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A More Proximate Form of Theory: Tracing New Interdisciplinary Ground through Discourses of Diaspora and Haptic Aesthetics

Introduction: Touching on the Incoherent Subject

[H]ow is it possible to make sense of our selves, if the boundaries that tell us who ‘we’ are are incoherent, or fragmented, or fuzzy, or somehow unreal, or fluid or on the move? Thus, identity is itself limited because it does not mark the same place: no one is identical (Thrift and Pile, 1995, p.179).

Nigel Thrift and Stephen Pile’s assertion, in *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (1995) of the incoherent quality of identity is not only true of cultural embodiment, but also of the relationship between an illusory sense of stable identity and the sense of touch. There is a strong tradition of transnational or multicultural authors who display an interest in the sensuality of Canadian urban spaces, Anne Michaels, Michael Ondaatje, Wayson Choy, and Austin Clarke among them, and Dionne Brand, in her novel *What We All Long For*, has similarly

considered the ‘permutations of existence’ (2006, p.5) that take place physically and aesthetically among diasporic bodies in the multicultural city of Toronto. Brand has sought to identify alternative sites of community, fostered sensually across diasporic communities through tactile and affective gestures of touch, including the ‘sandpapered [...] jostling and scraping’ (p.5) that bring diasporic subjects together. Inasmuch as identity is a fiction whose boundaries we often try to reinforce, touching deconstructs the sense of a coherent boundary of the body in discourses of diaspora, as the boundaries that mark touch – who is touched, who touches, when touch begins, and when it ends – are always fragmented, unfinished or indefinite, shifting, and topographically uneven. Specifically within the spatial definitional practices of cultural studies, the attempts of some literary and cultural theorists, geographers, or politicians to arrive at a sense of coherence have directly or indirectly insisted on drawing and maintaining the boundaries of political legitimacy and sovereignty, whether in mapping the physical migrations of people, or in defining what it means to embody a particular cultural group, despite the less coherent accounts of bodies that continue to mark the human subjective experience. Thrift and Pile (2005) point out that nowadays identity is often ‘hedged about with spatial metaphors’, or what Gilroy calls the ‘spatial focus’ (p.10). This shift in perception has entailed new forms of social and cultural mapping that are less dependent on visual representation, relying more on the interplay of the other senses in collaboratively tracing alternative sites of embodiment, such as community mapping and social networking. According to Thrift (2007), touch and the sensorium are manifold in ‘re-mapping the topography of the body and its sensory properties, from one mode of mediation to another’ (p.105). Confined less by the concrete boundaries of cultural or geographic space, and more in the realm of the ‘non-representational’ according to Thrift, subjectivity can now be reconceived as rooted in the ‘spatial home of the body’ (Thrift and Pile, 1995, p.11). However, mapping the geographic affiliations of diasporic subjects throughout their associative narratives of ‘mobility’ and ‘transculturation’ (Thrift and Pile, p.10) has been particularly challenging, in large part because diasporic subjects often occupy shifting, unmarked, or transitional sites across the globe. Therefore, a more micropolitical language of touch, traced across the narratives of diasporic and non-diasporic bodies, can more successfully illustrate how subjects not only occupy and cross into different communities coherently and harmoniously but also discordantly, incoherently, and even irresponsibly.

This paper will discuss contemporary theories of diaspora and transnationalism across the emerging and already shifting theoretical terrain of sensory studies in order to explore what this field suggests about the incoherent nature of cultural boundaries and alternative possibilities for embodiment and community formation. I will proceed by laying out the theoretical groundwork that has concerned scholars of haptics, affect, and diaspora, and then move into a discussion of how together, these intersecting approaches may be used to challenge the representation of coherent cultural identity and work towards a more proximate form of theory. I will draw on some of the work of contemporary Canadian and transnational authors interested in the sensory aspects of transnational experience, specifically the sense of touch, including authors Dionne Brand and Anne Michaels, who have called attention to the imposition of cross-cultural contact and the superficial promise of cultural coherence through the sensory aspects of transnational experience in the city of Toronto. This emerging discourse, which combines theory and literature, may in turn work towards a more proximate understanding of diasporic embodiment, embracing what Donna Haraway (2004) has described in cultural and feminist studies as the promise of a ‘never-settled universal’, a collective and yet personal language achieved through ‘radical specificity’ (p.54).

How Touch Communicates

In recent years, haptics has emerged as an interdisciplinary mode of study in the fields of computer science technology, psychology, engineering, and aesthetics.¹ Haptics originated as a tactile feedback technology in the twentieth century, expanding the functional and expressive possibilities of the user in applying forces, vibrations, or motions to the machine or device. Although little scholarship has taken up the sense of touch in cultural studies, apart from some recent anthologies on the philosophical history of the senses, haptic technologies have made it possible to investigate how the human sense of touch works and have inspired contemporary theorists to trace the philosophical and social history of touch. In *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies*, Mark Paterson (2007), an interdisciplinary scholar of sensory studies, argues that due to a linguistic shortfall, the more somatic experiences are represented as ‘incoherent or seemingly ineffable’ (p.14). Anne Michaels’s post-Holocaust diasporic novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) has as

its protagonist Jakob Beer, a young Polish Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, who similarly alludes to this ineffable quality in the process of historical witnessing in the transnational present, describing how time has been a 'blind guide' (p.5).² In his thorough survey of the philosophical history of touch, Paterson (2007) points to new ways of articulating the sense of touch and its relationship to historical embodiment, including approaches in emerging interdisciplinary fields like haptics and affect theory, that can act as a means to navigate the evasive and problematic characteristics of human experience. Like Paterson, I use 'haptics' to refer to the sense of touch, to the cutaneous, tactile, and other bodily orientations, as touch is most often associated with tactile contact, somatic movement, and physical immediacy, bringing distant objects and people into proximity. Touch can be divided into several sub-senses, including proprioception (the body's felt position), kinaesthesia (the sense of the movement of the body and limbs), and vestibular sense (a sense of balance derived from information in the inner ear). Tactile touch denotes the direct connection of the senses: to put one's hand, finger, or some part of the body upon or into contact with something else so as to feel it. It can be classified as immediate and direct physical contact, being near enough to touch or be touched, being within reach or accessible, or the potential for contact (*OED Online*, 2013), and it implies the immediate contact and proximity among bodies of a shared social space.

In addition to the connections between touch and tactility, the etymology of the term haptic is associated with aesthetics and the metaphoric extension of the meaning of touch to the semantic field of affect and emotion: to be touched means to be affected emotionally as well as physically. In 'Embodying Strangers', Sara Ahmed (2000) describes how a 'strange encounter' is played out between two bodies (in Ahmed's illustration, foreign or othered bodies) both 'on the body' and 'with the emotions' (p.85, emphasis in text). An example can be found in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), in which the protagonist Jakob relates how he was soothed by the weight of his companion Athos's 'safe, heavy hand' (p.21) on his head. Here, touch serves not only as immediate physical support to Jakob but also an emotional confirmation, as he and Athos maintain a secure and restorative relationship following their flight from German-occupied Poland to Greece and eventually to the city of Toronto. Affective touch can be understood both physically and metaphorically in terms of physical immediacy, as bodies sense, feel, and are touched by other bodies and things in response to and as a result of affects. Inasmuch as tactile touch may be

guarded, monitored, or even rejected in certain contexts, it is ultimately associated with a form of social knowledge and experience. The sense of touch, like vision, articulates an equally rich, complex world, a world of movement, exploration, and non-verbal social communication (Paterson, 2007, p.2). Diasporic embodiments and migrations likewise imply a world full of complex movements and non-verbal social communications related to touch. For example, in *What We All Long For*, Brand (2007) describes the complex relationships of diasporic characters to the city of Toronto through the senses, such as this description pertaining to the young Afro-Scotian character Jamal: '[h]is life was in his skin, in his mouth, in his eyes, in the closest physical encounters. He operated only on his senses as far as [his sister] Carla was concerned' (p.32). Touch not only functions as a physical form of verification but also a platform for understanding the less coherent or conscious forms of touch, such as the connections between different bodies in and across the social, political, or geographic boundaries of contemporary life, some of which may be accidental or arbitrary, and some more structured, such as in the form of a novel. Paterson (2007) has similarly distinguished between 'immediate' and 'deep' or 'metaphorical touching' (p.2). This is not to say that tactile touch is incapable of inciting an emotional response or implying a metaphoric relation, but rather to show how physical contact does not need to be achieved for bodies to touch and be touched. The extent and form of touch can indicate the nature and stage of a relationship, as people 'suggest, impose, accept or reject relationships through touch' (Finnegan qtd. in Classen, 2005, p.19). The notion of 'social touching', whether tactile or affective, thus reinforces the communicative potential of touch.

Thrift (2007) contends that there is no 'stable "human" experience' (p.2) in Western thought, and because the human sensorium is constantly undergoing reinvention by shifting and adding parts to itself, any one theory of touch is insufficient in describing the changing phenomena of bodies and their senses. Aesthetics, which refer to 'our capacity for feeling, sensing and being affected' (Paterson, 2007, p.83) involve a sense of touch, including visual, tactile, and affective qualities that inform our worldly encounters with things. Haptic aesthetics, therefore, consider the qualities of touch, including tactile and affective touch, traceable in literature through narration, metaphor, imagery, and other aesthetic elements. Marinkova (2011) describes haptic aesthetics as a multisensory reading that 'implicates touch but is not reduced to it, that involves the aesthetic without

idealizing it, that is ethical without moralizing' (p.5). She suggests that haptic aesthetics 'rejoice in the exploration of the intimate space of the bodily and the microsocial space of the interpersonal' (2011, p.4). In this vein, Marinkova seeks to demonstrate how such a brand of aesthetics has an empowering micropolitical potential, which participates in the political domain without entirely discarding the invocation of aesthetics. Indeed, haptic aesthetics allow readers to understand the extent to which subjects feel tactilely or affectively engaged with or removed from their sociocultural or geographic contexts. The language of touch has naturally permeated many narratives of diasporic and transnational experience (often in conjunction with the other senses, as a multisensory language of touch), wherein such narratives describe the complex physical, emotional, and political negotiations of diasporic subjects not only in tactile or emotional terms but also in aesthetic terms. A diasporic language of touch involves representing qualities such as fear and vulnerability, thoughts of return, relationships with other communities in the diaspora, and lack of full assimilation into the host country. Touch offers a way of understanding the complex bodily and cultural negotiations of diasporic subjects within and outside of their communities without imposing concrete forms of cultural coherence or identification. Haptic aesthetics offer a more empathetic engagement with the physical and emotional negotiations of subjects, representing both proximate and distant aspects of national and transnational experience. Wyschogrod notes that touch is 'not a sense at all; it is in fact a metaphor for the impingement of the world as a whole upon subjectivity' (qtd. in Paterson, 2007, p.147). Touch is not only cutaneous tactile experience but also the overall feeling of one's corporeality and the 'sense most difficult to localize in a particular organ, isolate from the rest of the sensorium, or even contain within the boundaries of the self' (Marinkova, 2011, p.6). An interdisciplinary theoretical approach to the haptic aesthetics of diasporic and transnational experience must, therefore, necessarily combine theories of tactility, affect, and cultural embodiment, together working towards what James Clifford has described as a body of theory 'dwelling-in-travelling' (1997, p.2).

The Affective Turn

In the past two decades, an 'affective turn' has taken place in the social sciences and humanities, advancing discussions around culture, art, subjectivity, and bodies.³ The

turn towards bodies and affect has in large part implicated a contemporary sense of discontinuity regarding the subject and the less intentional aspects of bodily and social experience. I incorporate affect theory into my examination of haptic aesthetics precisely because affects provide a flexible, albeit slippery, means of exploring what constitutes touch in the less coherent aspects of social interaction. Affect theory gained its footing in psychoanalysis in the mid-twentieth century, drawing from a psychoanalytical understanding of affects, their discrete categories, and biological or physiological responses, applying them to social theory. Affect theory is attributable to Silvan Tomkins's multivolume *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962), in which he contends that the role of affect has been grossly underestimated in studies of human social behaviour, having been previously subordinated to the function of biological drives. However, as Tomkins states, the affective system provides the 'blue-prints for cognition, decision, and action' (1991, p.22). Tomkins states that the primary motivational system of the subject is 'the affective system', and that biological drives have motivational impact 'only when amplified by the affective system' (p.6). The subject's ability to 'duplicate and reproduce himself' is guaranteed not only by a responsiveness to biological drive signals, but by a responsiveness to whatever circumstances activate positive or negative affects, such as 'joy, distress, startle, disgust, aggression, fear, and shame' (Tomkins, 1991, p.22). The subject's physiological and even biological behaviours are thus motivated, intentionally or not, by the body's affects. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), postmodern theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe affect as a 'prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another' (p.xvi), implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. Brian Massumi further describes the incoherent, autonomous nature of affects in their ability to affect other bodies in powerfully indeterminate ways, positing that affects escape 'confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is' (qtd. in Thrift, 2007, p.180). Insofar as affects seem to escape their own boundaries of understanding, even to the extent that they are prepersonal and therefore prior to a concrete identity, Thrift (2007) has asked how it is possible to 'group around states that are neither dependent on lasting objects nor on fixed locations?' (p.22), a question germane to the discussion of how affective forms of touch impact the bodies of subjects and their physical relations to other subjects. Thrift defines affect as 'the property of the active outcome of an encounter',

which takes on the form of an increase or decrease in the ability of the body and mind alike to act, which can be ‘positive and increase that ability (and thus “joyful” or euphoric) or negative and diminish that ability (and thus “sorrowful” or dysphoric)’ (p.178). Thrift’s emphasis on relations is especially important, as affects occur in encounters between ‘manifold beings’, and the shifting outcome of each encounter depends upon what forms of contact, relations, or contexts these beings enter into (2007, p.178). In *The Skin of Film* (2000), for instance, Laura Marks describes affective touch via a form of haptic visuality, wherein one is ‘more inclined to graze than to gaze’, making oneself ‘vulnerable’ to an image or an encounter (p.185). Affective touch, which is most often relational and thus vital in creating community, is also represented by a kind of touching-sound in Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2006). Brand conceives of the cultural beauty of Toronto as ‘polyphonic’, engendering a sense of many voices and thus many affective and physical bodies moving together in a shared space (2006, p.149).

Having named the affective turn, Patricia Clough explains in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007) that she wanted to revisit the various intellectual discourses that she and other authors explored in order to ‘refind the capacities of critical theory to address the reconfiguration of technology, matter, and bodies’ (p.3). This shift towards affect has pointed to the capacity of matter for self-organization, in being informational and communicative with other bodies in a culture that sees all matter tending toward entropy. Michael Hardt (2007) notes in the foreword to Clough’s work that because affects most often refer equally to the body and the mind, to both reason and the passions, they enter ‘the realm of causality’ regarding the intentional aspects of the body and bodily expression (p.ix). Affects, as flexible and mobile forces or intensities that influence the subject’s body indeed provide a more descriptive, micro understanding of the complex movements and negotiations of subjects in contemporary transnational spaces. Yet theorists like Clough and Marinkova have also embraced how affects can be less teleological and therefore freer in their workings than other aspects of the body, as affects are understood in between perception and consciousness, stimulus and response, and thus resist the more definitive structures of biological and tactile experience. Thrift (2007) cautions that the recent turn to corporeality has allowed a series of assumptions to be ‘smuggled in about the active, synthetic and purposive role of embodiment’ (p.10), in particular, that bodies are always ‘bodies-in-action’, able to exhibit a kind of ‘continuous

intentionality, able to be constantly enrolled in activity' (Thrift, 2007, p.10). He contends that with this overemphasis on intentionality, embodiment should also include 'tripping, falling over, and a whole host of other such mistakes' (Thrift, p.10). Pursuing a similar understanding of the concrete and more transitory, slippery forms of embodiment, it is necessary to challenge the necessity of unified or monolithic forms of embodiment by tracing alternative ways of understanding the experiences of transnational subjects through the sensual and creative sites of touch and contact.

The Felt Field of Diasporic Studies

In contemporary discourses of diaspora, theorists such as Rogers Brubaker (2005), Robin Cohen (2008), and William Safran (1991) continue to debate what constitutes diasporic embodiment and community.⁴ The term diaspora has traditionally referenced communities of people dislocated from their homelands: those who have been dispersed from an original site, often traumatically, to one or more foreign regions. The term has seen much revision from the traditional victim diaspora to additional grounds for migration, including labour, imperialism, or trade, and more deterritorializing contexts, such as those groups who do not have a literal homeland but who still experience a similar historical disconnection from an ethnic identity or fixed origin. Brubaker (2005) warns that as the term diaspora is increasingly used in different contexts, its meaning has been 'stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural, and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted', resulting in what he calls a "'diaspora' diaspora'; a dispersion of the meanings of the term in 'semantic, conceptual, and disciplinary space' (p.1). Rather than stretch the term 'diaspora' too far beyond its original contexts or commit to a universal, fixed notion of diasporic embodiment, I hope to implicate the sense of touch in and across the shifting terrain of contemporary diasporic discourses. For Cohen (2008), it has been necessary not only to draw critically from the founding Jewish tradition of diasporic studies but to be sensitive to the inevitable dilutions, changes, and expansions of the meaning of the term. Cohen remarks on the sense of protectionism and unease that invariably steeps discussions regarding what constitutes contemporary diaspora:

The tapestry of Jewish diasporic experiences becomes nuanced, but more accurate, when we accept a dual model, with the warp of the Jewish diaspora being one of creativity and achievement and its weave being one of anxiety and distrust. However economically or professionally successful, however long settled in peaceful settings, it is difficult for many Jews in the diaspora not to 'keep their guard up', to feel the weight of their history and the cold clammy fear that brings the demons in the night to remind them of their murdered ancestors. The sense of unease or difference that members of the diaspora feel in their countries of settlement often results in a felt need for protective cover in the bosom of the community or a tendency to identify closely with the imagined homeland and with co-ethnic communities in other countries (p. 35).

An element common among diasporic communities is the ongoing desire for proximity to tradition, land, or origins; not surprisingly Cohen cites the 'weight of their history' (2008, p.2) as being a proximate one. In my own examination of diasporic embodiment, I proceed carefully in this regard, mindful of the same weight felt by critics, including the vulnerabilities that have accompanied these definitional practices. Such vulnerabilities include risks of prejudice and apprehension among and outside of diasporic communities, as well as general resistances to alternative modalities that might constitute a broadening or shifting sense of diasporic embodiment. Such discursive anxieties generate new, rigorous, and creative forms of cultural theory, which carry the same weight of history while simultaneously invoking a sense of being in touch with contemporary considerations of identity, belonging, and community.

Cohen (2008) acknowledges that as much as the Jewish diasporic tradition has been at the heart of any definition of diaspora, it is necessary to take full account of this complex and diverse concept in order to transcend its more traditional iterations, noting how the word is now being used in a variety of new and suggestive contexts. As Safran (1991) notes, the term diaspora is now deployed as 'a metaphoric designation' describing different categories of people with a broad base of affiliations and contexts, such as 'expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities' (p.83). Safran's invocation of the metaphoric dimension of the concept provides an opportunity to involve the specificities of bodies and senses in a broader discussion of global transnational community, even those communities understood metaphorically. This more metaphoric dimension also unsettles previous definitions of diaspora by embracing a more sensual and affective reading of diasporic subjects and their communities,

opening up new possibilities for affiliation and community formation in global transnational contexts. There are other potential creative connections between the definitional discourses of Cohen and Safran and the embodied experience of transnational literary production, which further reveal the haptic possibilities of diasporic discourses more broadly. One classic example has been Salman Rushdie's well-known *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1992), similar to Benedict Anderson's (2006) notion of the 'imagined community', which evokes the sense of distance felt by authors and subjects who have journeyed away from their homelands and who have a strong desire to look back and reconsider their diasporic roots and identities through literature. He notes:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must [...] do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation [...] almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (p.10).

Rushdie views this physical alienation as a kind of collective loss, a shared sense of being *out of touch*, among diasporic groups. I cite Rushdie here, despite his rather privileged position as an internationally acclaimed author with greater mobility than most diasporic subjects, because I seek to engage with his reliance on the gaze in the context of diasporic identity. Rushdie suggests that as all diasporic authors look back towards the imaginary homeland, these subjects at once have a link to a territory that is tactilely and geographically out of reach and yet affectively shared. For the subject who is 'out-of-country' and even 'out-of-language', the 'looking back' is experienced in an intensified form and is not limited to sight. Diasporic subjects regard the homeland and other affiliations to the past also through the affective longing for proximity, in the felt material loss of the homeland, and in the continuous desire to recreate the homeland or some other embodiment of culture in the present. Rushdie (1992) suggests that the loss experienced by him and other diaspora in similar positions is made more 'concrete by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being "elsewhere"' (p.12). With this being 'elsewhere', the difficulty in fully recollecting a past and one's homeland is like dealing with images through broken mirrors, 'some of whose fragments have been

irretrievably lost' (pp.10–11). While one might assume that a mirror could not be fully reconstructed, this broken mirror analogy implies that something productive might be envisioned in this process, that the broken mirror might 'actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed' (p.11). The shards of memory acquired through this process achieve greater resonance, according to Rushdie, because they are 'remains' (p.11, emphasis in quote). Even as these remains haunt the writer or subject in his or her unfulfilled desire for proximity, they are important, albeit immaterial, remains of the homeland tied to the subject's present sense of embodiment. The shards of glass that Rushdie seeks to reconstruct border on an act of archaeology, an attempt to literarily and haptically reconstruct the home that was lost while now in a host country that likewise continues to change.

Haptic Aesthetics as a More Proximate Theory

I felt that my study was in search of a different author. It kept changing direction, resisting the narrative threads I was intent on following, moving in and out of Canada and its literature, conflating various temporalities – and thus revealing my historical imagination to be other than what I thought it was (Kamboureli, 2000, p.2).

Above I cite a passage from Smaro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (2000), where Kamboureli describes the tension of a diasporic critic's self-location in producing a new critical project. She suggests, regarding her position in contemporary Canada, that the main symptom of trying to understand the conditions of a particular social body has been that she herself became the 'medium of representation' (p.iv). Referencing Stuart Hall, Kamboureli notes that '[p]ractices of representation [...] always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation' (p.4). Indeed, the very act of writing or searching for understanding implicates the critic's proximate haptic role in the process of representation. My own process of writing has not merely been from a position of enunciation, of speaking about diaspora, but also a deeply haptic one. Having engaged with theories of touch spanning from the tactile, geographic, affective, and nonrepresentational, I contend that these diverse understandings of touch and affiliation indeed can work towards Haraway's call for a radically specific

approach to ‘a never-settled universal’ understanding of identity formation (2004, p.54). Indeed, the affective and haptic relationships of diasporic subjects to their environments have come to resemble a ‘constantly evolving distribution of different hybrids with different reaches’, thus challenging the emphasis that has been placed on the coherent understandings of cultural identity (Thrift, 2007, p.10). Furthermore, and rather inevitably, such an approach reveals the gaps and phantom limbs that emerge from engaging with theories of the subject without insisting on concrete forms of embodiment or understanding. This phantom-limb phenomenon is a reminder of the difficulty of conveying subjective experiences in literature, especially physical and affective histories of trauma shared by diasporas. Haraway (1998) has described such approaches to culture as characteristic of ‘partial, locatable, critical knowledges’ which instead sustain the possibility of ‘webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology’ (p.584). Any commitment to such mobile positioning is dependent on the ‘impossibility of entertaining innocent “identity” politics’ and one cannot ‘relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement’ (Haraway, p.585). This emphasis on responsible critical positioning becomes a vital feature of this form of theory, as it insists on examining histories and affiliations of subjects while simultaneously remaining aware of the diverse negotiations, capacities, and restrictions of doing theory.

Considering these challenges to critical representation, I wonder: what might it mean to relinquish the affairs of representation and coherent theoretical understanding and move towards a more haptic engagement with theory and literature? This question opens up a form of theory, although sometimes beset by the phantom limbs or ghostly encounters of previous theoretical discourses, that rejects the more universal knowledge-based pursuits of the past often associated with the objective eye, this being in favour of more humane theoretical practices. It is from this proposal that I seek to affirm the possibility of alternative affiliations, ones that reveal new and more proximate modes of communication in and across diasporic communities, modes of communication that have thus far been neglected in cultural discourses. One task of this paper has been to haptically trace the contours and textures of diasporic theory, and in doing so, to recognize how even if the subject or geography cannot be fully traced, touch is present or implicated in almost every interaction. In the increasingly disparate, fleeting, and yet all the while shared and

proximate spaces of contemporary life, we find ourselves in need of some commonality, some mutual sense of touch. As Athos tells Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* (Michaels, 1996) regarding their own journey together into intimate proximity, a proximity that eventually translates into a series of collaborative haptic writings: '[w]e must carry each other. If we don't have this, what are we[?]' (p.14).

Notes

¹ The term 'haptic' etymologically derives from the Greek words *haptikos* meaning 'able to come into contact with,' and from *haptein* meaning 'to fasten' (*OED Online*, 2013).

² In *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (2008), Michel Serres likewise defines the ineffable sense of touch as the last perceptual means of identification and navigation in a state of total blindness.

³ The affective turn was first initiated in the twentieth century by critical theory and cultural criticism under the influence of post-structuralism and deconstruction. However, affects appear earlier in Baruch Spinoza's seventeenth century text *Ethics*, where he outlines forty-eight different forms of affect, which are all manifestations of three basic affects: desire, pleasure, and pain or sorrow (1994: 154).

⁴ The term 'diaspora' etymologically derives from the Greek words *dia* (across) and *sperin* (to sow or scatter seeds) and refers to a scattered or dispersed population with a common origin in a smaller geographic area. The term has traditionally referred to the expulsion of the Jewish people from Israel in the sixth century BCE, when they were exiled to Babylonia (*OED Online*, 2013).

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