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Things that Stick:
Felicité à deux

To be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject.... To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible...is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor.¹—Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

The skin is the largest organ of the human body. Touch is fundamental for survival, as it supports emotional stability, cognitive development, and social integration. In the 1960s Harry Harlow performed controversial experiments on non-human primates in an attempt to understand human behavior. To determine how much of the affection between a mother and an infant was based on food, Harlow separated baby monkeys from their mothers immediately after birth and introduced surrogate inanimate objects that would stand in as the source of food and comfort.

One surrogate was made of wire and dispensed food, and one was made of terry cloth and did not dispense food. In another set of experiments Harlow physically isolated baby monkeys for up to two years; in some cases the monkeys could see, hear, and smell other monkeys but could never touch them, while in other cases the monkeys were isolated from all other life-forms for up to two years. In general, the isolated Rhesus monkeys displayed cognitive and behavioral distress and difficulty socially integrating. The more intense and longer duration their abuse, the more profound their distress.² Such results indicate that social isolation and touch correlate with social development and engagement, cognitive and behavioral flexibility, and psychological and emotional well-being. Harlow's Rhesus monkey experiments are commonly ranked among the top ten ethically questionable psychological experiments of the past century *because* their results regarding touch deprivation and social isolation were so dramatic. Monkeys are not humans, so the scientific comparison has limits. However, isolation used as a form of punishment and torture for humans leaves signs of emotional and psychological disruption. It is therefore reasonable

to infer that possessing the power to regulate and control touch means also possessing the power to regulate and control entire fields of emotional exchange, interpersonal social development, and behavioral flexibility in humans.

Cultural constraints around touch are instituted in order to maintain social order: groups of children are taught to hold hands in order to stay together for safety; *kiss and make up* is an order for reconciliation; hugging is equated with caring and kindness. The withdrawal of touch functions as punishment through isolation: children are sent to their rooms; prisoners in penal systems see their visitors from behind glass. The quality and quantity of touch that groups of people engage in varies based on many facets of life, including ethnicity, religion, geography, and sexual orientation. However, the predominant visual culture of touch offers a narrow and restrictive representation. I will focus on the way that these restrictions function in a mainstream U.S. cultural construct to form and perpetuate the groundwork of our understanding of touch and the practices we employ around it.

Our understanding of touch begins with our family. The nuclear family socializes us into codes of conduct toward authority figures and relational orientations based on age and gender.³ Physical and emotional styles in families can vary widely; we might have parents who are physically affectionate, who kiss and hug everyone, or parents who do not use physical affection to show emotion or demonstrate intimacy. Some parents use touch for corporal punishment like spanking, slapping, or hitting. Some parents use isolation strategies for punishment, such as demanding that children go into a room to be alone. Some people have large extended families, and others have little to no extended family. The smaller and more isolated the family group, the less diverse the exposure to alternative world views or attitudes toward touch. Ultimately, a family's power dynamics blend with our individual temperaments to create unique social and emotional strategies and coping mechanisms, which become the basis for our social integration.

Family images regulate our understanding by modeling narrow and gendered forms of socially acceptable touch that convey different kinds of intimacy between family members. Images of families and nuclear families follow a visual formula as they reproduce a social ideology and delimit what a family is by omitting what family is *not*. Only certain events, people, and pairings are pictured. The limitation of what family is and

1

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*
(New York: Routledge, 2004), 30.

2

Frank C. P. Horst, René Veer, "Loneliness in Infancy: Harry Harlow, John Bowlby and Issues of Separation," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 42, no. 4, (2008): 325-35. doi:10.1007/s12124-008-9071-x.

3

The standard definition of the nuclear family is two monogamous, married heterosexual adults and their offspring.

looks like, both conceptually and visually, constrains the way individuals perceive their place in society and their perception of themselves as having agency and value.

In a culture with deeply entrenched negative attitudes toward sex, anything that is equated with sex is made to seem threatening and is considered a taboo. In this case, conflating intimacy with sexuality undermines intimacy. Platonic touch offers comfort as a means of physical contact between people or things. Hugging and holding are natural responses; clutching a teddy bear, or a hand, can bring comfort and security. The nomenclature that euphemistically conflates the word *intimacy* with sexual intimacy exemplifies the way that such connotations divert personal power and choice by restricting notions of emotional intimacy to that which is only *also* sexually intimate. For example, an adult man might perceive the only appropriate channel for an emotionally intimate relationship as a sexual relationship. For some, there is no opportunity for platonic touch or emotional intimacy without sexual bonding. The social practice of closely associating intimacy and touch with sex means that these basic human needs often carry the charges and regulations associated with sexual taboo.

I remember visiting an artist studio with my mother when I was around seven years old. I encountered a stunning impasto-style painting with cadmium yellow sunflowers, and I felt so lured in by its tactile brightness and beauty that I was compelled to touch it. I was too young to know better and old enough not to be under surveillance by my mother. I touched the thick yellow on the canvas and it stuck to me—it touched me back. I thought it was dry. I tried to rub it off, but it was oil paint. I smeared some of it off on the edge of a table and tried to rub the rest of it off on my pants. I was terrified that I would be caught yellow-handed. I hid my hand, and I hid the smear on my clothing that was evidence of my transgression. I was mortified. Alongside the fear of being caught, I felt ashamed for not knowing better, for breaking the rules of not touching that applied in other contexts, that I didn't even know were rules here; I felt ashamed for hurting the painting.

Restrictive and homophobic regulations around touch and intimacy are triggered by sexual maturation. Sex is sticky; it might stick to whatever we touch or whatever touches us. Sara Ahmed, a feminist scholar on affect, elaborates the quality of stickiness in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.⁴ Stickiness may involve feeling disgust toward something expelled

from the body, like sexual or menstrual fluids. Stickiness might signify the experience of being *sexually noticed*, as sexual attraction might seem to adhere to the surface of the body. The ideological conflation of touch with sex, coupled with social regulations around sex, maintains and reinforces regulations around all touch. For many, touch between family members stops after children reach puberty: fathers stop touching their sons and daughters; mothers modify how they touch their sons; restrictions around sibling touch emerge based on gender. In this way the institution of the family reinforces the social order by encouraging its members to become self-conscious. Sometimes same-sex friends can't touch each other without the quality and nature of that touch becoming subject to scrutiny.

The nuclear family is a politicized sexual institution. Patrilineal naming marks our lineage and reinforces incest prohibitions. In the West, exogamic marriage is mandatory, so that people must draw romantic and sexual partners from outside of their genetic line. Sex in the United States is commonly perceived through a lens of monogamy and heterosexuality, wherein the first long-term goal of monogamous coupling is legal marriage and the second is sexual reproduction; these milestones are to be repeated by one's children. Images of the nuclear family manufacture and reinforce our expectations of what a family should look like and who and what fits within its descriptor. Family depictions in studio portraits and snapshots play a key role in shaping the archetype of the modern American family. The family image is a still image caught in time that may or may not reflect our personal experience of family. The posed family portrait, whether taken as a snapshot or in a studio, codifies representations of family. The genre visually formalizes expressions of emotional and sexual intimacy, such as conventional strategies of touch that signal sexual monogamous pairing or that indicate love, affinity, or hierarchies within the familial group.

Commercial images reinforce what is socially acceptable by reflecting and naturalizing particular norms. When what is reiterated as the deepest emotional unit of belonging is visually equated with a family that looks a particular way, I might believe that such a family is necessary in order to feel that kind of closeness. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler suggests that the taboo against incest creates heterosexual and normative kinship relations that shut down all other forms of love and desire. Alternative forms threaten to corrupt the recognized normative

system of kinship, along with its accompanying social and state-governed expectations and limitations.⁵

The family formula that comprises two romantically, sexually paired monogamous people and their offspring limits the potential for a more expansive notion of kinship and the social commitment that some might make to those connections. If this is the only form of kinship I am encouraged to recognize, I might be compelled into marriage and reproduction in order to avoid emotional and social isolation.

In a capitalist economy, market forces mobilize feelings of emotional scarcity and alienation. This is instituted in part by limitations imposed on what is considered appropriate touch and, by extension, on interpersonal connection. Consumerism encourages people to consume products to feel better about the things that dissatisfy them, such as their bodies, their lives, or their feelings. You might be encouraged to buy things that make you feel like you belong because you've been identified as part of a particular group or as having a shared ideology, like things that relate to ethnic heritage or sports teams. Objects and ideas that are marketed for self-improvement imply that you need to be improved. Consumerism proposes that feelings of loneliness or sadness are things to be assuaged or avoided. The cultural conflation of sex with touch and intimacy bleeds into visual representations, either as a proliferation of images, as is the case with female-to-female touch, or as an absence of images, in the case of male-to-male touch. Through the lens of sexuality, images of platonic touch between men might be perceived as homosexual and images of platonic touch between a father and daughter might appear questionable for appearing sexually inappropriate to some. Homophobia genders all bodies, regulating the bodies and images of women differently than those of men.

When a woman becomes a mother, her sexuality is often suspended. The identity of the mother is reified as sacred and protected. To insult someone's mother or sister is a unique form of scorn. To make specific reference to the sexuality of another man's mother or sister is a considerable affront. The relationship between the mother and daughter manifests a special kind of intimacy and also frames and orients the way that women are perceived in heteropatriarchal society. Heteronormative culture sanctions the mother and daughter dyad for higher levels of physical touch and emotional intimacy than other gendered familial pairings. Exploring the space

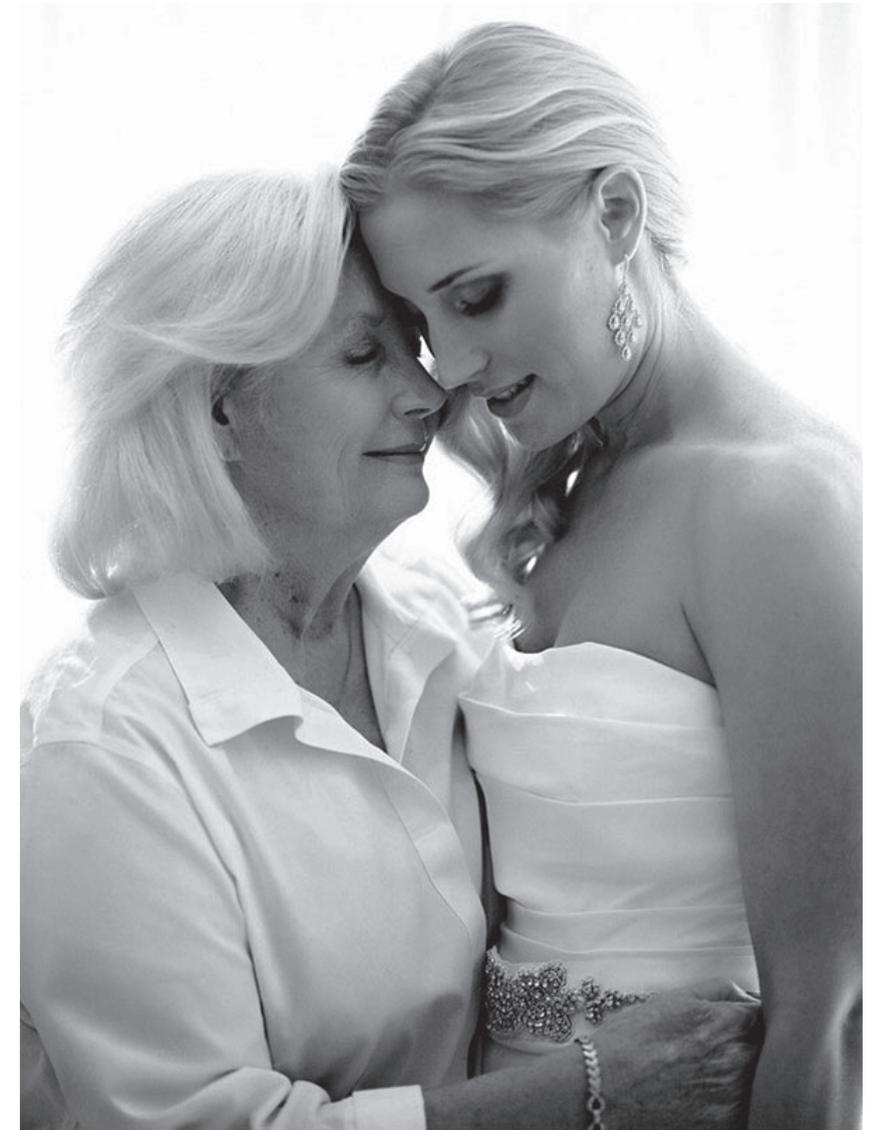


FIGURE 1.

Paul Von Rieter. *Mother and Daughter Brides*,
[http://www.bridalguide.com/photo-of-the-day/
precious-mother-daughter-photo](http://www.bridalguide.com/photo-of-the-day/precious-mother-daughter-photo).



FIGURE 2.

Annie Leibovitz, *Gwyneth Paltrow and Blythe Danner*, 1999, <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnik-polityka/kultura/wystawy/1514966,1,recenzja-wystawy-annie-leibovitz-kobiety.read>.

between the erotic and the pornographic as it relates to the mother and daughter dyad across genres can open up meaningful critical space.

Mother and Daughter Brides (fig. 1) is a commercial photograph on a bridal website. The image, constructed in a studio, presents a precious moment between mother and daughter on the daughter's wedding day. Its intended audience is that of soon-to-be-brides or women interested in the pomp and circumstance of the ritual of the wedding ceremony. Removed from context, the emphasis falls on these women and their touch. The women's physical resemblance is unremarkable, but they are visually coded as mother and daughter by their age difference and the photograph's title in the online *Bridal Guide*. They both have white skin and professionally color-treated hair and are both dressed in white. The daughter wears a wedding gown, and the mother wears a fairly androgynous dress shirt, which downplays her sexuality in contrast to her daughter's high femme dress. Exhibiting a more overt sexuality would frame the mother as sexually deviant and therefore less sophisticated.

The mother gently embraces her daughter at the waist as they face each other; their chests meet as they press their bodies together. Their faces are close and their eyes lowered; their noses are touching. All of the visual energy is channeled inward toward each other. These women look like they are about to tenderly and sexually kiss. The photograph derives erotic energy from the incest taboo, which lies beneath its surface. By indirectly depicting and summoning this erotic energy, the photograph seeks to channel it into the viewer's urge to consume images, objects, or performances related to capitalism or their desire to participate in elaborate and expensive rites of passage. Without looking deeply, I might imagine that the ritual or the image offers me love, and not just my betrothed. Like the image of the nuclear family, this image represents something that has been woven into our associations with love and belonging.

The viewer encountering this image while shopping online for a wedding gown may overlook this homoerotic aspect or simply read it as an image of desire or longing. This image relies on the indoctrinated script that every woman anticipates her day as a bride and reinforces the deeply entrenched mythology of womanhood. The formal conventions of *Mother and Daughter Brides* eclipse any intimations of incest, homosexuality, or intergenerational sex that might register in a more illicit or pornographic context. In this context, such implications

appear as abrasive, threatening, or inappropriate because they represent undomesticated impulses. These women are framed by a commercial and heteronormative ritual, which provides the viewer with the distance necessary for maintaining the mythology. The viewer is able to indulge in the erotic charge of the image while never being asked to evaluate what generates that eroticism. The sensation of desire becomes attached to the image of the bride, and the satisfaction of that desire becomes compulsory. The erotics that energize this image give it an *affective* register, so that this image and my associations with this ritual compel an emotional experience in me. Like the image of the nuclear family, this image comes to embody something that we see repeatedly and that becomes inextricable from our associations with images that signify love and belonging.

Regardless of what genre it falls in, mother and daughter sexual imagery traffics in the fantasy taboos of incest, homosexuality, and intergenerational sex. In the pornographic context, these images are also exhibitionistic and intended to be sexually used for masturbation. In the commercial context, these images are intended to elicit the desire to belong to or to possess an intimacy this deep and uncomplicated.

Gwyneth Paltrow and Blythe Danner (fig. 2) is a studio photograph by the artist Annie Leibovitz of two celebrity women, Blythe Danner and Gwyneth Paltrow, mother and daughter, respectively. They are white women, both wearing makeup, and are both dressed fashionably. The background is bright green behind their heads and graduates into a darker green toward the lower third of the image. The two women are seated; one sits behind the other and embraces her.

The frame cuts off at the women's waists, though it includes the younger woman's lap and skirt. A small margin of color exists above their heads, though there is no other background information. Their heads create a heart shape at the top of the frame, and the only space between their bodies is a small hole that is created by the curve of the daughter's neck meeting her mother's face. Their bodies mimic the arc of each other.

This image is constructed around the polarities of masculine and feminine while also engaging the familial framework of mother and daughter. Danner, the mother, is the yang. She is visually presented as the masculine element: Her breasts are de-emphasized; her entire chest is covered up to her neck by a black turtleneck. Her hair is short and messy with gray

streaks. Both of her hands are visible and actively engaged; her gaze is solid and directed into the camera at the viewer. She sits behind her daughter, embracing her. She holds up the back; she is in the power position. Paltrow, the daughter, is the yin. She is presented as the feminine element: She wears a white dress; her breasts are nearly exposed as the strap falls off of her shoulder. Her arms are skinny and pale, draped to her side; one hand is cupped underneath her mother's. The other hand is cut out of the frame; her eyes are limp, too heavy to hold open. She is demure, frail, and wilting. The daughter is conventionally beautiful, and in this image evokes classical paintings of a woman, martyr, or saint. This image stages an intimate homoerotic embrace between mother and daughter.

The studio portrait is tempered because the gaze of the mother, who confronts me when I look, is gendered masculine. As such, it is possible that I experience a less homophobic response than I would if they didn't occupy the gender binary that strategizes a masculine look as being acceptable as dominant. Some may experience an increased sense of this image's homoerotic quality because these women are framed on a butch and femme spectrum. However, in the context of the normative mainstream, this invocation of the heterosexual gender binary likely works to subvert the image's homoerotic and incestuous qualities. My feelings of desire and attraction may instead arise in response to their celebrity status or to my desire to possess (what appears to be) an uncomplicated and intimate familial bond.

The image of the mother is a powerful one, and while the homoerotic fantasy of the mother and daughter as a site of pornographic or erotic content is deeply charged, it is rarely acknowledged as present and mobilized in mainstream marketing. It encompasses multiple points of tabooed expression: female homosexuality, incest, and intergenerational sexuality. When mother and daughter are placed into a pornographic context and positioned as fodder for sexual self-pleasuring, the sacred image of the mother and daughter smothers beneath a heap of perversion.

The image *Dressed* (fig. 3) is an illicit snapshot of two women identified as mother and daughter by *dressed-undressed.com*, an online porn site that curates mother and daughter sexual images. The women are contextualized within the space of a room. They are sitting on a bed. We see the frame of the bed behind them and curtains and wallpaper. Their age difference is

typical for a mother and daughter, which could corroborate the notion that they are in fact mother and daughter. The women are smiling, laughing, and looking directly into the camera. In this online pornographic context, the actors maintain eye contact with the camera to deliberately mimic the intimacy associated with the mutual enjoyment of sexual exchange and bearing witness. The women playfully engage with each other either for the camera or for the person taking the snapshot. In both images, they look directly into the camera, clearly positioning themselves so that the frame will include both their torsos and their faces. They appear to physically engage each other with ease, and they posture as if they are friends or buddies. This is to say that they are not specifically engaging one another sexually but rather engaging both the invisible other behind the camera and the imaginary other behind the computer screen.

If I look exclusively at the top two-thirds of this image, it could be any mother and daughter snapshot in which a mother embraces her daughter. The bottom third of the image reveals that they are wearing accouterments generally associated with sex. The daughter is wearing a strappy leather harness-type of lingerie associated with kink or bondage, and the mother is wearing a black lace teddy. Black satin gloves with cheap fluffy fur at the top adorn the daughter's arms. The revelation of this specific style of dress casts their interaction and presence before the camera as sexual. This also positions the viewer as a scopophilic voyeur to their activities. Because this image is of two women alleged to be mother and daughter, the circumstance and production of this image become sexually illicit, socially inappropriate, and taboo. The thrust of this image invokes incest, intergenerational sex, and potentially female homosexuality.

Smiling and looking into someone's eyes is an intimate act. In family images as in pornography, this convention is designed to imply the physical presence of an unseen viewer. Simultaneous smiling with eye contact represents pleasure that is mutual and shared. Silvan Tomkins, the founding scholar of affect theory, describes this mutual exchange as *félicité à deux*, roughly translated as "the shared joy of two." This smile is first established developmentally between mother and child. This form of mutual drive satisfaction operates at a distance and doesn't require physical contact.⁶

These women are performing the relationship of mother and daughter for the camera with a specific viewer in mind: you. The eyes are a socially imagined portal to one's

Pic #2 | 43

Naked Mother And Daughter



via meundressed.tumblr.com

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FIGURE 3.

Photographer Unknown, *Dressed*, <http://www.imagefap.com/pictures/4082775/Moms-Daughters-08-%28-dressed%2Fundedressed-special-%29>.

Naked Mother And Daughter



via meundressed.tumblr.com

Comment

FIGURE 4.

Photographer Unknown, *Undressed*, <http://www.imagefap.com/pictures/4082775/Moms-Daughters-08-%28-dressed%2Fundedressed-special-%29>.

thoughts and feelings, and as such they possess the possibility for a breach through the betrayal of feelings or insecurities that would otherwise remain unexpressed. Talking and listening to people who are in close physical proximity requires attenuating intimacy by breaking eye contact at irregular intervals. One who holds too much eye contact might be perceived as inappropriately intimate or invasive, while the one who resists or avoids eye contact is perceived as untrustworthy based on the assumption that they are trying to hide what their eyes would otherwise betray. The eyes become a site that supersedes the verbal and seizes the physical. The intimacy generated around eye contact might be as intimate, or even more intimate, than sex. These women are really happy together. They are experiencing simultaneous joy. The solicitation of this emotion is what family photographs do. The viewer wants to belong. This is an intimate space.

Undressed (fig. 4) is also a staged snapshot. The women mirror one another with their body positions as well as by sharing a pair of gloves. The mother has one glove from the pair on her right arm, and the daughter has the corresponding glove on her left arm. This arrangement theoretically situates them as one body conjoined at the center by physical linkage. The daughter casually casts her arm over her mother's shoulders, while the mother's arm wraps around the back of her daughter and rests in a gentle embrace at her waist. The daughter has very pale, white skin. She is thin with small, pert breasts, and her pubic area is shaved to expose her outer labia. The mother has brown tanned skin. She has a fullness around her belly and breasts that are slightly thinned out by gravity. Her pubic area is shaved to expose her outer labia. They are both wearing black thigh-high pantyhose and are similarly positioned, propped up on their knees and spreading their legs to frontally expose their naked bodies.

Unlike the studio image, the genre of the snapshot is perceived as being real because it is contextualized within the space of daily life. This quality accounts for the image feeling more intimate. The images from *dressed-undressed.com* are performances designed for the sexual provocation of the viewer through scopophilia. These women intentionally invoke the taboos of incest, even though they are not directly sexually engaging with each other. These women are explicitly and

overtly marketing themselves sexually as mother and daughter despite the taboos against that.

The political theorist and literary critic Fredric Jameson opens his book *Signatures of the Visible* with the bold declaration, “The visual is essentially pornographic.” He speaks to the use of images in consumer culture as constructed indulgences that produce mindless voyeuristic fascination. Jameson suggests that when certain consumer images are not sexually explicit, they are energized by their unwillingness to expose the excess that the viewer desires.⁷ The studio images *Mother and Daughter Brides* and *Danner/Paltrow* differ significantly from these pornographic snapshots because the women are decontextualized. Removing them from the context of the world may contribute to the illusion of their being above the commoners. In *Danner/Paltrow*, the characters are well-respected female celebrity actors. They are professionally groomed and adorned in clothing indicative of a wealthy socioeconomic class. Wealth and the sophistication associated with social etiquette grant privileges in the hierarchy of capitalism. Her and daughter are strategically marketed for their social access to touch and emotional closeness. This is played in contrast to the populations of people in the United States who are denied regular platonic touch based on homophobia and sexual taboos. These visual reiterations of mother and daughter intimacy spring from a consumer culture that regularly invokes its own taboos around sex to create desire in the viewer that will motivate them to buy things or feel dissatisfied with their lives.

Ahmed characterizes the “willful subject”⁸ as one who is reluctantly obedient. The *dressed-undressed.com* women could be categorized this way. They are not intentionally staging a resistance; in fact, their sexual deviance relies on the framework of homophobic and heteropatriarchal society. But their overt, undomesticated, naked, and inappropriate wielding of the labels *mother* and *daughter* is a refusal to be subtle about the taboos they are enlisting. Disruption is certainly not revolution, but disruption does leave the door open for change. The door these women left open gave me the opportunity to examine the cultural regulation of touch, the desire for intimacy and belonging, and the meaning of family.