Porous Bodies

Corporeal Intimacies, Disgust and Violence in a COVID-19 World

Cynthia Sear

ABSTRACT: The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has changed the way we imagine and experience our bodily boundaries. While previously we may have believed our body to be discrete and bounded by our skin, the latest medical advice has awakened us to the porous nature of our bodies. The virus, we have learnt, may enter our body through our mouths, nose and eyeballs via the surfaces that we touch and through the air that we breathe. In this article, I employ auto-ethnographic reflections and recent media coverage to argue that this new corporeal intimacy has both produced and revealed new and latent experiences of disgust and violence.

KEYWORDS: biopower, COVID-19, disgust, embodiment, gender, handshakes, power, violence

Masked-up, gloved-up and wearing a pair of sunglasses, I am ready for my walk to the local shopping strip. As I approach the grocery shop, I see a broken line of waiting shoppers. I stop two metres behind the last body, staking my place in the queue to become one of the four people allowed in the store . . . I am mentally revisiting my shopping list when sounds of heavy footsteps and breathing jolt me into the present. A male runner, visibly sweating and audibly panting, is approaching me on the sidewalk. My chest begins to tighten, and my heart rate quickens. I glance around to find that I am unable to move off the pavement because of a parked car. The man passes me, entering and leaving the one metre orbit around my body, a space that until recently I had rarely given much thought. Even though he is now at least three metres away from me, the smell of his sweat mingled with deodorant lingers in the air around me. I feel the breeze on the side of my eyes, where my sunglasses break with my face, and I have the terrifying thought that the runner's breath has just entered my body via my eyeballs (Sear 2020).

This anecdote served as the introduction to an opinion piece published in the Australian newspaper *The Age* in April 2020. I had written the passage to high-

light how the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the way we imagine our bodies and the body of the proverbial 'other'. The pandemic, I had argued, has awakened us to the porosity of our bodies and in so doing has given rise to new experiences of disgust and violence.

In the days prior to its publication, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the United States National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, declared that he hoped the handshake would be a thing of the past. Fauci stated: 'I don't think we should ever shake hands again' (qtd. in Cathey 2020). In this context, and in the hope of inciting readership, I had entitled the opinion piece 'Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not'. Given the heightened focus on the transmission of germs, I had proposed, it may be difficult to return to our previous ways of interacting with other bodies.

The piece attracted a mixed response. In publicly posted comments, a number of readers, typically male in name, suggested that I was mistaken and expressed their intention to retain the handshake. Others, however, welcomed the tentative prediction, stating that they hoped the handshake was to become a gestural

vestige of a pre-COVID world. For this special issue of *Anthropology in Action*, I expand upon the arguments from this original piece in light of the reaction the article generated. I contend that the comments I received attest to a transformation of corporeal intimacy and further illuminate previously latent or underacknowledged forms of disgust and violence.

Porous Bodies

As news spread of the novel coronavirus at the beginning of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a number of recommended activities for individuals (WHO 2020). The most important: thorough hand-washing. Instructional videos were shared on social media regarding the ideal way to clean our hands, and stores sold out of hand sanitiser and antibacterial hand wash. Health officials asked us to refrain from handshaking and to execute coughs and sneezes into a tissue or one of our elbows.

When more became known about the virus and how it spread, we were told to 'social distance'. In Australia, this message was relayed on signage in public places, in stores and on footpaths, which urged people to maintain a 1.5 metre distance between bodies (DoH 2020). State-sponsored television and social media adverts warned that the virus could enter our body through our noses, mouths and eyeballs via the things that we touch and through the air around us (DoH 2020).

Confronted with the multitude of ways in which we may be infected by COVID-19, we were awakened to the porous nature of our bodies. Where previously we may have imagined our body as a cocoon (cf. Dawson 2020; and Sear 2020), with defined boundaries of inside and outside, the latest medical advice now denies us such an understanding. Instead, we are told to be vigilant in the public realm because our body is open to our environment and to other bodies in many different ways. As in the opening anecdote, a consequence of this new corporeal intimacy is a reimagining of our perceived bodily orbit beyond our immediate flesh and skin. The boundaries of our bodies have become messy and their management difficult.

Weaponising Disgust

As Mary Douglas famously observed, humans have a universal desire to classify and categorise, and assign

boundaries 'on an inherently untidy experience . . . [so] that a semblance of order is created' (1986: 4; and qtd in Sear 2020). Where things refute our neat categorisations, we experience disgust. The object of our disgust is not inherently foul, but it becomes so in contradicting our understanding of where things belong. Dirt, Douglas offered as an example, was merely 'matter out of place' (1986: 36; and qtd in Sear 2020).

The expansion of our bodily boundaries to encompass the air around us therefore creates new opportunities for discomfort, disgust and danger. In Belgium, as cases of coronavirus rose, a commuter was filmed removing his face mask, licking his fingers and then smearing them onto the rail of a crowded train carriage (Ng 2020; and in Sear 2020). The video went viral (no pun intended), and the man was subsequently identified and arrested (Sear 2020).

In Australia, reports of spitting and coughing in the presence of front-line workers have led to new laws to penalise such behaviours. Politician Brad Hazzard described the newly punishable offences as 'disgusting, dangerous behaviour [that] . . . will not be tolerated' (qtd in Aubusson 2020). Hazzard added that 'COVID-19 is every bit as dangerous as a weapon, so anybody who thinks it's funny to spit or cough on somebody are without doubt pathetic grubs' (qtd in Aubusson 2020). By engaging in disgusting behaviour, Hazzard suggested, a person may become disgusting as well.

Distinction and Discipline

As Hazzard's words attest, bodily practices can not only violate boundaries, but they can also create them. This was exemplified by Norbert Elias in *The Civilising Process* (1994; and qtd in Sear 2020). Spitting, Elias described, was once a habit of all classes in Western Europe. Indeed, the practice was thought to be a healthy way to expel unwanted saliva in the sixteenth century. Over time, however, spitting was considered indecorous in the presence of royalty and eventually became associated with the lower classes and the 'uncivilised' other. Because of this relation, more so than any medical danger, spitting was deemed disgusting (Elias 1994; and qtd in Sear 2020), and today in the West the bodily impulse to spit has largely vanished from daily life (cf. Coomber et al. 2018).

Such bodily discipline and its associated opportunity for social distinction (cf. Bourdieu 1984) are perhaps analogous to the new as well as prohibited behaviours of the COVID-19 world (Sear 2020). As

commentators have noted, most of the recommended bodily practices are implausible for many in the working class and Global South (e.g. Prose 2020). Further, these corporeal performances are a form of 'bio-power': 'techniques [which achieve] the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations' (Foucault 1978: 140; and qtd in Sear 2020).

As Michel Foucault (1978, cf. 1988) theorised, medicalisation has produced many efficiencies for the management of states. Whether coughing into our elbows, sanitising doorknobs or washing our hands until they are dry and coarse, there are now numerous ways in which we can perform good citizenship and cultivate healthy bodies that will not burden our health system. In a nod to Dr. Fauci's statement, I had concluded that such performances were 'likely to continue to produce responsible citizens who do not endanger their bodies and others to the transmission of germs. Citizens who will, pandemic or not, refuse to shake each other's hands' (Sear 2020).

History, Heretics and Handshakes

While many readers expressed relief that handshakes may be a thing of the past, others appeared annoyed by the suggestion that handshaking was to become a behavioural relic. In particular, I noted a trend for readers with male monikers to exclaim their affection for the handshake and belief that 'people will get over the COVID-19 inconveniences and get on with their lives' (Geoffrey B 2020). Matt (2020) decried that shaking hands is 'deeply rooted in man's culture from thousands of years ago', while John (2020) proposed that handshakes would soon return because 'this is humanity'.

The handshake does have a long history amongst men in the West. The practice can be traced back to antiquity, when the handshake was reputedly a gesture of reconciliation, a signal to its participants as well as onlookers that a dispute had been resolved (Roodenburg 1991). As a mode of greeting, however, Herman Roodenburg has noted that the history of the handshake is 'far from linear' (1991: 178) and may only date back to the sixteenth century. One popular account sees the practice proliferate with the Quakers, who purportedly settled on the greeting as a means to promote their egalitarian philosophy in contrast to other more hierarchical strains of Christianity. In any case, as Roodenburg has concluded, 'the body reflected even in its smallest gestures the value that society, this other body, attached to matters of hierarchy or equality' (1991: 179).

To build upon this sentiment and again echo Foucault, bodily performances can produce as well as reveal wider forces and values. This relationship is clear when we consider the furore that arose when Iman Ahmad Salam refused to shake the hand of the female Dutch Minister of Immigration and Integration, Rita Verdonk (Fadil 2009). While Salam explained the refusal in terms of his Islamic faith, Verdonk labelled the move offensive, and impressed the importance for citizens to adopt the values of the Netherlands. Apparently, the equal treatment of men and women was a value exemplified by handshaking. To this end, one reader of my article reflected on his enjoyment of the handshake and noted sadly that, 'if [the handshake] does disappear, it will disappear for reasons reflecting myriad cultural differences' (Bayle 2020).

The handshake is indeed cultural, but it is also, as Sarah Hillewaert (2016) has argued, an embodied and inter-subjective experience. While Erving Goffman described the role of the handshake in demonstrating 'how worthy he is of respect and how worthy he feels others are of it' (1967: 19 and qtd in Hillewaert 2016: 8), this is by no means all that a handshake can convey or establish. Perhaps the most thought-provoking response I received came from a professional acquaintance of mine on the website *LinkedIn*. She wrote: 'I will regret the passing of the handshake . . . For me it has been a way of initiating an interaction, signalling the type of interaction I want it to be, and marking a boundary. So, it is a strategy against certain forms of violence and one that I've been very conscious of as a woman' (Smith 2020). The handshake may be, as Hillewaert has proposed, a 'tactile tactic', 'a tool that is embodied and culturally scripted as well as consciously manipulated' (2016: 24). Inspired by Michel de Certeau's 'tactics', Hillewaert has discussed how the handshake is a sensorial mechanism that may be used to manoeuvre within and between larger systems (cf. De Certeau 1984). In the case of my acquaintance, the handshake can create a bodily boundary, a space deemed necessary given the threat of other, presumably male, bodies.

Conclusion

The implication of Douglas's seminal *Purity and Danger* was that where there is dirt, danger or disgust, 'there is system' (1986: 36). Similarly, Foucault (e.g. 2003; and qtd in Fadil 2009: 440) pointed to transgressions as a means of understanding power. In the case of COVID-19, the heightened import of medi-

cal knowledge has changed how we imagine and experience our bodies. From discrete to porous, this transformation in bodily intimacy has exposed new as well as underacknowledged forms of disgust and violence. While at present it is difficult to deny the need for such bodily discipline, in a post COVID-19 world we should be mindful of the bodily behaviours that are promoted as ideal versus deviant (Sear 2020). The way we imagine and enforce our corporeal boundaries reveals much of how we understand and experience the world. Importantly, the perceived violation of these boundaries exposes the values that dominate therein.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the opinion editor of *The Age* newspaper, Angus Holland, for publishing the opinion piece which is referenced in this article. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the many readers who publicly commented on the opinion piece and Professor Andrew Dawson for his kind encouragement and helpful comments regarding the ideas presented in this article.

CYNTHIA SEAR is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include shopping, work, power, uncertainty, gender and emotion. E-mail: cynthia.sear@unimelb.edu.au

References

- Aubusson, K. (2020), '\$5000 Spitting and Coughing Penalty Expanded to Protect all Workers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/5000-spitting-and-coughing-penalty-expanded-to-protect-all-workers-20200418-p54l0x.html>.
- Bayle (2020), "Re: "Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not"" [comment], *The Age*, 13 April, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/will-we-still-shake-hands-in-a-post-covid-19-world-probably-not-20200412-p54j4p.html#comments>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (trans.) R. Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).
- Cathey, L. (2020), 'Fauci: "In a Perfect World" Americans Would Stop Shaking Hands"', *ABC NEWS*, 10 April, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fauci-perfect-world-americans-stop-shaking-hands/story?id=70062797>.
- Coomber, R., L. Moyle and A. Pavlidis (2018), 'Public Spitting in "Developing" Nations of the Global South: Harmless Embedded Practice or Disgusting, Harmful and Deviant?', *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South*, (eds) K. Carrington, R. Hogg, J. Scott and M. Sozzo (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International), 493–520.
- Dawson, A. (2020), 'A new spin on the car as cocoon', *Critical Automobility Studies Lab*, 23 March, <https://cas.ihs.ac.at/a-new-spin-on-the-car-as-cocoon/>.
- De Certeau, M. (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (trans.) S. F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- DoH (Department of Health, Australian Government) (2020), 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) Campaign Resources', <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-campaign-resources> (accessed 4 June, 2020).
- Douglas, M. [1966] (1986), *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge).
- Elias, N. [1939] (1994), *The Civilising Process*, (trans.) E. Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
- Fadil, N. (2009), 'Managing Affects and Sensibilities: The Case of Not-Handshaking and Not-Fasting', *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 4: 439–454, doi:10.1111/j.1469-8676.2009.00080.x.
- Foucault, M. (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, (trans.) R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books).
- Foucault, M. (1988), *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (trans.) R. Howard (New York: Random House).
- Foucault, M. (2003), *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, (eds.) P. Rabinow and N. Rose (New York: New Press).
- Geoffrey B (2020), 'Re: "Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not"" [comment], *The Age*, 13 April, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/will-we-still-shake-hands-in-a-post-covid-19-world-probably-not-20200412-p54j4p.html#comments>.
- Goffman, E. (1967), *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday).
- Hillewaert, S. (2016), 'Tactics and Tactility: A Sensory Semiotics of Handshakes in Central Kenya', *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 1: 49–66, doi:10.1111/aman.12517.
- John (2020), 'Re: "Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not"" [comment], *The Age*, 13 April, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/will-we-still-shake-hands-in-a-post-covid-19-world-probably-not-20200412-p54j4p.html#comments>.

- will-we-still-shake-hands-in-a-post-covid-19-world-probably-not-20200412-p54j4p.html#comments.
- Matt (2020), 'Re: "Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not"' [comment], *The Age*, 13 April, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/will-we-still-shake-hands-in-a-post-covid-19-world-probably-not-20200412-p54j4p.html#comments>.
- Ng, K. (2020), 'Coronavirus: Man Arrested after Licking His Fingers and Wiping Them on Pole in Train', *Independent*, 11 March, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/belgium-subway-train-passenger-lick-fingers-pole-coronavirus-a9394876.html?fbclid=IwAR0ZhFikCNICCCGjmRlIZz03_GqazhlKYHz93GYLCMK1uBd0YBZ92koth28.
- Prose, F. (2020), 'Social Distancing? Working-Class People Don't Have That Luxury', *The Guardian*, 1 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/01/coronavirus-covid-19-working-class>
- Roodenburg, H. (1991), 'The "Hand of Friendship": Shaking Hands and Other Gestures in the Dutch Republic', in *A Cultural History of Gesture: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, (eds) J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (Oxford: Polity Press), 152–189.
- Sear, C. (2020), 'Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not', *The AGE*, 13 April, <https://qoshe.com/the-age/cynthia-sear/will-we-still-shake-hands-in-a-post-covid-19-world/70171392>.
- Smith, L. (2020), 'Re: "Will We Still Shake Hands in a Post-COVID-19 World? Probably Not"' [comment], *LinkedIn*, 14 April, <https://bit.ly/3juf4DE>.
- WHO (World Health Organization) (2020), 'Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Advice for the Public', <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> (accessed 4 June 2020).