experience involves pedagogies of touch (Springgay 124) where knowing is constantly interrupted and deferred “by the knowledge of the failure-to-know, the failure to understand, fully, once and for all” (Miller 130). It is the unthought that is felt as intensity, as becoming, and as inexplicable that reverberates between self and other, teacher and student, viewer and image, compelling a complex interstitial meaning-making process. Writing about pedagogical relations, Ellsworth states: “In excessive moments of learning in the making, when bodies and pedagogies reach over and into each other, the pedagogical address and the learning self interfuse to become ‘more’ than either intended or anticipated. In some cases, they become more than they ever hoped for. The instability and fluidity of pedagogy hold the potential for an unknowable and unforeseeable ‘more,’
and the actualization of that potential is what springs the experience of the learning self” (55).

This “more” shifts teaching and learning away from representation of something with a meaning, to an aesthetic assemblage, which moves, modulates, and resonates through processes of becoming that are imbued with bodily sensations such as touch. Western thought has always privileged vision as the dominant sense, equating it with light, consciousness, and rationalization (Vasseleu 21). The other senses, marked by the body, were understood as interior sensibilities and thus of lesser value (Classen 50). For instance the differences between the following two turns of phrase signify the ways in which Western thought has constructed knowledge as separate from and in opposition to the body. “I see” has commonly meant I know or understand, while “I feel” is often associated with intuitive knowing, which has historically been condemned as ridiculous and dismissed as trivial.

While vision is premised on the separation of the subject and object, creating a rational autonomous subject, touch, as a contact sense, offers contiguous access to an object. Touch alters the ways in which we perceive objects, providing access to depth and surface, inside and outside. Touch as a way of knowing can be understood through two modalities. First, touch is the physical contact of skin on matter. The second modality is a sense of being in a proximal relation with something. In visual culture this has often been addressed as synaesthesia. Synaesthesia refers to the blurring of boundaries between the senses so that in certain circumstances one might be able to say, “I can taste a painted image.” A further understanding of proximity has been taken up by corporeal
phenomenologists (e.g., Merleau-Ponty) and feminist scholars (e.g., Ahmed & Stacey; Grosz) who argue that knowledge is produced through bodied encounters (Weiss).

Inter-embodiment, an approach explored by feminist scholar Gail Weiss, emphasizes “that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and non-human bodies” (5). Inter-embodiment, or relationality, poses that the construction of the body and the production of body knowledge is not created within a single, autonomous subject (body), but rather that body knowledge and bodies are created in the intermingling and encounters between bodies. Elizabeth Ellsworth maintains that a relational learning experience “acknowledges that to be alive and to inhabit a body is to be continuously and radically in relation with the world, with others, and with what we make of them” (4). How we come to know ourselves and the world around us, our subjectivity, is performed, constructed, and mediated in relation with other beings. It is this relationality that is crucial. Rather than knowledge formed through the rational autonomous I, knowledge is the body’s immersion, its intertwining and interaction in the world and between others.

In proposing *pedagogies of touch* I draw on poststructuralist feminist pedagogies and theories of inter-embodiment and relationality. In her critique of critical pedagogy, Ellsworth reminds educators that pedagogies need to move away from “reason” and recognize that thought, knowledge, and experience are always partial—“partial in the sense that they are unfinished, imperfect, limited; and partial in the sense that they project the interests of ‘one side’ over others” (305). Shifting emphasis from “empowerment,” “voice,” “dialogue,” “visibility,” and notions of “criticality,” poststructuralist pedagogies problematize partiality “making it impossible for any single voice in the classroom…to
assume the position of center or origin of knowledge or authority, of having privileged access to authentic experience or appropriate language” (310). Rather, as Villaverde suggests, it is important that pedagog(ies) engage with “dangerous dialogues” in “order to expose the complexity of inequity and our complicity in it” (125). Deborah Britzman asks questions about the production of “normalcy” in the pedagogical encounter, creating the myth of the stable and unitary body/subject as the center from which all else deviates. Unhinging the body from such normalizing practices, how might pedagogies of touch “think the unthought of normalcy” (Britzman 80)? Unsettling and rupturing the limits of normalcy and representation pedagogies of touch help us “get underneath the skin of critique …to see what grounds have been assumed, what space and time have remained unexamined” (Roy 29). Furthermore, pedagogies of touch stress the need for an ethics of embodiment where transformations are connected to body and flesh and to a perception of the subject as becoming, incomplete, and always in relation (Springgay 153). Thus, ethical action becomes unpredictable and adaptive (as opposed to enduring and universal), and it is what happens when we venture into the complexities of the unthought.

Pedagogies of touch compel us into a place of knowing that is aware of how much it does not know, leading us to an elsewhere that is replete with what Barbara Kennedy calls an “aesthetic of sensation.” An aesthetic of sensation “is not dependent on recognition or common sense” (110), but operates as force and intensity, and as difference. This, argues Kennedy, has significance for the way we approach perception. Visual culture then shifts from being “representation” to a material embodied encounter as sensation. Images/pedagogies do not exist as static forms, but are experienced as
processes and as movement. An aesthetics of sensation is not an aesthetic based on “normalcy” or structuralist semiotics, but an aesthetics that vibrates and reverberates in modulation with, in, and through bodied encounters, shifting such concepts as “beauty” from form to a process—an assemblage. It is an aesthetic of civic engagement. Thus, in *pedagogies of touch* movement becomes an essential element.

For instance, the knitted tags that now adorn the University campus, attached to hosts such as trees, lamp posts, and stairwells, rest momentarily until they are set in motion once more; taken down, discarded, re-tagged, and transformed. The movement and sensation of knitting is not perceived outside of the body, but “rather [are] affections localized within the body” (Kennedy 118), thus materializing a pedagogical encounter imbued with forces, oscillations, intensities, and energies.

At the heart of *pedagogies of touch*, normalcy, the common, and representation become un/done, entangled again and again as difference. Says one student of the project:

> Knitting will not end the genocide in Darfur. Knitting will not stop 4.2 million native Africans from losing their homes and being torn from their families nor will it save 400,000 from death. Knitting allows for artistic and emotional expressions. Knitting is a peaceful outlet for individuals’ opinions and voices. Knitting instills harmony through the tranquil movements of two needles and a ball of yarn. Activism through knitting does not require enormous numbers and large crowds. Knitting provides an open door policy that many of the young women in our class have never seen. It offers a policy that is not often given by other forms of activism. Knitting invites young minds to create activism instead of “doing” activism. Knitting never demands much nor does it judge others.
Knitting is believing you can make a difference one stitch at a time. Knitting involves being fearless and accepting of the notion that we do not have all the answers nor could we ever understand the complexities and horrors of genocide.

Knitting/knitivism is important for the ways it highlights how young people materialize their own bodied subjectivities, imaginations, and communities, and produce the new conditions for how they live their lives. Moreover, it embraces Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi’s arguments that the classroom is no longer the sole pedagogical site for youth (5). My call for pedagogies of touch is not for teachers all to bring knitting needles to class. Rather, to be relevant, responsive, and critically engaged we need to think about pedagogy as something in the making, as an embodied, experiential, and relational process that is irregular, peculiar, or difficult to classify only when viewed from the center of dominant educational discourses. As a student wrote in her class reflections,

My experience with feminist activism has worked to open my eyes to how far reaching and indefinable activism truly is. My own stereotypes of what I viewed as activism have been interrupted and reconstructed to include the facets of feminist activism—embodying the changes as a way of life, disrupting space, and ultimately redefining social norms. Moreover, having learned about this idea of making activism a lifestyle has inspired me to incorporate my own individual forms of activism into my everyday life such as regularly knitting in public and periodically offering free hugs. Knowing now that to embody change is to create change in this world, it has become clear that feminist activism is at the heart of true change.
Whether knitting, hugging, or engaging in other relational encounters, pedagogies of touch enhance moments of knowing and being that are unfamiliar. Touch becomes a commitment to knowing that is engaged, emphasizing bodied encounters that are interrogative and unsettling. Pedagogies of touch open up feminist classrooms for other ways of understanding based on sensations and flows of interconnecting spaces, endowing education with contradictions and complicated knowledge.

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NOTE

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