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## Kept in the "Anonymous Dark": An Exploration of Touch and Isolation in the United States

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# Kept in the "Anonymous Dark": An Exploration of Touch and Isolation in the United States

*Madison Tuggle*

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## *Playing with a sick man's toes*

What does touch mean to you? This question has a never ending slew of answers, that span the boundless yet shared experience of being human. In her book, *Touch*, Tiffany Field includes an anecdote of a patient and his osteopathic physician, who would playfully pinch his toe during each examination. While seemingly innocuous, this gesture changed the course of this man's life:

The patient says, "I've been waiting for you, to tell you it is because of you I am still alive." The osteopath says, "What are you talking about?" "Well," says the older man, "every morning you pinched my toe when the others weren't looking." The physician, puzzled, says, "Yes, but what does that have to do with..." The patient interrupts, saying, "Nobody plays with the toes of dying men. So I decided I must not be dying after all."

Field points out the meaningful nature of this playful touch.<sup>1</sup> A fleeting gesture aiming for levity, a personal quirk of this doctor, was able to not only communicate to this man that he was still human with life ahead of him, but to also make him believe it. Touch plays many roles in our lives, which

we will explore throughout the course of this paper, but this anecdote helps to show that none of them are as small or inconsequential as they may appear.

Touch is one of the five main senses (as we conceive of them in the Western world), and is also termed "the mother of the senses,"<sup>2</sup> as it is the first of the senses to develop in all studied animal species. Six-week old embryos, who do not yet have eyes or ears, experience and react to sensations of touch.<sup>3</sup> As other senses decline with age or are lost, touch remains a constant. The constancy of touch is also apparent in that there is no off button. We can intentionally reach out and touch things, just as we can focus our gaze or ear towards something specific; and if we want it to stop, we can do our best to shut out the sensation with our eyelids, fingers jammed into ear canals, but we can't stop feeling the world around us. And as we are immersed in feeling the world around us, this feeling always operates as a two-way street-like trying to see above the surface and below the water at the same time, a split view of the same space. As we reach out to touch anything, even ourselves, we feel both what we are reaching for and the reflection of that sensation back onto us.

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<sup>2</sup> Montagu, "Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin,"

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Field, "Touch," 17.

The sensation of touch, the depths of which are felt but not fully seen, provides for a communication beyond words. While this begins in infancy, before parent and child can use words to relate to one another, the importance of this wordless human understanding doesn't decrease with age, and is an essential part of our lives, as we saw with the man whose doctor's toe pinching saved his life, or the research that shows the necessity of touch in treating elderly nursing home patients.<sup>4</sup> Not only that, but touch has a myriad of other functions, such as warning us of danger or pain, expanding our knowledge and familiarity with the world around us, and relieving ailments. For much of history, the "laying on of hands," as a healing act was widely known and respected. With the advent of modern technology and medicine, this concept was left behind and often derided as a non-scientific approach, but research in the last several decades has begun to confirm the benefits of touch in lowering stress and its associated hormones, which in turn strengthens the immune system. The benefits of touch and massage may be the most well known in supporting healthy development in infants and young children, but it has also been shown to have positive effects on a bevy of other illnesses and diseases, including mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, asthma, arthritis, HIV, cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, sleep problems, and more.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gleeson and Timmins, "Touch: A Fundamental Aspect of Communication with Older People Experiencing Dementia."

<sup>5</sup> Field, "Touch," 84-89.

And just as touch positively affects so many aspects of our lives and bodies, the deprivation of touch can be debilitating. If deprived at a young age, there are serious and long-lasting effects on the growth and development of the child, in terms of mind and body. Children and adults deprived of touch are shown to be more aggressive, and they may have sleep problems, lowered immune responses and along with them, heightened risks of contracting some of the ailments mentioned above, or deadlier or more painful experiences with them. Huda Akil, co-director of the Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience Institute at the University of Michigan, situates touch as important as sunlight and exercise, stating that

lack of social interaction, lack of sunlight, lack of exercise, lack of visual stimulation and lack of human touch have all been associated with negative health effects...each one is by itself *sufficient to change the brain* and change it dramatically, depending on whether it lasts briefly or is extended—and by extended I'm talking about *days, not decades* [emphasis added].<sup>6</sup>

Despite the research documenting the detrimental effects and trauma that comes with touch deprivation, it still remains an issue both structurally and socially, which will be explored in the next sections.

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<sup>6</sup> Willigan, "What Solitary Confinement Does to the Human Brain."

## *Touch-Aversion in American Culture*

Americans have been deemed "among the world's least tactile people,"<sup>7</sup> by psychologist Tiffany Field and many other researchers. In a psychological study conducted by observing touch between pairs of people having coffee together in cafes around the world, the pair from England didn't make any contact, the Americans made direct physical contact twice, the French made contact 110 times, and in Puerto Rico the pair touched over 180 times.<sup>8</sup> This is obviously dependent on context, as relationship dynamics vary greatly, but it does give a general idea of how much more conservative Americans tend to be with touch, even when it comes to someone they know or are close with, and this is just one example of a multitude of similar or other studies that also illustrate this difference between the U.S. and the rest of the world. The United States is also a huge country, with many different cultures and ethnic groups all with their own cultural norms, but various research and surveys of the American population have supported the notion that Americans are generally more conservative with their physical affection. Given that the United Kingdom also usually rates at the same level of touch aversion as the U.S., and were the primary driving force of settler colonization that led to the creation of this country, I believe it's safe to posit that America's current relationship to touch and

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<sup>7</sup> Field, "Touch," 9.

<sup>8</sup> Field, "Touch," 22.

social isolation is connected to the white, Anglo-Saxon history of our society.

A devaluing of touch in favor for sight or hearing can be traced back even farther, to one of the most influential scholars in Western society: Aristotle. In creating his hierarchy of the senses, touch was at the very bottom.<sup>9</sup> This hierarchy was justified by notions of proximity, as smell, taste, and especially touch all required being much closer to what one was trying to sense, they were considered more intimate and embodied senses, further away from the mind and higher thought. Similar to Aristotle, other male-bodied thinkers considered influential to Western history have echoed this sentiment, as the likes of Plato, Da Vinci, and Galileo all expressed that sight was humanity's most important and "noble" gift, closely connected to intelligence and appreciation of nature.<sup>10</sup>

As we move into the present day,<sup>11</sup> not all Western countries hold conservative views on touch—France and Greece (the home of Aristotle) in particular are incredibly tactile societies, in comparison with the U.S. and the U.K.<sup>12</sup> So how did the U.S. get to where it is today? The construction of sociocultural norms of touch is a wide-ranging and complicated topic, one I'm not able to fully explore in this paper, but there are threads to be briefly pulled upon.

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<sup>9</sup> Segal, "Touching and Not Touching: The Indirections of Desire," 32-33.

<sup>10</sup> Lanjewar, "Which of the Five Senses Is Most Noble."

<sup>11</sup> This is a huge jump in time to be sure - while a full genealogy of the shifting cultural norms around touch in Western society would be vastly interesting, it's not a project I have the time or resources to dig into in this space.

<sup>12</sup> Field, "Touch," 22.

As I stated previously, due to the beginnings of the U.S. as an English colony, it's likely safe to say that part of America's conservative attitude when it comes to touch can be attributed to colonial holdovers, as well as the large role of religion (specifically Puritan-Protestantism) in this process of colonization and its continuing effect on social conduct in America. While one may be hard pressed to find a practicing Puritan in the U.S., the role of this ideology in the founding of the country left "an indelible influence on the values and ideals of the United States."<sup>13</sup> Puritans made up a large number of initial colonizing settlements in America, fleeing religious persecution for taking Protestantism to the extremes of purity and strict devotion, and their numbers remained strong for quite a period of time, making up three-quarters of the population until the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Puritan values, while obviously rooted in religious context, are not limited to piety, but include more traditionally conservative views on issues such as sexuality, divorce, and abortion; as well as a high regard for individualism and work ethic. While America remains more religious than other countries with Protestant backgrounds, these values retain influence over implicit biases and beliefs even in those who are secular.<sup>15</sup>

America's current day devotion to individualistic work ethic is also closely related to the inescapable forces of neoliberalism and capitalism in regards to

both the economy and social sphere-which makes sense, as the "father of Liberalism," John Locke, was a Protestant, as were so many other Western thinkers foundational to our current economic system. In our highly neoliberal and capitalist society, a person's worth is seen as inextricably linked to their individual production as a worker, thus people in the working class are pushed to work themselves harder in the name of unattainable success, while the top 1% profits off of their labor. This places an overarching emphasis about being able to cope with every part of your life and job on your own, without the help of community bonds, which are often formed or strengthened through touch. And as these capitalist ideals push the working class to isolate from each other in pursuit of wealth and power, we are distanced from touch in casual, familiar or community spaces, while at the same time, the upper class can afford touch as a commodity. Those with enough wealth are able to regularly afford luxuries like personal grooming by professionals and hiring nannies to nurture their children, filling in the socially created absence of touch by paying for personal services of physical and/or intimate social contact in exchange for a fee. On the other hand, this wealth also allows for them to control when they are distanced from touch, through not having to take public transportation, having an office or workspace distanced from one's employees, and living in spacious houses far away from all others, where the only people allowed entry is your invited social group or paid staff. This economic and social distance

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<sup>13</sup> Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, "The Implicit Legacy of American Protestantism."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

leads to the development of a more independent mindset, furthering notions of individuality above commonality, always.<sup>16</sup> In addition to a historical pattern in America of underlying Puritan values, the idealization of the individual supported by neoliberal capitalism has only grown in recent years, devaluing group and community bonds, placing capital and the fear of losing it over human lives, and dividing parts of the human experience into consumable and profitable pieces. As the modern working class is distanced from economic mobility, we are also distanced from each other and consequentially, touch.

Puritan moral values when it comes to sex are also still implicitly prevalent in our society, and this became somewhat more explicit in the middle of the 20th century, when we see the beginning of public anxiety around sexual abuse allegations. Around this time, adults who worked with children, particularly teachers and daycare center workers, were told to limit all touch with those in their charge, for fear of the cost that a sexual abuse lawsuit could bring. These regulations have continued into the present day, despite the research that shows how important touch is to child development and relationship building, and without a similar push across the board for comprehensive education on consent. As research has shown both the well known negative effects of withholding touch from young children, and the fact that these restrictions are

ineffective in reducing sexual abuse in such situations, the performative nature of such regulations is clear: protection of institutions' public reputation and wealth is considered more important than possible detrimental effects on the children.<sup>17</sup> In 2001, Field wrote that "a decade ago, touch was most often associated with sexuality, but today, in our litigious society, it is more associated with criminality in increasingly frequent court cases on sexual harassment and sexual abuse."<sup>18</sup> Even as we are isolated every day from those around us through neoliberal individualism, we are also structurally being given the message that touch and sex are inseparably linked, harming the development of children (and adults) and their relationship with what healthy touch is. This is not to say that sexual harassment or assault don't happen institutionally, women in corporate spaces face especially high rates, but rather to say our current strategy of blanket restriction of touch reinforced through shame, without comprehensive education on consent is not addressing the problem but rather worsening it, and harming all of us in the process. Including the negative effects to physical, mental, and emotional health, as previously discussed, touch averse societies such as the United States also have higher rates of physical abuse, especially against those considered to be weaker or of lower status, like children, women, and the elderly.<sup>19</sup> Not only that, but those who only receive

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<sup>16</sup> Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, "Economic and Social Distance: Perceived Income Inequality Negatively Predicts an Interdependent Self-Construct." "

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<sup>17</sup> Field, "Touch," 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Jablonski, "Touch."

touch in violent contexts, by those in power over them, learn to dissociate pain and emotion, allowing them to replicate their abuse onto others once they gain power, and continue the cycle.<sup>20</sup> As our society continues to frame touch as only sexual and inappropriate and police its expression in fear of litigation, we continue to avoid of the real issues of a lack of education around consent, protection of institutions over the wellbeing of people, and the actual roots of sexual violence; which can only lead to a reproduction of these cycles of abuse.

A notable example of ineffectual and ultimately harmful attempt to address sexual assault at an institutional level is the Prison Rape Elimination Act, or PREA. Passed in 2003, PREA was the first federal law addressing sexual assault of prisoners to be passed, with unanimous bipartisan support in the House and the Senate. While previous attempts at similar legislation failed, in *Tapestries'* 2018 volume Elizabeth Eggert argues that impetus for this bill passing was not the prevalence of previously studied sexual assault of female inmates by guards, but public anxiety around more recently rising rates of male rape in prisons, particularly racist notions of white men being sexually victimized by black men. Even though the bill was sponsored by civil rights groups such as the NAACP, co-sponsors also included many conservative groups, including Salvation Army, who were invested in the bill solely for the purpose of eliminating gay sex, whether it was rape or not. Addressing the rape of female inmates

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

by guards (which is more common in women's prisons, while male prisons have higher rates of sexual assault between inmates) was almost left out the bill entirely, as male rape was seen as more "disturbing" to members of Congress.<sup>21</sup> And while the title of the bill presents the illusion that all sexual abuse within prisons has been "eliminated," compliance with PREA is loosely determined by state governors, compliance is not mandatory for state and local facilities, and the penalty for non-compliance is minimal if enforced at all. Yet as we will see in the case of Minnesota's Shakopee Correctional Facility for Women, PREA, legislation intended to reduce sexual assault in prisons, has not only failed in that respect but was punitively used against those it was supposed to protect in justifying a traumatic ban against all touch.

### *Incarceration and the Banning of Touch*

As scholar and prison abolitionist Angela Y. Davis has said, "the institution of the prison has stockpiled ideas and practices are hopefully approaching obsolescence in the larger society, but that retain all their ghastly vitality behind prison walls."<sup>22</sup> While the previous section clearly shows that American culture's aversion to touch is not approaching obsolescence, we will now explore the ways in which one prison punitively exploits touch deprivation, and uses it to violently enforce socially constructed norms of sexuality and gender. When it comes to the power of prisons to

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<sup>21</sup> Eggert, "Violence and Silence: The Prison Rape Elimination Act and Beyond."

<sup>22</sup> Davis, "Are Prisons Obsolete?" 83.

violently control marginalized bodies and their expression, one only has to look to the long and bloody history of the exploitation of Black people under slavery as a foundational part of creating this country to see how this current iteration is not new, but a continuation of these exploitative processes of control. The kind of structural control and restriction of touch in Shakopee is not an isolated circumstance, but rather another way in which prisons explicitly reproduce and further extend damaging social norms and boundaries.

I would also like to highlight the fact that this section, and the work of Elizabeth Hawes, a woman incarcerated in Shakopee, was the inspiration and the impetus for this entire paper. Through an internship I held in 2019 with the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop, I was lucky enough to be able to read Hawes' writing about the touch ban in Shakopee, which set me off onto a train of thoughts about how important touch really is in our lives, and how deeply damaging it is to be deprived of it. I'm so glad her writing has now been published for everyone to read, and I will be drawing heavily from the incredibly valuable research and writing she did from prison during a period of intense social isolation, lifting the voices of herself and those around her about their everyday reality.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted an anonymous survey at Minnesota's Shakopee Correctional Facility for women, the results of which placed Shakopee as one of the worst prisons in the

country for sexual misconduct.<sup>23</sup> Following this data, and legally supported by the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), former Warden Tracy Beltz enacted a strict ban against touching in the Shakopee facility. Those incarcerated within the facility were not allowed to touch each other or anyone that visited them, even through a pat on the back or high-five, at the risk of being written up and typically put in solitary confinement. This policy was not enforced inside men's prisons in Minnesota. In 2019, after eight years of the Minnesota Department of Corrections denying the touch ban, the work of the ACLU and the Minneapolis Star Tribune proved the existence of the policy through many Freedom of Information Act requests and brought it into the public eye, and the ban was scaled back to allow handshakes, high-fives, fist bumps, but no hugs outside of brief hugs for visitors.<sup>24</sup> Beltz has publicly denied the claims of those in the Shakopee facility—but failed to supply records that refute them—that guards took advantage of this rule to dole out the harsh punishment of solitary confinement for innocuous touches, purposefully misconstruing the touch as "sexual" as a way to exert power over inmates, especially queer women within the facility. It's also of note that this policy did not restrict touch between guards and inmates, allowing for strip searches and other handling of inmates by those with power over them to continue.

The system of mass incarceration in today's America has allowed for the status of

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<sup>23</sup> Lyon, "Minnesota Prison Bans 'No Touch' Rule."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

criminal to justify a complete removal of a person's humanity, rendering them socially dead, as argued by Joshua Price.<sup>25</sup> Drawing from Orlando Patterson's analysis of slavery as social death, Price analyzes the process of social death and its parts (institutional violence, generalized humiliation, and natal alienation) in the system of modern incarceration. Social death means a complete removal of an individual from society, from their humanity. Denied their rights by the virtue of whatever crimes the state has declared they are guilty of, they are now at the complete mercy of institutional control:

Every aspect of our life is micromanaged, from when our blinds have to be raised and lowered, and how many books we can put on a shelf in our room, to the date we have to wear our winter coats regardless of the outside temperature...By its very nature, prison is isolating. Stripped of our personal physical identifiers – wedding rings, contact lenses, clothing and makeup, we are away from our homes, family, pets, employment, favorite activities, foods, computers and green spaces. Our lives are condensed. To survive, we cling to what comforts us – small rituals that give us a sense of normalcy and help us retain our dignity.<sup>26</sup>

In both Price's book and Hawes' article, we also see this disregard for the humanity and

bodily autonomy of incarcerated people surface in medical treatment, or more likely lack thereof. In his work from 2004 - 2007 doing participatory research about the healthcare of incarcerated people in upstate New York, Price mentions "people forced to languish in their cells for days with a burst appendix or a fractured vertebra before they received anything other than a Pepto-Bismol or Advil;"<sup>27</sup> while Hawes quotes many women who were sent to solitary confinement for issues relating to trauma and/or mental health, such as women sent to solitary for self harm or suicidal thoughts, which only began and worsened because of their time in prison and solitary.<sup>28</sup> There are so many people who have experiences similar or worse than the small glimpses quoted here, their voices can be found in the work of Hawes and Price and beyond into the wide world of writing and testimony by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated peoples; and all of which are instances of institutional violence that happen every day inside of prisons all over the country. I would argue that a ban on touch is another form of institutional violence, as the ban and its enforcement have not only taken away a vital part of the humanity and safety of women who have every aspect of their life controlled by an institution, but actively worsened their mental health and trauma. After social death, an incarcerated person is separated from what is considered inhumane by the abyssal divide between the

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<sup>25</sup> Price, "Prison and Social Death," 5.

<sup>26</sup> Hawes, "Incarcerated Women are Punished for Their Trauma with Solitary Confinement."

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<sup>27</sup> Price, "Prison and Social Death," 9.

<sup>28</sup> Hawes, "Incarcerated Women are Punished for Their Trauma with Solitary Confinement."

rest of the world and the inside of the prison, and the humiliating practices within it are presented as justifiable, if the public even learns of them.<sup>29</sup> The complete deprivation of touch can be allowed under the flimsy basis of preventing sexual assault, yet strip searches and pat downs are allowed to continue, despite being well-documented ways for guards to abuse their power and sexually assault inmates.

This ban is one of absence, an insidious form of control whose traumatic effects are debilitating and long lasting on those who are confined by it, but not immediately observable to those on the outside. In this way, the prison is not only incarcerating the body in terms of physical space from the outside in, but also attempting to completely sever the fundamental link of sensing and connection that humans get from being able to reach out to others:

A prisoner at Shakopee who did not get visits – where an outside visitor can give a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek when they arrive or leave – would not have had human touch in a long time. Some people had literally not been touched for years...I spoke with a white woman in her mid-30s with a very long sentence. She said, "I need human contact, it doesn't matter how much. I'm here for a long time. I need to do what I need to do to survive. If that means I need a hug, I'm going to hug someone...If I can go for

the smallest things, (she got 15 days for hugging someone and one day and an overnight – but not charged – for holding someone's hand) if I get in trouble for holding someone's hand, why not just hug them? What's a reason not to go bigger? I know it's bad to hit someone; I'm not going to do that. But hug someone?<sup>30</sup>

Under this policy, these women have to make the choice every day of self-imposing isolation for their own safety, or engaging in any kind of supportive or even loving communication at the risk of losing all contact in solitary confinement. If we go back to the beginning of this policy, it was supposed to be a measure of protection for these inmates, but has only manifested as another way to punish them for their everyday existence. Not to mention, that the majority of the inmate population at Shakopee is there on drug-related charges, not violent charges. As a prison abolitionist, I don't want to reproduce narratives of who is and isn't deserving of the violence that the U.S. prison system perpetrates against the incarcerated, but rather to point out that any attempt to justify the aggressive use of solitary confinement in this instance to reduce inmate violence is false both in its consideration of who is violent, and in its effects, which have worsened trauma and self-harm in inmates while not addressing issues of sexual assault in the slightest.

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<sup>29</sup> Price, "Prison and Social Death," 6.

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<sup>30</sup> Hawes, "Incarcerated Women are Punished for Their Trauma with Solitary Confinement."

The distance of the abyssal divide between society and prison, and encouragement of humiliation in social death also results in the perpetration of social constructs of gender and sexuality, giving guards unchecked power to violently enforce their own personal biases against visibly queer and gender nonconforming inmates.

Prisoners were not able to help someone up when they fell, hug them when a parent died, or shake their hand when they earned their GED. All these gestures were considered "sexual." All touch was considered sexual...Every person I asked, regardless of sexual orientation, thought that there was homophobia within staff. A 28-year-old white woman said, "I am targeted [for] my sexual orientation. Verbal harassment is constant. They use intimidation, always threatening to take me to segregation."<sup>31</sup>

Despite homophobic and transphobic fearmongering of LGBTQ women as sexually predatory, they face some of the highest rates of sexual assault in prison, as their very existence challenges long held and colonially imposed ideas of what sexuality and gender should be and makes them a target for guards and institutions upholding these ideas. Shakopee's touch ban disproportionately affects to affect queer women, as their oversexualization mean that

guards could claim all touch by out queer inmates as sexual, and punish them more harshly.

## *Connection and the COVID-19*

### *Pandemic*

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't speak at all about the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis we're still in the middle of and that has brought touch, or the lack of it, to the forefront of many people's minds. When it comes to writing and thinking about the pandemic's effects, it feels bizarre, like my brain's still pinging and bouncing around from everything that has happened, is happening, and is still going to keep going.

Due to my parent's age and my inability to quarantine with them after returning from study abroad, I was lucky to be able to spend my 14 day quarantine in a tiny house in rural Iowa, with no internet and no one else around. As someone who clings to their alone time, this turned out not to be the terrifying prospect I joked about to my friends beforehand, but actually a really valuable time in understanding myself and learning to be comfortable with my own company. Don't get me wrong—there was certainly no small amount of crying and nights when I read aloud to myself to even get a semblance of human company—but that kind of time to just exist, to be without any second-guessing of outside perception and projection of the image others held me to, that's something I'm incredibly grateful for.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

While the tragic and traumatic nature of the pandemic shouldn't be minimized, the isolation of quarantine did grant a sense of freedom for some people, becoming a site of discovery once there was an extended amount of time away from the performance of multitudes of social constructs. Stories of people discovering or coming to terms with their gender, sexuality, their body outside of gendered social norms have all surfaced as the pandemic has gone on. And as we move slightly closer to being able to see the end of the pandemic, so many questions arise as to what will change about society in the aftermath – the only certainty is that we will all have changed. I think that many people expect a 21st century reboot of the Roaring Twenties, and I'm sure that there will be an upsurge of partying and large scale events once people are allowed to attend without the risk of the coronavirus over their head (especially as we've seen that this risk still hasn't stopped some people from continuing to participate in large gatherings). But on the flipside, I think there will also probably be a prolonged cautiousness even after we get as close to an "all-clear" as we can get, as at that point we'll likely have been in over a year of keeping to the habits of isolation and social distancing. Once we're finally able to engage in the contact that so many of us have missed over these months, will that push our society into a more tactile nature, trying to make up for the extended seclusion? Or will our force of habit and previous conservative norms around touch continue to hold us back? Or will it be some of both, inbetween, something else entirely? There's no way of knowing

what the future will hold, only an understanding of who we were before and what we discovered was lacking.

### *Conclusion*

When it came time to consider how to end this paper, I was at a loss. Grand concluding statements of how we should all embrace touch feel disingenuous at best considering all of the structural and societal barriers we're going up against in the U.S. right now, and also ridiculous consider how deep we're still stuck in the quagmire of the COVID-19 pandemic. There's so much we don't know about how the world will look in a year, about how we'll all be affected by the pandemic, and so much I wasn't able to cover in this paper due to the many avenue this topic opened up and a compressed course schedule. How is the way we express touch influenced by externally enforced constructs of race and gender? How have social norms around touch fluctuated in the time between Aristotle and the current day? How can we begin to push back on these deeply engrained notions? What I can leave you with is the knowledge that even despite all the messaging to the contrary, our fundamental connection to touch is still there. In the long history of humanity, touch averse societies are anomalies: to quote neuroscientist Saul Schanberg, "We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it."<sup>32</sup> The progression to restricting the fundamental physical relationships between humans is one that was imposed, not a natural part of our

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<sup>32</sup> Field, "Touch," 57.

evolution. Furthermore, even within a society that teaches us to hold back our touch and find strength only in individuality, there is still a basic yearning for that connection. In a psychological study conducted at Swarthmore College, students were taken to a darkened room, then a well-lit room. While almost none of those in the well-lit room touched each other, held back by (presumably) embarrassment and strict social norms of who you can touch and when; over 90% of those in the dark room touched each other, and close to 50% percent hugged, "too shy to touch each other when they could be seen, but were more willing to touch in the anonymous dark."<sup>33</sup> The anonymous dark reveals that despite attempts to control it, that instinctual reach for connection persists, it just needs to be brought back out into the light.

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<sup>33</sup> Field, "Touch," 61.

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