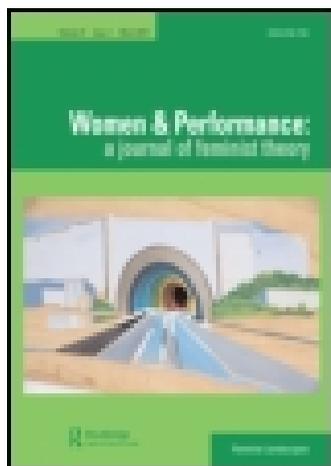


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### Ten theses on touch, or, writing touch

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## Ten theses on touch, or, writing touch

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This performative text engages with a writing of haptics by offering 10 theses on touch. This writing exercise that seeks to philosophize the feel, to paraphrase Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, comes to understand itself as a performance of touching rather than a text about touching. Each of the 10 separate theses/touches can be read independently and in any order while also creating a whole through their proximity. The passages presented touch upon each other in order to create a performative instantiation of Jacques Rancière's notion of a "distribution of the sensible." This distribution of the sensible and the gaps therein emerge from different times, spaces, political and aesthetic practices that include yet are not limited to the tear gas sweating streets of Athens touching Caribbean dance practices touching Audre Lorde's erotics touching Max's Kansas City touching queer commons touching anarchist love letters. To trace these practices, temporalities, resistances is to touch the constant trembling oscillation of subject and object.

**Keywords:** touch; politics; aesthetics; erotics; object; queer; Brown Commons

For José

*Touch 1. To write on touch is to recognize that one is touching and being touched.*

In its seeking to philosophize the feel, to paraphrase Stefano Harney and Fred Moten on hapticity and love, this experimental exercise necessarily comes to understand itself as a performance of touching rather than a text about touching (Harney and Moten 2013). Tense tactile abstractions and extensions approximate here a textuality touched in-and-out through the realization of writing. To feel out 10 theses on touch then is to think the term thesis as it is used in music. In music the thesis is a downbeat or conducted downward stroke. This downbeat or swooping gesture measures space and time so as to manifest a textured sonority made possible through a performance of haptics. Traces of haptic excess spill into and out from each of these 10 gesturing theses, each and together in their setting down defying containment through a compositional makeup of material, affective, spatial, temporal, contingent impingements and multiplicities. These stroking theses, drumming serially

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here but open to any order of reading, are ones that in their separateness and proximity perform a differential common, an alternative texture produced from a certain “distribution of the sensible” (as well as the occasional necessary “dissensus” that is the “demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself”) to borrow two notions from Jacques Rancière (2010). This distribution of the sensible and the gaps therein emerge from different times, spaces, voices, politics, and aesthetics touching me, touching you. To be touched by and touch these practices, temporalities, resistances is, like the touching of language, to touch eternal oscillation and alternation: the osculation, merging, and dissolution of subject and object.

*Touch 2. To touch is always to be touched in return. Consensual touching is coalescing empowerment. To knowingly touch and be touched is to be in a state of wakefulness.*

This state of wakefulness is an erotic and political one. Audre Lorde speaks of the political power of the erotic that is oppressed, has become suspect. In her piece “The Uses of the Erotic” Lorde thinks through the usefulness of the erotic as expansive immersion and the extension of limits. To tap into the erotic is to tap into information, into an “internal requirement toward excellence” (Lorde 2007, 54). To live erotically is the conscious decision to refuse disaffection in all vital endeavors: “For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely we can feel in the doing” (Lorde 2007, 54). Erotic pleasure and satisfaction touches all forms of being and expression and can be a resource for change. If we do not deny this joyous sensuality to ourselves and others then how can we not seek it in everything we touch and touches us? For Lorde the erotic is deep knowledge, self-connection, and when not feared and sequestered to the private domain, a provocative creative life force, a guide, an illumination that is social. Acquiescence: “It feels right to me” (Lorde 2007, 56).

*Touch 3. Unrequited touch is an unrequited world.*

A popular anarchist website in Greece publishes love letters on a page linked to its site titled “Hidden.” Underneath the polemics and cries against foul play lie shimmering interfaces calling out for touch. Prevalent within these countless romances is the convergence of eros, struggle, and the city. Many letters echo each other, torn over the dilemma of whether to gaze, when the time surely comes, at the blazing fire or one’s lover’s glowing face as the city burns. Many letters attempt to locate a desired object last seen at that meeting or that demo that has since disappeared. All these sites and moments of resistance are named, dated, marked by acronyms, significant locations, events, histories. The letters reveal the commons, language, landscapes, and sociality of anarchist spaces and practices entwined with yearnings galvanized by and galvanizing a revolutionary ideal. Desire to touch and be touched by the amorous other is always also the desire to touch another world.

*Touch 4. A strenuous intention towards non-touching or the dissenting imperative to not touch or be touched can be just as much about touching otherwise.*

The limbo is a Trinidadian dance practice where the dancer’s task is to avoid the touch of horizontal planes. In the documentary *Limbo* (1983) choreographer Julia Edwards tells us

that the limbo was traditionally performed at wakes. For nine nights after the death of one of the members of their community, the descendants of the dead, accompanied to the sounds of drumming and song, pass under the stick. What is significant about this passing, both of the dead and the live body, is the supposition that each time the dancer glides face-up under the horizontal material plane the soul of the deceased moves higher into the spirit world. This performance of resisting touch embodies a bridge between foundational ground and a transcendental plane. It is a bodily attempt to get as close to the ground while at the same time not succumbing to gravity's grave pull. Wilson Harris sees the limbo as a conscious effort to dislocate a chain of miles: the willingness of a body to re-enter, albeit on new redefined grounds, the contortions and cramped state of an ancestral journey, the embodied memory of being in limbo, the traversing of the Middle Passage. For Harris, the limbo entails the wrestling with the sense of a "phantom limb," a memory of the part of oneself that has been amputated by way of violent contact, the sensation of a missing part still felt present through its absence (Harris 1999, 157). In the documentary we see a Trinidadian dance troupe use the limbs of other dancers instead of a stick. The legs of a limbo-ing dancer emerge through the splayed legs of another enacting a subverted birth, with the body that is "born" through these straddled legs appearing feet first. At one point two dancers limbo side by side, a twinned movement of synchronous re-exit and re-entry. In their effort not to touch the tight place they move through, the dancers press against each other, supporting each other. This doubled emergence of subjectivity is a shared and danced refusal of that historical passage into ratified sovereignty while gesturing toward the allowance of a concurring subjective sociability. This new kind of entering a scene, of encountering, is a sea-changing "consent not to be one" (Harney and Moten 2013, 97).

*Touch 5. Contact and/or its refusal gesture toward a theatrical agency and the indexical present.*

Adrian Piper says that her early conceptual work "succeeded insofar as it illuminated the contrast between abstract atemporality and the indexical, self-referential present" (1996, 241). Performances such as "Catalysis" (1970), "The Mythic Being" (1972–75), and the untitled piece at Max's Kansas City (1970), indexed the ways in which objects can refer to themselves in the present while at the same time spatially and temporally refer to concepts beyond, and beyond the control, of their being. Since the perpetual "indexical present" cannot exist outside of its "here and now" it necessitates a constant reassertion of consciousness and behavior at the exact moment contact is made with external objects. Thus, in order to understand the way she viewed herself and others, and how others viewed themselves (in conjunction to their view of others), Piper embarked on an experiential existence as self-conscious art object. The "Mythic Being," Piper's stereotypical persona of an aggressive, macho, sexist black male asserts "Look, but don't touch" while in "Catalysis III" Piper walks through the streets of New York and shops at Macy's in clothing slathered with sticky white paint and a sign attached to her body that writes: WET PAINT. That same year, in her untitled performance piece at Max's Kansas City, Piper breaks from the art community she once embraced. Seeking to defend her self-coherence she performs for her peers "a silent, secret, passive object, seemingly ready to be absorbed into their consciousness as

an object” (Piper 1996, 27). She claims that this voluntary stance preserved her autonomy. Piper is photographed standing next to interested onlookers while her eyes, hands, ears, and nose are closed off with gloves and bindings. In distancing herself from her audience and cognitive faculties (by way of literally closing off all her senses), Piper frames herself and her spectators, dictating the conditions of contact, suggesting that since certain bodies are denied subjectivity due to conceptions and constructions of race, gender, her objecthood “became my subjecthood” (Piper 1996, 27). This “indexical present” is where the theatricality of the object makes itself felt. Piper becomes the object that talks back (see Moten 2003). The autonomy of the object relies on this theatricality. Theatrical agency is where the performance of presence can happen because theatricality cites difference.

*Touch 6. Consciousness of the haptics of language emerges from the very performance of the materiality of language.*

What is it to touch language and be touched by language? Writing on touch inevitably touches upon linguistic brushes felt both cognitively as well as materially. One way to begin exploring these questions is to engage with a haptics of language – language as matter, as sonic, textural and bodily performance. We do not usually think of our relationship to language, as our being in language, as a haptic one. Language is felt as an abstraction, as a conceptual domain *a priori* to our senses where we can easily forget how language is both of the *bios* and the *nous*. Yet we must touch and be touched by language to be in the world. To borrow Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the fly that sees the world through a glass, we see the world through language that we touch but don’t see (see Agamben 1999, 46). To see the world through language is to trace its structural plane of transparent yet traceable materiality. A haptics of language is invoked through the act of grasping signs and their non-signifying materiality as the event of communicability’s being. We touch and are touched by language every day. The sign’s complex existence as a manifestation always stems from the body to come to exist outside of it, necessarily exceeding both its form and function and its initial source by way of its materiality, its being in the world. Let us think poetics then as touch and touch as poetry, for to do and make language is to know what it is to be touched by language and to touch language in return. To touch and be touched by poetics, to recognize language as made and thus open to being remade is to theorize a norm, to exceed representational social patterns seeking to generate rational subjectification. Anti-colonial neologisms, paralinguistic performances, texts, songs, poems, sounds that veer away from meaning by touching language’s materiality dismantle and reconfigure language’s being as a mere means to an end. This is always a struggle against the violence of normativity, governmentality’s conduct of conduct. To inhabit the means without end is to be touched in the head. Irrational.

*Touch 7. To fight the neoliberal state is also to erotically and poetically occupy it.*

Late on a dark night in February 2013 a rundown occupied theatre in Athens inaugurates its “Prostibulo Poético” (“Poetic Brothel”) event. People pour into the theater and stand patiently in line as an androgynous dominatrix figure guards the bottom of the interior staircase. She lets a few people in at a time so as not to overwhelm the “sex workers” upstairs.

The “sex workers,” men and women milling about in resplendent drag are all poets. Customers are flirtatiously beckoned into glittering dark corners, into neon shadows of the theatre’s niches, into improvised cramped magical boudoirs, touched and satiated by queer intimate one-on-one poetry readings. There is no fee – one’s participation is desired, a “listening in detail,” a deep partaking (see Vazquez 2013).

*Touch 8. To touch is to alter and be altered. To touch is to recreate. Touch is a gesture toward poetic being.*

In her poem “Recreation”, Audre Lorde writes of her and her lover coming together, a writing flesh into flesh where the writer becomes a poem, the lover a poet, moving through unleashed aesthetic landscapes of aestheses. Harney and Moten tell us that in our logistical capacity to be the means for each other, hapticality is “the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality, the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you...” (2013, 97). In reading her poem, one senses how Lorde as the poet-subject is remade through touch into a recreated and recreating poem-object.

*Touch 9. Entities traversing social and desiring fields are constituted through and by a matrix of senses. These relationalities are determined by approach – to reduce distance in some cases and to increase distance in others.*

Countless foreign bodies are brushed and bumped against, smelt when moving within a protest, demonstration, or improvised general assembly. What is felt is a visceral turbulence of, because it is made tangible, the malleability and ephemerality of context and convention, twisting, never settling, the work itself as it unfolds, the contingency that is the absence of a finished product. Jostling bodies touch feelings. During the past few years in Greece insistent practices at collective resistance spew and negotiate, inhabit and are inhabited by affects that arise “in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1, original emphasis). These “forces and forces of encounter” mark the body’s tactile capacities in the world through constant struggling, performing, doing in uncommon common (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). Gathering, turning blind corners, sheltering in tear gassed arcades together, pulling each other out of danger, touched to the quick we strive, arm in arm, to step into that which is here and not yet.

*Touch 10. Touch is integral to the modes of formation of a critical utopian queer commons.*

On 25 March 2013 José Muñoz and Samuel “Chip” Delany share a stage at the *Journal of Narrative Theory* Dialogue at Eastern Michigan University. Muñoz reads a paper titled “Brown Commons: A Sense of Wildness” and Delany reads an excerpt from his novel *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*. For the last part of the event “Queer Commons” Muñoz joins Delany on the stage for the Q & A session patting him gently on the back. An audience member asks about the idea of contact present in both of their presentations. Delany speaks of how contact is a good thing when it’s about pleasure, about communing across generational, class, racial difference and not about operationality or necessary

durationality. Muñoz says: “What is it to enact a mode of touching that isn’t about mastery, that isn’t about foreclosure, that isn’t about fusing, that isn’t about collapsing things ... ?”<sup>1</sup> In the chapter titled “The Future Is in the Present” in his book *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz touches upon Delany’s autobiography where Delany describes public gay sex in New York of the 1960s. This leads Muñoz to write of the gay bar Magic Touch in Queens, NY, a queer space where he discerned the kinds of interclass contact Delany writes about. Muñoz then cuts from the scene of the Magic Touch to the stickers he notices around his neighborhood, small activist stickers whose phrasings perform “integrated and intersectional queer critique,” to then bring the reader to the scene of a mass political vigil in response to the murder of Matthew Shepard and countless others, a mass rally violently quashed by the NYPD (Muñoz 2009, 61). In this chapter Muñoz takes us on a journey from a New York past, to a neighborhood bar situated at the margins of the city to stickers proliferating downtown to a queer riot on the streets. What is common to these different temporalities, spaces, and narratives is the palpable sense of touch. From the Magic Touch, to the stickers, to activists jostling in a large public gathering. Singular, sexual, cruising, activist, group queer touches meet and culminate in a plurality attacked by the state in order “to keep us from knowing ourselves, from knowing our masses” (Muñoz 2009, 64). Muñoz tells us:

Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. (2009, 1)

In response to a call made by Barbara Browning these words are being written on the walls of public bathrooms around the world, haptic gestures of love from a knowing and growing constellation Muñoz makes possible through his expansive material ephemeral touch.

### Notes on contributor

Hypatia Vourloumis received her PhD in Performance Studies from New York University and teaches at the International Centre of Hellenic and Mediterranean Studies in Athens, Greece. She is completing a book titled *Murmur Nation* on the politics, poetics, and performance of counter-public paralinguage in postcolonial Indonesia. Recent publications include essays in *Theatre Journal* and *Live Arts Research Journal*.

### Note

1. Muñoz (2013). Accessed December 18, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVQmeO1m9NU>

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