WHEN WORDS FALTER
Sara Davies

Abstract
When words falter in translation I feel a desire to touch, to form my life story in artworks, letting visual images express my movement between cultures. I examine issues of belonging in the Swedish diaspora in the north of England, bringing a minority discourse into the public realm. In my art practice I articulate the embodied experience of negotiating two cultures, transforming Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘third space’ into visual forms. Using my art practice as an example of haptic experience and this essay as a platform to reflect, I examine the relation between making and making sense in diaspora.

When words falter, I encounter things haptically. Diasporic touch is a conceptual idea naming a reiterated gesture in my practice which gathers cultural material from established narratives and reassembles them into visual forms. Diasporic touch is a performative gesture that opens up an imaginary space where closeness disrupts linear time and making art generates a sense of being at ease. Using Nikos Papastergiadis’ ideas of ‘hyphenetic energy’ and bridging, and Julia Kristeva’s theories of signification and subjectivity formation, I will analyse my Anglo-Swedish diasporic sliding motion between two cultures.

Keywords: belonging, diaspora, Scandinavian studies, materiality, haptics, affect, art practice, performativity, photography

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Biographical note
Sara Davies is a Associate Lecturer and a Ph.D. student at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research project, ‘Creating images of belonging through diasporic touch’, is investigated through art practice. She uses performance, photography, moving image and creative writing to explore belonging in diaspora. After completing a BA(Hons) in Fine Art at Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design Davies relocated to Manchester and completed an MA in Visual Culture at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2003. Davies has disseminated her research at conferences such as: Association for Art Historians’ New Voices conference Image Matter:Art and Materiality (2015) at Manchester Metropolitan University, Writing Between the Lines at Cardiff Metropolitan University (2016), Nordic Research Network Bridges Between at University College London (2016), Nordic Research Network The North as Home at University of Aberdeen and the international conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Heritages of Migration: Moving Objects Stories and Home organised by Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage, University of Birmingham and UNTREF Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (2017).

Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel’s Bakterium – Vanitas from his Bakterium-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)
WHEN WORDS FALTER

Sara Davies, Manchester Metropolitan University

I slide. The lantern is spreading forest green across my bedside table. It is wrapping surfaces with images of pine needles; it is scattering memories of Sweden across my folded legs and the ruffled duvet. I move my hand through the branches, imagining them heavy and prickly. Through touch I internalise the culture I left behind in the present moment. I find comfort in the soft shade under the tall pine tree. The red-painted croft environment in the pine forest is an idyll, an imagined Sweden. A place I long for but that I know never really existed. In the light of the faint projection, pine needles are blending with the folds and fine lines of my skin. I move my hand and the pattern changes. As I lift my thumb, the shadow creates a dark shape in the projected pattern; it allows me to recall the scent of a warm forest, the feeling of bare feet on granite doorsteps and how the powdery red paint leaves traces on my fingertips. The light of the lanterns draws me closer; I search for the forest path, following the pattern of pine needles, imagining home.

The texture of the fabric in my bed linen brings me back. I am again aware of the Victorian furniture in my bedroom. The traditional cast iron fireplace, the dark brown chest of drawers, the water stained romantic prints picturing English countryside. As I sit on my bed focusing on pine needles there is a sense that the Victorian furniture disturbs my reverie, the rounded corner of the bed frame disrupts my memories of back home in Sweden. I long to see past my brown furniture to avoid forgetting. When experimenting with the lanterns in my bedroom, when seeing the images that remind me of Sweden projected on the furniture, boxes with make-up, curtains, bottles of hairspray, the Victorian-style interior of my current house in Manchester and debris of my life, I feel a lingering sense of discomfort. Embedded in one visual form, the two cultural narratives pull in different directions. I sense ambivalence. Is this what faltering words look like?

Making and making sense

In my art practice I constructed a series of ‘memory lanterns’ for a performance by adapting traditional candle-powered portable lamps so that they projected images that reminded me of back home in Sweden. I attached images to the glass panes so that the lanterns simultaneously lit up the interior of my present home, a Victorian terrace house in Manchester and projected images that reminded me of back home in Sweden. Through projecting onto the interior of the rooms, the architectural features and Victorian-style furniture, the lanterns created environments where elements from one culture were superimposed onto things from another; they created cultural double exposures (Boym, 2001). In the process of making art I encountered the ‘memory lanterns’ through touch. The reflective writing in this article emerged from my physical encounters with the lanterns. It derived from my experimentation as I developed the lanterns into props for a performative piece of work, into a live art event. By using this article as a space to reflect on my art practice, I will address how making and making sense are interwoven in my particular diasporic situation. What feelings are linked to this process? What kinds of images emerge? Using my diasporic art practice as an example of sensuous making and this article as a platform to reflect on my making, I will examine how they interact. Rather than treating them as separate entities I intend to explore how they are entwined.

I am Anglo-Swedish. I have spent half my life in Britain and simultaneously feel British and Swedish but am neither and both. My practice-based research examines issues of belonging in the Swedish diaspora in the north of England, bringing a minority discourse into the public realm. Through my art practice, I am articulating the embodied experience of having two cultural narratives. Homi Bhabha (1994) considers cultures not as separate entities but as overlapping, intersecting and merging. He suggests that new cultural forms emerge in an indeterminate ‘third space’ between languages, cultures and associated historical discourses. This is a space of translation where gaps and overlaps in meaning give rise to a sense of uncertainty. In my art practice, I am giving Bhabha’s notion of ‘third space’ between cultures a visual and tangible form that emerges from my embodied diasporic experience. In the lantern piece, I am superimposing images of the Swedish ideal home, the red-painted croft environment, onto the Victorian furniture in my house. I re-arrange linear time associated with national histories into a visual form that derives from my diasporic memories and becomes a piece that works across the space between cultures.

Art practice is a way of finding out about the human experience in the world, how we evolve as subjects in a changing environment, how we become. To develop a more detailed understanding of Anglo-Swedish diasporic experience I make use of Paul Carter’s (2004) idea of material thinking. I think through the process of making art, studying how the workings of mind, eye and hand are interwoven. It is a process that derives from a physical engagement with the surrounding environment; rather than producing a linear narrative it materialises time. It is non-linear and occupies a particular position in space. As art practices sediment they retain the intricacies of human experience in the world (Carter,
I use my art practice to give rise to Bhabha’s third space in order to find out about the particular complexity of my Anglo-Swedish diasporic experience. As my practice unfolds I examine how I reassemble materials, how I alter tone, shade, colour, texture and composition. My engagement with the materiality of things feels as if it has particular significance in my life, it is as if it leads me home.

**Belongings**

In my memory I return to the croft, not far from a lake, surrounded by tall conifer trees. The main wooden house was painted red and the barn was grey and weathered. The forest formed a dark green backdrop. A path with bilberry borders connected the yard and the meadowlands where the oxeye daisies, bellflowers, chervil and meadow cranesbills were waist high. I repeatedly imagine myself in this environment, my childhood seems to be lived by red, wooden walls but I also know that my memories are partial. This type of environment is a cultural symbol (Nora and Kritzman, 1996) that is deeply embedded in Swedish culture and linked to the notion of home. It is part of the Swedish national narrative, a symbol that is still important today (Davies, 2015). The red-painted croft by the lake in the forest has, over many years, been the subject matter and the source of inspiration in my art practice. I collect photographs, postcards, napkins, key rings, posters and many other things that depict the red-painted croft environment. I gather pictures, stories and fragment of the ideal Swedish home as keepsakes. In the process of making art, I use fragments of many red-painted houses, by many lakes, in many forests. They are from many different times and places. Yet, the fragments are all ‘that croft’, the idyll. The environment is a romantic, diasporic access point to my former culture (Cohen, 2008), it is how I imagine the home I left behind.

As I became aware of the recurrence of the Swedish red-painted croft environment in my art practice I began to explore how and why it was of importance in Swedish culture. How did it become connected to the idea of an ideal home? How did it become part of narratives of Sweden? The red paint used on wooden houses in Sweden, both past and present, was discovered at the copper mine in Falun. It is a by-product from the mining industry and a paint that preserves wood. The paint was cheap and therefore historically used by small-scale farmers in the rural parts of the country. The iron-oxide red is still the most common colour of houses in rural Sweden (Edenheim, 2005). It is popular with both permanent residents and summer guests. The red-painted wooden-croft environment and the surrounding forest were during the national romantic era incorporated into the Swedish national narrative. It was often painted by Nordic national romantic painters such as Carl Larsson, Anders Zorn and Christian Skredsvig (Davies, 2015). They transformed the rural, small-scale farm environment into an idyll. This idyll was widely distributed by illustrators such as Maja Synnergren and Martta Wendelin. It was reiterated in literature by, for example, Astrid Lindgren in her books *Alla vi barn i Bullerbyn* ([1946] 2003) and *Emil i Lönnerberga* ([1963] 2004) and more recently by Sven Nordquist in his book *Pettson och Findus: Pannkakstärtan* (1984). The strength of the symbol in contemporary society is illustrated by a personal find at Arlanda Airport in Stockholm. In the tourist gift shop I found a colouring-in book for children titled Sweden. The picture on the cover displayed a red-painted house, the Swedish flag and the forest behind.

There is a historic presence of Swedish migrants and their descendants in the north of England. These settlements are distinctly different from Nordic migration to the country’s capital (Davies, 2015). Robert Lee (2008a, p.8) explains that following the early Viking settlements, more recent Nordic immigrants to Liverpool and the north of England were seafarers and emigrants on their way to America that failed to complete their journeys or made a conscious decision to stay. The Nordic Church in the docks of Liverpool is the historic and contemporary centre for Nordic migrants and seafarers in the north of England (Lee, 2008b, p.13). I migrated to England in 1994 and my move was made possible by legislation permitting ‘freedom of movement’ within the European Union. At the time the power relationship between my minority culture and the host country seemed fairly equal. When I arrived in England I assimilated well, sometimes forgetting the culture I left behind. I moved from London to Manchester in 1999 and experienced decreased contact with Swedish culture. Small, temporary gatherings of Swedish people seemed to appear in my life and then disperse. There is instability in the Anglo-Swedish community in the north of England. It is going to be interesting to see, in the shifting post-Brexit political climate, if the fragility of the Anglo-Swedish community will transform into something with a firmer and more organised structure. Since I arrived in England I have developed a passion for Victorian furniture. Perhaps it was the urban environment and the type of houses I lived in, Victorian and Edwardian terraces that triggered my interest in Victoriana. Reading books about Victorian architecture and décor became a way for me to find a new past, to...
learn about my new culture and its history (McCoy Miller, [1993] 1997; Galloway, [1991] 1996; Chris, 1996). The Victorian style interiors displayed in the books were from wealthy people’s homes. The books portrayed rooms from much grander properties than mine. They showed idyllic interior environments, which avoided discussing the poverty and harsh conditions that 19th-century British subjects lived under; and the industry that made the wealth possible. The desire to find out more about England was hopelessly linked with the awareness that I was choosing to encounter another romantic national narrative, another problematic notion of home. This time, perhaps arising from my urban location, the idyll was linked an upper- and middle-class way of life rather than being a romantic version of Swedish rural life.

**Bridging**

In my artistic practice I make my embodied diasporic experience of belonging visible. I examine the movement between cultural narratives that give rise to a sense of temporal incoherence. Nikos Papastergiadis ([2000] 2007) claims that diasporic subjectivity is not the sum of two compounded nationalities, in my instance Anglo and Swedish, but a sense of self that emerges from the area of tension between the juxtaposed categories. He offers a way of thinking about cultures in an embodied way. He states that ‘[i]n many recent applications of this concept, the figure of the hybrid is extended to serve as a “bridging person”, one that is both the benefactor of a cultural surplus, and the embodiment of a new synthesis’ (p.15). He opens up a possibility of locating Bhabha’s notion of ‘third space’ within a person of dual heritage. He suggests that inconsistencies in translation create excess energy; it evokes creative responses. Artists and writers of dual heritage make use of this energy to creatively assemble elements from different cultures into new forms (Papastergiadis, 2007). They try to articulate the shift in meaning arising from translation. They try to bridge faltering words.

Oxeye daisies, bellflowers and cranesbills: these words feel unfamiliar to me. When reading the names of these flowers in English I translate them into Swedish. It takes a moment for the new word to register and connect with a mental picture of a specific flower. Prästkragar, hundkex och midsommarblomster, on the other hand, immediately reach my gut. When I describe memories from Sweden to others here in England, I often transform experience known in one language into another. When translating I feel the new words and sentences sometimes fail short in describing my past. I sense the fissures and confusing slippages. The English language is unable to fully capture my Sweden-memories. The process of translation shifts my understanding of self and life. When words falter in translation I feel a desire to touch, to express my life story in creative ways, letting visual images express the gaps and overlaps in translation.

In the visual double exposures I can simultaneously see my two cultural narratives. The pine forest is converging with the lines of wardrobes, ornate skirting boards and Victorian corbels. They blend with flowerpots, patterned curtains and an ornate Victorian fireplace. Shapes are unclear; outlines are confused, bright colours transforms into greys and browns. Superimposed my homes collapse into complexity. Sometimes they seem to blend and sometimes one disrupts the other. As I slide between lanterns and the furniture in my bedroom, my focus shifts away from the meaning that arises from the work to a more haptic space. Attracted by the greys and browns I move closer. I want to be close to their texture, so close that my nose nearly touches the lantern glass. I leave the branches and pinecones behind. As I follow the shades, shapes and patterns there is no need to belong, there is no need to translate. Being in close proximity, being with the materials of the artwork is comforting. Amongst the converging lines, dark shadows and unusual shapes, I temporarily feel at ease.

**Thresholds**

The sense of comfort I experience when temporarily shifting focus to the shapes, patterns and shades in my artworks can be partly explained by Julia Kristeva’s (1980) theory of semanalysis that allows her to reconnect the physicality of the body with language. She argues that language has two interwoven elements which are dependant on each other but at the same time compete in the construction of meaning. One element is the semiotic which encompasses the way bodily impulses are manifested in rhythm, tone and movement of writing. The other element is the symbolic which relates to the grammar, structure and linguistic conventions (Kristeva, 1980). She outlines that the semiotic is linked to the maternal; how it is a remnant of pre-linguistic experience. It is connected to the haptic and material, and unfolds in a non-linear way. Arising from our affective experience it fills language with life (Kristeva, 1980). She describes how the symbolic is linked to grammatical structures, shared meaning and conventions in society. It makes understanding possible. The symbolic without the
semiotic is text without emotion and the semiotic without the symbolic is incomprehensible chaos. The two entwined elements form a threshold from which meaning emerges (Kristeva in Keltner, 2011); it is how we come to understand ourselves as subjects.

How are these bodily impulses manifested in creative practices when there is partial identification with two symbolic systems? Kristeva (1980) connects the workings of language with the formation of subjectivity. Subjectivity is not fixed but a transformative process that develops through a movement between the semiotic and the symbolic. It emerges from a threshold between the inner psychic life and the outer structures in society (Kristeva, 1980). She suggests that the semiotic sphere is prior to the symbolic, but it cannot be known without the other, without language. The two elements are necessary in the process of becoming a speaking subject, they help form an ‘I’ that is knowable. According to Kristeva (1980) we identify through the symbolic at the same time as the semiotic challenges this identification through creative impulses; bodies disrupt language structure. In people with dual heritage there is an uncertainty associated with a sense of self that affects the characteristics of our body’s creative impulses: it alters the performance of the semiotic. In diaspora, the relation to languages is complicated by translation, the rhythms of the semiotic become more persistent (Kristeva, 1989). The rhythms return endlessly, and creativity becomes necessary. Is it possible for somebody with dual heritage to find a place of rest in the haptic experience of rhythm, tone and shade? Is it possible to dwell in the materiality of art making?

When meaning shifts and language hesitates, I encounter things haptically; I make visual forms. Diasporic touch is a performative gesture that opens up an imaginary space where I can internalise – in the present moment – the culture I left behind. It is a conceptual idea that names a reiterated gesture in my art practice, a bodily movement that gathers and reassembles cultural material from the two dominant cultural narratives in my life into complex composite forms. Through my art practice, I am making visual forms that articulate the temporal incoherence often experienced in diaspora. Linear time is disturbed as fragments from different times and places are re-assembled into artworks. My diasporic gesture makes the things that fall to the side when one language is turned into another visible. As an artist, I write descriptively about the relations of diasporic touch to Julia Kristeva’s theories of signification and subjectivity formation in order to understand how making and making sense are entwined. Diasporic touch is an artistic gesture that arises from the gaps and overlaps in translation, aiming to bridge cultures in visual forms. When my words falter, I slide with the rhythm of tone, colour and shade of the red-croft environment to be at ease.

Fractures
For a person with dual heritage belonging can be complicated by the pull of two languages, two cultural frameworks; it can be undermined by slippages of meaning, lack of correspondence and misunderstanding. Bhabha (1994) expands Kristeva's notion of semanalysis exploring life experiences of people in minority cultures. He agrees that bodily impulses establish themselves poetically in art and literature, but his theoretical approach functions differently. He (1998) suggests that bodily impulses manifest themselves in a creative underlying gesture, a bodily movement that arises from gaps and overlaps in translation. The gesture, rather than emerging from a gap between society’s symbolic system and lived experience (Kristeva, 1980), arises from a sense of confusion and ambivalence. The self, instead of developing from the movement between identification with and rejection of a symbolic system (Kristeva, 1989), wanders without clear anchor points. Affected by the tension and uncertainty that characterises life experiences between cultural frameworks, the recurrent bodily gesture reiterates: it haunts (Bhabha, 1994). For me, these returns are of specific importance in my artistic process and life.

In dual-heritage life experiences there are flaws in the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic, between becoming and belonging, inside and outside. The fractures in the process that forms subjectivity leads to a sliding sense of being placeless. It leads to a sense of loss (Kristeva, 1989). Bhabha (1998) suggests that life experiences that incorporate more than one cultural narrative result in an ‘I’ that roams between two symbolic systems, two cultures. It gives rise to an uncertain sense of self with partial and multiple senses of belonging, a free-flowing signifier between multiple signifieds. He writes from a postcolonial perspective that identifies significant tensions between host country and minority. He speaks of a gesture that disrupts. My diasporic experience is different; it leads to a milder gesture. As belonging is complicated by translation, the rhythms of the semiotic become more persistent (Kristeva, 1989). The rhythms return endlessly, and creativity becomes necessary. Is it possible for somebody with dual heritage to find a place of rest in the haptic experience of rhythm, tone and shade? Is it possible to dwell in the materiality of art making?
Making visible
There is an ambivalence in dual-heritage experiences in relation to the idea of home as tied to place. Instead, there is a conscious understanding that it is impossible to fully adhere to one cultural framework. Svetlana Boym (2001) emphasises the visual and haptic in the transformative process that characterises diasporic experience. She claims that people in diaspora approach the cultures they left as tourists collecting mementoes. The mementoes tend to have both personal significance and be part of established cultural narratives. She outlines how people in diaspora actively engage with the mementoes by displaying them in their homes. When arranging the treasured things in their new homes and discussing them with visitors, they remake the life they left behind in a new location: they reform their subjectivity (Boym, 2001). This transformative process encompasses touch, rearrangement and the visual experience of display. She outlines that in diasporic experience it is important to be able to make things visible. She describes how the complexities of belonging can be shown and how home can be re-constructed through touch. Writing for people in diaspora still encompasses an encounter with the difficulties of translation. In making visual forms, it is temporarily possible to bypass the tension of two competing linguistic structures. Making visual images makes it possible to find rest.

I make visual images that articulate my position between cultures. They form a bridge between the Anglo and Swedish, the dominant cultures in my life, in a way that matches Paul Carter’s (2004) and Estelle Barrett’s (2013) descriptions of how creative practices use performative and material strategies to articulate the complexity of our experience. Barrett provides a detailed account of how these kinds of practices can generate new information that extends beyond established knowledge. Haptic experience, she argues, gives rise to internal images that precede the emergence of language. The images arise in our mind as we handle the surrounding environment; they capture heterogeneous experience. If artists make use of these internal images in their artistic processes, they can generate new understandings about our experience and offer information that is positioned between languages and historical discourses (Barrett, 2013). As I am handling the red-painted croft environment in my art practice, I am thinking through this handling, I am making and making sense of my diasporic experience between histories (Fig 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Sara Davies, Memory Lanterns, 2016. Performance, work in progress.
Through touch I am sliding between cultural frameworks, moving between languages and different ways of making sense of experience. I slide, I reach and I touch. I move closer. Temporarily there is no need for translation. I touch the tall skirting board interrupting the image of pine needles. I feel the glossy, smooth paint and see pine needles on my hand. In diasporic touch I reach the conifer forest and it reaches me. I touch the narrow attic staircase in the Victorian terrace and it touches me. There is change, there is transformation. Up close I am revelling in the textural grain of the image, the curved wood, the gradual change in shades, the inky dark green, the glossy blue paint. In this haptic space, temporarily forgetting the ambivalence of translation, I am becoming, the world is evolving and I feel a sense of self-fulfilment.

Resting
I can express my diasporic experience in writing. The texts can be sensuous and expressive, yet it is still closely connected with translation. Through my art practice, I can make my two cultures visible at once. Through double exposures I can blend them into composite spatial forms. My visual artworks emerge from this sense of ambivalence caused by the gaps and overlaps of translation between English and Swedish; they nestle between cultural frameworks. Translation is always there in the background but when I make visual images, I am able to temporarily reduce the pain of loss. They create a bridge between cultures and in touch I feel at ease. I can temporarily move beyond the problems with belonging into a space of transformation and becoming. When focusing on the semiotic elements in image making, the non-linearity of tone, shade, colour and composition, it is possible to temporarily find a place of rest. Through the process of making artworks, beyond the ambivalence of translation their heterogeneous qualities bridge cultures, languages and histories. Visual images bridge cultures and their materiality leads me home.

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Beside the ‘memory lanterns’ I write my tales, letting their light and faint projected images shape the narrative. I approach the lanterns, I write about here, there and everywhere, trying to find a position between cultures, always slipping to the side of one language or another. There are some things from Swedish culture the English language cannot convey. It changes the pace, tone and the feel of the culture I left. There is always translation in my writing, there is always loss. When trying to make sense of my making through reflective writing, I still feel the rhythm of my diasporic gesture. The texts move beyond the journey from beginning to end – from the first capital to the final full stop – and instead loops and returns. There is a faint impression of disjointed time. I craft tales of many times and many places, without sharp detail but powerful in their repetition. I write of connecting, holding and touching. But above, below, around and between the words, sentences and paragraphs there is also always more.

The making and making sense in two languages is a sliding movement between translation and haptic closeness, between a sense of ambivalence and touch. The ambivalence of translation provides the energy that steers the persistent creative impulses (Papastergiadis, 2007) and the underlying diasporic gesture (Bhabha, 1994). Diasporic touch is a gesture that emerges from my embodied Anglo-Swedish diasporic experience and aims to bridge cultural frameworks by rearranging linear time into visual forms. It is a gesture that rearranges a journey through texture, tone, composition, shape and shade; it is a sliding movement that engages in materiality. Diasporic touch is linked to Kristeva’s (1980) notion of the semiotic; it is my bodily impulses discharged into writing and visual artworks. It is similar to Bhabha’s (1994) underlying, insistent and haunting gesture arising from translation. It returns and reassembles cultural material in particular ways. It differs in how it does this, as it arises out of my Anglo-Swedish diasporic situation. This time the artworks emerging from this process are cultural double exposures where my two belongings are visible at once. They are complex and composite visual forms that show my urban terrace house, romantic Victoriana and a rural Swedish idyll, the red-painted croft environment. They form a visual bridge between my two dominant cultural narratives and between two languages. The grain, tone, shade, colour and composition offer a space that provides a temporary shift away from the ambivalence of translation, problems of belonging and the sense of loss. In closeness, I am touching and am touched by the materiality of my visual images as I find a place of temporary rest.
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