

Introduction: The Victorian Tactile Imagination

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In July 2013, over one hundred researchers gathered in Birkbeck, University of London, for a conference on ‘The Victorian Tactile Imagination’.¹ The social and cultural historian Constance Classen, a keynote speaker at the conference, has written that the history of touch ‘clothes the dry bones of historical fact with the flesh of physical sensation’, and certainly what united all presentations at this event was a sense of intellectual freshness, excitement, and energy.² But what implications might approaching Victorian culture through the tactile have upon our critical practice? As Classen also stresses, sensuous history is important not simply because it is memorable but because it opens out the cultural values of societies. Touch is not just a private act: it is also a ‘fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social hierarchies’.³ If we turn briefly to nineteenth-century literature and to Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857), the prostitute who mistakes Amy Dorrit for a child is particularly shocked by the tactile encounter this leads to and its disruption of the propriety of social and gender relations: ‘I never should have touched you, but that I thought you were a child.’⁴ Who touched whom, and how, counted in nineteenth-century society.⁵

In the field of nineteenth-century studies, however, touch (and other sensory modalities) have been largely overlooked by an emphasis on

¹ I am grateful to the British Academy for supporting both the conference and my wider research project, which has enabled me to edit this special issue.

² Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. xii.

³ Constance Classen, ‘Fingerprints: Writing about Touch’, in *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen (Oxford: Berg, 2005), pp. 1–11 (p. 1).

⁴ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Stephen Wall and Helen Small (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 176.

⁵ For a discussion of the hand as a site of overdetermined sexual meaning, see William Cohen’s chapter on hands and masturbation in Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861), ‘Manual Conduct in *Great Expectations*’, in his *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 26–72.

the visual in recent years. Particularly groundbreaking in this respect is Jonathan Crary's 1990 study, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Here, Crary reappraises the moment at which the classical, Renaissance model of vision ruptured and modernist visual culture emerged, locating this systemic break in the 1820s and 1830s, rather than — as previously accepted — the 1870s and 1880s (with the emergence of Impressionism). Crary's thesis importantly aligns Impressionist paintings with the development of photography as part of a modernization of vision bound up in a new type of observer. This observer was, Crary stresses via Foucault, produced by a new set of relations between the body, technology, and forms of institutional and discursive power that emerged in the early nineteenth century, through which the subject became 'visible'.⁶ The influence of Crary's work on literary and cultural studies of the period has been significant. For example, Nancy Armstrong, in *Fiction in the Age of Photography* — her study of the relationship between photography and realism — states that Victorian fiction 'equated seeing with knowing and made visual information the basis for the intelligibility of a verbal narrative', arguing that 'photographic technology increased exponentially the separation of the senses that privileged seeing' (pp. 7, 76). Armstrong alludes here to Crary's insistence that the nineteenth century underwent a pervasive separation of the senses, in which touch was disassociated from sight (Crary, pp. 57–58). This account of sensory separation has contributed towards a downplay of interest in the other senses and has obscured, as Hilary Fraser argues, 'the equivalently novel conceptualization of touch in the visual field' that emerged in the nineteenth century.⁷ Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello, in the same collection of essays, ask whether 'beholder' is perhaps a more

⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 16. Other key works that have established the importance of the visual in nineteenth-century culture include: Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Carol T. Christ and John O'Jordan, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Gerard Curtis, *Visual Words: Art and the Material Book in Victorian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷ Hilary Fraser, 'Foreword', in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello (London: Palgrave, 2010), pp. ix–xv (p. ix).

fitting term than ‘observer’ to encompass the wide range of manual practices associated with viewing in nineteenth-century culture.⁸

The edited collection in which Fraser’s and Calè and Di Bello’s critiques of Crary’s thesis are offered is part of a growing body of work that has refocused scholarly attention on the functioning of the wider human sensorium in nineteenth-century culture. In this brief introduction, I want to call attention to two areas of critical importance, both outside and within the field of Victorian studies, which have helped to shape recent discussions and offer productive seams for future inquiry: from anthropology, the critique of the visual privileging inherent in structuralist interpretations of material culture studies; and in nineteenth-century studies, a move away from Foucauldian-influenced critical models and a reappraisal of phenomenological approaches. If we turn to the first, the work of social and visual anthropologists and historians including Christopher Tilley, David Howes, Constance Classen, and Elizabeth Edwards has contributed towards the formation of the critical field of sensory studies which, as Howes explains, has ‘long warned against the visual and verbal biases intrinsic to the dominant social scientific accounts of “meaning”’.⁹ Sensory studies scholars have advocated instead a more nuanced account of material culture that also interrelates sensory modes, media, and embodied experience.¹⁰ Howes describes how following a model of intersen-

⁸ Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello, ‘Introduction: Nineteenth-Century Objects and Beholders’, in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects*, ed. by Calè and Di Bello, pp. 1–21 (p. 4). The essays in this collection also explore a range of multisensory cultural discourses in the long nineteenth century.

⁹ David Howes, ‘Scent, Sound and Synaesthesia: Intersensoriality and Material Culture Theory’, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. by Christopher Tilley and others (London: Sage, 2006), pp. 161–72 (p. 162).

¹⁰ See, in particular, Howes, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. by Tilley and others; *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. by David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw History: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), and ‘Thinking Photography Beyond the Visual?’, in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, ed. by J. J. Long, Andrea Noble, and Edward Welch (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 31–48; *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, ed. by Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). For a discussion of the relationship between the human senses and the media explosions that characterized the nineteenth century, see Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley, ‘Introduction: The Nineteenth-Century Invention of Media’, in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sounds, Touch*, ed. by Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 1–19 (pp. 3–6).

sociality would compel us to ‘interrelate sensory media, to contextualize them within a total sensory and social environment’ that also takes account of embodied experience (‘Scent, Sound and Synaesthesia’, p. 169). And Classen, in particular, has focused intensively in the past decade or so on the changing status of the touch sense in the modern period, through publication of monographic surveys and edited collections, doing much to refocus critical attention on a sense which, as she notes, has long suffered neglect.¹¹

In a discussion of the theoretical traditions that have characterized material culture studies over the past few decades, Christopher Tilley outlines the productiveness of adopting a methodological approach drawn from phenomenological theory, which focuses on ‘material forms as encountered through the multiple sensuous and socialized subjective apparatus of our bodies (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste)’.¹² Phenomenology, broadly conceived, is a science of the phenomenon; and, in particular, the way in which phenomena manifest themselves, and the mental acts concerned with experiencing them. In its distinction from ‘the idealist return to consciousness’, early twentieth-century phenomenologists including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty placed particular emphasis on knowledge as embodied and experiential and on investigation into its mediation through the senses.¹³

Phenomenological analyses have also begun to permeate the study of nineteenth-century culture. William Cohen’s recent exploration of embodiment and the senses in Victorian literature draws on the insights of twentieth-century theorists Georges Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari to open up the ways in which Victorian writers attended to the experiential dimension of the body, rather than simply to its domination by overarching social formations.¹⁴ Cohen’s study takes its lead in part from ‘cultural phenomenology’, a critical practice associated with Steven Connor and Stephen Clucas and which adapts phenomenological philosophy for cultural studies. Frustrated with the ‘above’ po-

¹¹ See Classen’s *The Deepest Sense*, pp. 1–2; ‘Fingerprints’, pp. 1–9; *The Colour of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹² Christopher Tilley, ‘Theoretical Perspectives: Introduction’, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. by Tilley and others, pp. 7–11 (p. 8).

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. x. Originally published in French as *Phénoménologie de la perception* in 1945.

¹⁴ William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. xii, 24.

sition assumed in contemporary cultural studies, cultural phenomenology is an attempt to try to understand the materials of culture in themselves.¹⁵ Cultural phenomenologists seek a kind of permeability to the object of study; to open up a range of experience for thought, from sensorial and affect to the forgotten objects of a culture. Yet as Hilary Fraser has also recently suggested, as well as considering how phenomenologists might open up our objects of study, nineteenth-century cultural and literary historians can also help identify the lineage of phenomenological accounts of embodiment. In her critique of Crary's project noted above, Fraser asks whether a valid alternative critical approach might be to trace the 'pre-history' of Merleau-Ponty's multisensorial phenomenology (p. ix). Indeed, in a discussion of the post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne's distinction of tactile and visual qualities, Merleau-Ponty suggests the pre-history to his own project as he acknowledges that 'it is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses'.¹⁶ The contributors in this special issue may not identify as cultural phenomenologists, nor indeed as phenomenologists. Yet their focus on nineteenth-century psychophysiological discourses of touch, and their role in developing a 'science of the senses', deepens our understanding of the interconnections Victorians made between mind, body, and self, and the ways in which each came into being through tactile modes, thickening and populating the pre-history that Fraser invokes.

Let me briefly expand upon this point. The five senses, in their somewhat arbitrary construction, have long been conceptualized hierarchically, with the distance senses of sound and vision associated with more rational (and masculine) forms of knowledge, and the proximate senses of touch, taste, and smell associated with baser (and feminine) ways via which to engage with the world. Classen suggests that touch remained maligned in nineteenth-century cultural discourses of the sens-

¹⁵ Steven Connor, 'CP: or, a Few Don'ts by a Cultural Phenomenologist', *Parallax*, 5.2 (1999), 17–31 (p. 21). See also Isobel Armstrong, 'Victorian Studies and Cultural Studies: A False Dichotomy', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 513–16. For a particularly tactile-oriented cultural history, see Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Here, Connor offers a rich reading of the cultural and historical meanings associated with the skin, and suggests how we might imagine and critique the haptic qualities of texts by writers including Dickens.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. by Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 59–75 (p. 65).

es, and that it continued to be conceptualized as a ‘crude and uncivilized mode of perception’ (*Deepest Sense*, p. xii). Yet as the contributions to this special issue emphasize, understanding of the tactile sense became crucial to the ways in which the Victorians conceived of reality, and touch — increasingly delineated as both a passive and active sense — became imbued with new social, psychological, and emotional resonances. In the discursive field of nineteenth-century psychological and physiological treatises on the senses, touch was increasingly promoted as a complex, compound sense, central to the ways in which humans gathered and conceptualized information about their world. As the psychophysicist Alexander Bain argued:

Touch is an intellectual sense of a far higher order [than taste or smell]. It is not merely a knowledge-giving sense, as they all are, but a source of ideas and conceptions of the kind that remain in the intellect and embrace the outer world.¹⁷

Far from touch being separated from vision, its role in the constitution of an embodied perceiver dependent upon a range of corporeal, cognitive, and sensory tools in their interaction with the world around them was coming under new scrutiny.

The term ‘tactile imagination’ is itself drawn from nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse, with the art critic Bernard Berenson first using the term in his 1896 study of Florentine painters. Drawing on contemporary psychological discourse which stated that sight alone cannot give an accurate sense of the third dimension, Berenson argues that ‘the essential in the art of painting [...] is somehow to stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that the picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our tactile imagination’.¹⁸ While Fiona Candlin has recently argued that ‘Berenson is clearly working within a western philosophical tradition which separates mind from body and allies art with transcendence’,¹⁹ the discourses Berenson inherit-

¹⁷ Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Parker, 1855), p. 171. Bain also argued here that touch should be considered not as a ‘simple sense’ but as a ‘compound of sense and motion’. Bain’s work was underpinned by recent neurological and anatomical research from scientists including Charles Bell, William B. Carpenter, Johannes Peter Müller, Robert Bentley Todd, and William Bowman.

¹⁸ Bernhard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, 2nd edn (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1903), p. 5.

¹⁹ Fiona Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 15. Hilary Fraser, for example, situates Berenson’s ideas within a

ed were far more concerned with the slippage between mental and physical states, an anxiety that was frequently, as the contributions in this special issue suggest, articulated through a changing discourse on the nature of the tactile sense. Indeed, Berenson himself believed that the purpose of art stimulating the tactile imagination was to awaken ‘our consciousness of the importance of the tactile sense in our physical and mental functioning, and thus, again, by making us feel better provided for life than we were aware of being, gives us a heightened sense of capacity’ (p. 11).

Berenson was mainly interested in the tactile imagination as a historical phenomenon; a quality inherent in *past* artworks that was reinvigorated in the modern-day viewer (or beholder), and he did not evaluate the tactile creativity of his own contemporary society. This special issue evidences, however, that scientific and creative exploration of the tactile was a dynamic part of nineteenth-century life. Contributors variously consider the ways in which an increasingly delineated touch sense enabled the articulation and differing experience of individual subjectivity; suggested the permeability of borders between self and the external world; and gave new meaning to the construction, handling, and exchange of visual media. William Cohen explores one particular aspect of the Victorian tactile imagination as it manifests through the relationship between people and environment in Thomas Hardy’s *Woodlanders* (1887). Drawing upon recent insights from phenomenologically orientated affect theory, Cohen considers the slippage between the human and the arboreal in Hardy’s work. He suggests that we read the people of the novel as trees, and the trees as people, considering how characters fall along a spectrum and exhibit different aspects of treeness. Yet this is not a reading that imposes recent cultural theory on Hardy’s novel; rather, Cohen considers how the novel (bringing its own philosophical genealogy via Spinoza) can reciprocally shed light on the field of affect theory. Through a close and sensitive reading of *The Woodlanders*, he demonstrates how the tactile modality provides a point of entry into discussions of both affect and ecology, ‘and for understanding the materiality of the human, whether that material is regarded in bodily terms or in terms of its non-differentiation from its environment’.

Importantly, Cohen advocates for a critical practice based upon tactile ways of knowing, in which ideas and things rub against each other, rather than being set in opposition in the classical form of a visually ori-

contemporary intellectual field that included physiologists, psychologists, philosophers and aestheticians (‘Foreword’, p. xiv).

ented subject–object dichotomy.²⁰ His reading of the tactile imagination denaturalizes the textual subject, as the actions and states associated with touch — contact, handling, proximity — merge the surfaces of characters with the arboreal objects they live and work among. Other contributors to the special issue also demonstrate how reading nineteenth-century culture through the tactile has particular implications for our understanding of subjectivity in the period. In particular, they recognize the body as a central site upon which nineteenth-century commentators explored issues of both subjective agency and perm- (and mall-)eability, through its capacity to reach out and touch others, as well as be touched, moved, and manipulated in return. Notably, these articles reassess the importance of psychophysiological discourses to wider cultural conceptions of the relationship between mind and body. Roger Smith observes that literary and cultural historians of the tactile sense in the nineteenth century have often overlooked the role of movement in touch perception. Through a wide-ranging and instructive survey of philosophic, scientific, and medical discourses on touch, Smith argues that resistance to contact and movement were basic to the Victorian notion of reality. While the word ‘kinaesthesia’ (used broadly to describe the sensory system which makes it possible to experience the position, movement, and effort required to move the body) was introduced in 1880 by the neurologist H. Charlton Bastian, Smith’s article traces how knowledge of kinaesthesia developed with analysis of touch and the muscular sense in work by thinkers including Charles Bell, Alexander Bain, and Herbert Spencer. As Smith shows, there is a rich tradition of thought on the relationship between touch and reality in the nineteenth century, which takes ‘the encounter of active movement with resistance as central to the discovery of realities of self and physical other’. This manifests in a ‘language of force’ in Victorian writing on physical nature and man’s place in it. Smith’s concluding sections offer a fascinating analysis of the ways in which new concepts of movement and the body contributed to modernist aesthetics, and, in particular, free dance, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Alan McNee likewise focuses on the cultural discourse surrounding a new sporting activity: mountaineering, which became popular from the 1850s onwards. McNee considers how an embodied — rather than optical — knowledge of the mountain landscape became crucial to climbers. Through an analysis of mountaineering literature published in the period,

²⁰ This insight is also crucial to Cohen’s *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*, and a feature he notes of the ‘materialist strain in Victorian writing’ (p. 25).

McNee identifies a Victorian approach to mountain climbing from the mid-nineteenth century that was distinctive from its Romantic predecessors through a more explicit emphasis on the satisfaction of physical activity and challenges as an end in themselves, rather than as a means to advance scientific knowledge. McNee connects this to shifting ideas around the body and sensory experience being advanced in psychophysiological discourses, and, in particular — as Roger Smith also traces — the greater attention being paid to muscular exertion and response to external stimuli. He observes that mountaineering literature was not necessarily directly influenced by physiological or psychophysiological research (although indeed many mountaineers were from scientific and medical backgrounds) but rather that ‘the attitudes expressed by mountaineers were symptomatic of a milieu in which physical sensation was allotted an increasingly important role’. Tracing how climbers pursued experiences ‘characterized and defined by movement and contact as much as by sight’, McNee argues that a new form of the sublime emerges in Victorian mountaineering literature, which he terms the ‘haptic sublime’. While acknowledging the mixed legacy of the sublime that Victorian mountaineers inherited, McNee details how the haptic sublime involves an encounter with mountain landscapes in which the human subject experiences close physical contact which brings about a kind of transcendent experience.

In a fascinating discussion, Karen Chase details how the physicality of fidgeting also took on new qualities, and was more clearly visible, in Victorian culture. At stake, Chase argues, ‘was a new regime of attentiveness to bodily dispositions and the uneasy borderland between voluntary and involuntary action’. This regime of attentiveness emanated from two distinct but connected social practices: the regulation of domestic and private life, and the articulation of an anatomical psychology concerned with charting the circuits of random movements of the human frame. Chase traces the figure of the fidget through scientific and journalistic discourses, before turning to a detailed discussion of the role of the fidget in Dickens’s work, as it is Dickens who enlarges its imaginative reach and makes peculiarly visible its ‘social challenge and revelatory ethics’. This renewed interest in the fidget (as noun) and fidgeting (as verb) is underpinned by the developing anatomico-physiological discourse of the body in which writers including Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Darwin debated whether voluntary meaning associated with the emotions and will could be ascribed to seemingly involuntary body movements, or whether they were the automatic release of neural energy. Chase also

stresses that the fidget is not simply a matter for scientists. Rather, the fidget — precisely because of these questions around control that s/he raises — disturbs the social and moral world s/he inhabits by posing an affront to propriety (not least that relating to sexuality). Chase finds in Dickens a repeated flickering of fidgety behaviour, which accompanies a sustained meditation on the relationship between body and conscious mind. Invading the very texture of his language, the fidget importantly forces readers to confront the question of ‘whether our most immediate bodily gestures are the outcome of intention or reflex, or simply part of the blind causality of the world’.

The questions that the fidget raises concerning the relationship between embodied subject and agency in Dickens’s writing is also the theme of Pamela Gilbert’s article, on the relationship between will and touch in *David Copperfield* (1849–50). Here though, the focus is on perhaps the most visible tactile appendage: the hand. In her article, Gilbert discusses two paradigms that emerge in medical and philosophical understanding of the relationship between hand and embodied mind: the hand as a kind of sensory ‘orifice’ that forms a conduit between inner and outer worlds; and the hand as an instrument of the will. Introducing key ideas on the distinction between voluntary touch and common sensation (the passive reception of feelings through the skin) as they evolved through the writings of Xavier Bichat, Charles Bell, and Herbert Spencer, Gilbert then tracks how these ideas transformed as they moved across cultural domains. Turning to literature of the period, she observes how authors ‘used hands more extensively than ever for characterological purposes’ and, in an innovative reading of *David Copperfield*, demonstrates how a character’s psychological development relates to the way he is able to use his hand. For David, this manifests in a disturbing play of hands, often violent, in the two profound struggles of will he recounts between his stepfather Murdstone and Uriah Heep, in which he struggles to maintain his own subjective boundary.

While these articles emphasize the ways in which the subject comes into being (or is undone) through the effect or exhibition of gestures on the surface of the body, Gillian Beer reminds us that touch is a matter also for its dark interior through her highly suggestive analysis of dream touch in literature. Beer takes as her starting point Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) to explore the richly textured tradition of dream sharing and interpretation prior to its association with the clinic and shame. Through a discussion that takes in Tennyson’s ‘dreamy touch’ in *In Memoriam* (1850), Lockwood’s disturbing dream in *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

where he rubs his arm on the broken glass after encountering Cathy's ghost, Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862), and Hardy's uncanny ghost story 'The Withered Arm', she points to the peculiarly threatening nature of touch within dreamscapes. Not only does the sensation of touch in dream alert the subject to danger; it also endangers, creating real psychological, and indeed physical, distress to the dreamer. Dream touch is also, however, part of what it means to read imaginatively, as 'the reader-dreamer reaches for the material worlds described, always yearning as well as engrossed'.

If touch signals danger in dreams, in other situations it is also linked closely to the desire for authenticity and the real. In her article here, Angela Dunstan explores the centrality of the artist's touch to that most tactile of art forms (and perhaps the one which has received least critical attention in nineteenth-century studies): sculpture. Dunstan examines how ideological shifts and technological advancements imbued the sculptor's touch with unprecedented import in the period, particularly in connection to portrait busts or works of the human figure. An almost nostalgic desire for the sculptor's touch, as thumbprint at the base of a work, emerged in response to a series of machines that threatened to eradicate the place of the artist (even though sculpture had long been characterized as a mechanical art). These sculpting machines — such as the fascinating if ill-fated sculptograph — seemingly promised the potential of sculpting the human face and form without any mediation by the artist. Dunstan's article opens up the complexities adhering both to the notion of what constituted an 'original' sculpture (could a bronze cast be claimed as such?) as well as the degree to which some sculpting machines continued to rely on the intervention of human operators. Yet what was at stake in the public debates over the status of sculpture is a concern we see repeated elsewhere in this issue: an anxiety over the automatic, mechanistic rendering of human subjectivity and a desire to recoup a cultural life that could be traced back to acts of human agency.

Like the theory of the 'tactile imagination', the word 'haptic' also came into being towards the end of the nineteenth century. Haptic perception, to borrow a contemporary definition from the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, is based on 'combined sensory inputs from the skin, muscles, tendons, joints and mucosae exposed to the environment' and most commonly results from 'active, purposive touch'. Significantly, 'haptic' emerged out of nineteenth-century psychophysiological investigations into both the structure of the skin (its cutaneous receptors) as well as the

proprioceptive systems associated with movement and balance.²¹ Today, ‘haptic’ signals a range of different sensory activities loosely cohered around the notion of active, whole body touch and the interoperability of touch and sight,²² and notable across several of the articles in this special issue are the various ways with which the term is deployed as both a critical tool and a historical definition. Cohen, for example, draws attention to the haptic visuality of Hardy’s novel, by which he means the way in which a reader is made conscious of the visual apparatus, both in its mechanical operations and as an interior physiological process. Outlining the multiple ways in which the term is used — including that which highlights sensory experience as having a greater dependence on touch than sight — Smith insists that as the term was not used by the nineteenth-century authors he discusses, he prefers to draw on a more precise contemporary description. Yet the articles in this special issue, notably McNee’s and Gilbert’s, offer rich suggestions for tracing the functioning of this sense — in its connection to the moving body as well as to the distinction between passive and active touching — in earlier, and varied, forms of cultural discourse.²³

The *Oxford English Dictionary* also defines the term ‘haptic’ as ‘having a greater dependence on sensations of touch than on sight, esp. as a means of psychological orientation’, and indeed understanding of the haptic sense developed as part of a nineteenth-century scientific investigation into the perceptual faculties of blind people.²⁴ Alexander Bain argued

²¹ Roberta L. Klatzky and Susan J. Lederman, ‘Perception, Haptic’, in *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/0470018860.s00624>>.

²² For an influential recent discussion of the haptic in relation to contemporary art and cultural theory, see Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). Marks develops a definition of the haptic as a form of vision as ‘embodied and material’, and advocates a ‘haptic criticism’ which ‘presses up to the object and takes its shape’ (p. xiii).

²³ This is also critical to David Parisi’s recent discussion of ‘tactile modernity’ in nineteenth-century scientific discourse. He argues that the important experiments conducted by Ernest Heinrich Weber on the tactile sensitivity of the skin in the 1820s contributed to ‘a fervent interest in the psychophysiology of touch’, directly generating the research of those working in experimental psychology during the 1890s who coined the term ‘haptics’. See David Parisi, ‘Tactile Modernity: On the Rationalization of Touch in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Colligan and Linley, pp. 189–213 (p. 191).

²⁴ ‘Haptic, adj. (and n.)’, *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 1 November 2014]. Abbie Garrington also notes how the term ‘haptic’ was important to

that ‘in order to represent to ourselves the acquisitions of touch in their highest form, we must refer to the experience of the blind’ (p. 346). As part of the events around ‘The Victorian Tactile Imagination’, I curated an exhibition at Birkbeck’s Peltz Gallery that explored one significant and changing aspect of blind people’s tactile experience in the nineteenth century: reading by touch. ‘Touching the Book: Embossed Literature for Blind People’ traced the development of raised alphabet systems prior to the adoption of Braille at the end of the nineteenth century, and considered the often contentious relationship between sight and touch that marked this history.²⁵ The conference also included a panel by three scholars engaged in important and exciting research in the field of nineteenth-century visual disability: Lillian Nayder, Jan Eric Olsén, and Vanessa Warne. Their three papers prompted important points of discussion around both the tactile experience of blind people in the period, and how it came under increased scrutiny from medical and educational authorities as well as cultural commentators. Following the conference, the contributors and I entered into a dialogue exploring important thematic strands that emerged from the panel, published here as a special forum of three short articles. These included reflection on how the tactile practices and experiences of blind and partially sighted people were shaped by, and in turn shaped, the wider discursive construction of touch in European culture at this time. This is not least in relation to shifting sensory hierarchies, and in response to changing ideas around the role of touch in disease and contagion. Each contributor also suggests the variant disciplinary regimes and concerns that began to adhere around blind people’s touch. The limitations of the historical record of visual disability are also acknowledged, and contributors consider the role of imagination and intuition in reconstituting aspects of blind people’s tactile experience in the absence of more direct personal testimonies.

nineteenth-century physiologists and today ‘lingers on in medical studies of the perceptual experiences of the blind’. See Abbie Garrington, ‘Touching Dorothy Richardson: Approaching *Pilgrimage* as a Haptic Text’, *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2008), 74–96 (p. 82). An example of this is the entry on haptic perception in the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, which focuses on perception of Braille signage and raised line drawings.

²⁵ ‘Touching the Book: Embossed Literature for Blind People in the Nineteenth Century’ was held at Birkbeck between July and October 2013. For more information please see the exhibition website <<http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/touchingthebook/>> [accessed 1 November 2014].

In this forum, Jan Eric Olsén contributes an article entitled ‘Models for the Blind’, which examines the prominent and contested role that three-dimensional objects played in the education of blind and visually impaired people in the nineteenth century, and considers an accompanying medicalization of blind people’s touch. Lillian Nayder’s article, ‘Blindness, Prick Writing, and Canonical Waste Paper: Reimagining Dickens in *Harriet and Letitia*’, briefly explores Dickens’s treatment and knowledge of raised-print formats for blind people in his journalistic writing, before turning to a consideration of his more personal stake in this issue via his sister-in-law Harriet who lost her sight in later life. While Harriet corresponded with Dickens, he destroyed all correspondence. In the absence of a paper archive, Nayder turns to novelistic form to give voice to Harriet, as well as to speculate on the material form her correspondence would have taken, as she imagines her using one of the devices invented for the production of tactile writing in the period. Finally, Vanessa Warne’s article, ‘Between the Sheets: Contagion, Touch, and Text’, explores how initial optimism that tactile reading would allow blind people to read their Bibles in bed and promote their spiritual education waivered in response to anxieties around both the masturbatory and the contagious potential of finger reading.

Touch was thought about in a diversity of ways in the Victorian imagination, and this special issue extends some of the rich and innovative discussions held at the conference in two other forum sections. As well as the special forum on blindness, there is a forum focused on the relationship between objects and touch. This springs from a special round-table panel at the conference that also included the curator Sonia Solicari and literary historian Nicola Bown. Panellists spoke for fifteen minutes on an object, image, or text that raised particular questions and issues about the nineteenth-century tactile imagination, to demonstrate how we might practise a tactile reading of nineteenth-century culture. The pieces published in this special forum develop some of the themes of that panel, by considering how tactility imbues photographs — as both image and data — with new meanings, as well as how taxidermic objects are shaped by both visual and tactile codes. The curator and anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards, whose writing has done much to make us rethink the ways in which photography is not simply a visual, but also an inter- and multisensory medium, contributes a short proposition article entitled ‘Photo-

graphs, Mounts, and the Tactile Archive'.²⁶ In this piece, Edwards considers the ways in which photographs were mounted and presented in public libraries in the long nineteenth century. Her object comes from the Surrey Survey in 1904, a seemingly ubiquitous item in Croydon Local Studies and Archives, which holds hundreds of such cards, mounted photographs taken as part of a loosely articulated photographic survey undertaken by a number of local authorities between the 1880s and the First World War. Edwards's article opens up two important fields of enquiry: firstly, the way that interpreting information stored in these records is dependent upon an embodied and tactile set of conditions, and was designed to be so as part of a broadening programme of accessibility that promoted 'legitimate' handling of historical knowledge; and, relatedly, an invitation to think of the library and archive as a tactile space, as the open-access public library — which emerged at the same historical moment as the photographic survey movement — gave readers 'direct, embodied and spatial access' to book collections through the organization of open-access shelves. Kathleen Davidson's short article on an early photographic venture at the British Museum similarly invites consideration of the ways in which tactile and visual experiences mediated between popular and specialist access to its natural history collections. Outlining the status of touch and vision as information-gathering sources in natural history education, Davidson goes on to examine how stereoscopes of the collections disseminated to specialist and non-specialist audiences alike through Lovell Reeve's *Stereoscopic Magazine* were intended to create the illusion of immersion for the viewer and thus to stimulate an engagement with objects of natural history 'as a virtual hands-on investigation'. Yet this was an intention that was not always successfully realized, and Davidson considers how, while the stereoscopes may have conveyed the tactile qualities of the objects portrayed, flaws such as strange camera perspectives frequently distorted the orientation of the objects in the gallery. And Jenny Pyke offers an intriguing analysis of the taxidermied paw of Dickens's favourite cat, which he used as a letter opener. Pyke, following Teresa Mangum, resists interpreting Victorian taxidermy simply within a narrative of collecting. Reflecting on the qualities that adhere to the taxi-

²⁶ See *Raw History*; 'Thinking Photography Beyond the Visual?', in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, ed. by Long, Noble, and Welch; and also 'Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive', in *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, ed. by Costanza Caraffa (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011), pp. 47–57.

dermied animal, she notes the peculiar charge of wildness and stillness it carries, in which anxieties about the appropriate use of energy are inscribed and evoked through the desire to reach out and touch it. Pyke sees a similar concern with the dissipation of energy at work in the depiction of taxidermied objects in Mr Venus's shop in Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65).

Finally, reports from three early career researchers, Kara Tennant, Claire Wood, and Angela Loxham, whose attendance at the conference was generously supported by the British Association for Victorian Studies, provide a record of the range of papers covered at the conference, and alert us to some of the lively conversations that emerged and which cannot be fully mapped within this special issue. They also invite reflection on how approaching Victorian culture through the tactile might be brought to bear on research methodologies.

Alexander Bain's concern to define the complex processes that made up the tactile sense was socially and aesthetically, as well as scientifically, motivated. In his discussion of the importance of touch to handicraft operations, he sounds an optimistic note that greater understanding of its physiological make-up will contribute to its correct disciplining:

Touch being concerned in innumerable handicraft operations, the improvement of it as a sense enters largely into our useful acquisitions. The graduated application of the force of the hand has to be ruled by touch; as in the potter with his clay, the turner at his lathe, the polisher of stone, wood, or metal, the drawing of the stitch in sewing, baking, taking up measured quantities of material in the hand. In playing on finger instruments, the piano, guitar, organ &c, the touch must measure the stroke or pressure that will yield a given effect on the ear. (p. 194)

Craftspeople must self-reflexively judge the correct 'force of the hand' through touching the objects that comprise their external world. Touch is the force which masters, as well as in turn requires mastering. Bain's detailing of different types of tactile acts is an invitation to deepen the ways we write and speak about the tactile sense in the nineteenth century, as well as to think more particularly about the language with which we describe touch. Indeed, this careful attention to the subtleties and gradations of different types of touching, and the feelings that are produced from acts of the finger and the hand and received as impressions on the skin, is replicated by artists and novelists of the period similarly keen to

explore the social, as well as the psychological, implications of how we touch. The articles in this special issue pay attention to this, and invite new ways of understanding the relationship between mind and body, and between selves and others in nineteenth-century society; and of the experience, feel, and texture of nineteenth-century culture.