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Feeling Slow Food: Visceral fieldwork and empathetic research relations in the alternative food movement

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ABSTRACT

This paper details the author's experiments with accessing the visceral realm in research on the food-based social movement, Slow Food (SF). "Visceral" is defined as the bodily realm where feelings, sensations, moods and so on are experienced. Fieldwork methods aimed at participatory co-creation of data through verbal communications in the form of in-depth conversations and group discussions, as well as non-verbal communications in the form of "intentionally designed experiences" and other forms of sensory involvement. Communications centered on understanding how foods and food-based settings elicit feelings and sensations that move and power bodies differently, and specifically how SF guides bodies to be affected by specific foods and environments. The paper details how data were created and recorded, specifically exploring how sensory-based research events were translated to data through the creation of imagined bodily empathies. The paper also discusses the emergence of change-oriented communications that pushed for transformation in SF's (in)attention to visceral differences, thus demonstrating how visceral research can challenge researchers and participants to critically reflect upon, and perhaps transform, how their own bodies *feel* (and respond to) the world.

1. Introduction

> "For myself, I want to be alive and thus I want more words, more controversies, more artificial settings, more instruments, so as to become sensitive to even more differences" (Latour, 2004, pp. 211–212)

An upsurge of work on 'biosocial' and/or biological aspects of life in various subdisciplines of human geography points to a generalized attempt to push the margins of how social science does and can understand the body (e.g., Anderson, 2005, 2006a,b; Colls, 2007; Hall, 2000; Latham and Conradson, 2003; Little and Leyshon, 2003; Longhurst et al., 2009; Mansfield, 2008; Nash, 2000; Thrift 2000). Although this work is epistemologically varied, it seems to coincide with a broad critique of the stance that the biology or 'nature' of the body is known and predictable, as in the medical or life sciences. Attending to the body then becomes crucial because the body is recognized as dynamic and active in its own right, and is implicated in the unfolding of our social and ecological worlds (e.g. Colls, 2007). This attention to the body invites not only a shift in analytical approaches to embodiment, but also a necessary (re)construction of methods that allow for different forms of body-attentive data gathering and/or creation (Crang, 2003, 2005; Latham, 2003). In this paper I explore the question of methods in regard to these trends by focusing on qualitative methods developed through research on Slow Food (SF), a food-based social movement organization dedicated to "good (tasty), clean (environmentally sound) and fair (socially just)" food (slowfood.com). My 8-month research project with SF sought to understand mobilization and movement participation in regard to what I call, following others (e.g. Connolly, 1999; Probyn, 2001), the *visceral realm*: the bodily realm where feelings, moods and sensations are manifest. SF was chosen for its explicit emphasis on sensory pleasure, with the idea that SF members might consequently be open to discussing visceral matters. In what follows, I assess my attempts to "get at" such visceral experiences of SF through a series of verbal and non-verbal means of data creation in order to illustrate some challenges and successes of both my specific methods and my general methodology. The paper thus addresses recent calls to expand geographic resources for attending to the body in empirical as well as analytical terms (Latham and Conradson, 2003).

Because the purpose of my research was to examine the role of visceral experiences – the arousal of feelings, moods, and sensations – in mobilizing food-based activism, I used the case of SF to examine the various ways a movement *feels* in the bodies of activists. Instead of identifying the content of these feelings, I concentrated on assessing the power of feelings to activate or deactivate behaviors related to Slow Food activism, so-called *alternative food practices* like buying local, developing agricultural heritage projects,

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home gardening, and other ways of advancing alternatives to conventional food ways.[1] In concentrating on the catalytic potential of feelings, I have not sought to circumvent the role of discourse, representation, and identity in activist mobilization, but rather to redraw the concepts of identity and identification around bodily sensation, moods, feelings, as well as cognition and eco-social imperatives.

I illustrate my fieldwork using conceptual tools developed by Bruno Latour (2004) in "How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies." Latour proposes a shift in the ontology upon which science operates based on an idea he calls "articulation." This new ontology of articulation sees bodied life operating as follows: as bodies go through life, they learn to be affected by various social and material elements in the world and, hence, to differentiate between them. A body becomes more "articulate" the more it learns to sense things as different, and hence to be differentially affected by them – e.g., vanilla and chocolate may taste different, puffy white clouds and rain clouds may look different, large cities and small cities may *feel* different. Applying this idea to my work, various kinds of foods (organic or conventional, local or exotic) and various food-based settings (exclusive restaurants or fast food joints, dinner parties or outdoor picnics) can come to elicit different feelings or sensations in different bodies. Importantly, in Latour's view, there is no 'one way' to be "articulate" – to feel or sense, and thus "make sense" of – nor is being articulate good or bad; it just is. His point is ontological, not normative.

Latour (2004) explains how articulation occurs through a body's interaction with any number of "setups" such as social institutions, cultural norms of practice, and so on. A setup could be as broad as a rural upbringing in which a child's body learns to differentiate between various farm fields based on their colors and smells and what physical labors they recall; it could also be as involved as an academic training in astrophysics in which a body learns to differentiate the luminosity, density, and chemical composition of celestial objects. In each case the body learns to register differences, eliciting different sensations, feelings, moods, or states accordingly. Through his emphasis on setups, Latour invites us to understand processes of the so-called biological body, like taste, smell, and other sensations and feelings as *biosocial* processes – relevant to the ways in which the biological body comes to decipher and develop in relation to social activities, behaviors, and ideas. Thus, theorizing the body according to articulations means giving up the idea that the body has a pre-known and essential 'nature' that completely explains its function, and at the same time recognizing that the biology of the body is active and dynamic (not simply something that is inscribed upon from the "social" realm).

Using Latour's ontology of articulation, I conceptualize Slow Food (SF), as a "setup" that encourages bodies to sense and feel food in specific ways.[2] SF largely operates in North America through its local chapters, called "convivia," which engage members in a wide variety of food-based activities including tasting workshops, production-site visits, shared meals, lectures, video screenings and so forth. SF members also "live" the movement daily, as a central tenet promotes finding pleasure in eating, cooking, gardening and/or food purchasing practices aimed at supporting local/regional, non-industrial, non-corporate food schemes. In order to understand how such activities work *affectively*, encouraging specific ways of feeling food, a research assistant and I immersed ourselves in SF's mediating configuration of people, words, flavors, odors, materials, and events through which SF members come to register numerous differences in feeling and sensation in regard to foods and food-related matters. Of course, in interacting with the SF setup, we necessarily changed it. Yet, I will argue, the changes imparted did not harm the significance of the study; instead they made possible a different and perhaps wider range of feeling.

Below, after briefly reviewing recent work on body-attentive methods, I detail my own methods, exploring how this work advanced through a participatory co-creation of data. After offering examples of verbal and non-verbal means of communication, I explore how we (participants and researchers) translated sensory experiences to "data," specifically focusing on the creation of imagined bodily empathies as a means to decipher the visceral. Importantly, I express that, the project was not to tally, categorize or provide explanation for the multiple visceralities associated with SF that were encountered but rather to explore various possibilities of feeling and possibilities of *feeling different* about food activism. Ultimately the research process itself became part of the outcome; foregrounding feelings and sensations that emerged in the event of research for the sake of witnessing and questioning how the (variable) power of the visceral realm can be attended to in activist mobilization.

2. Towards visceral methods

The visceral has been evoked in scholarly work in a variety of ways. Social science has often talked about "visceral" sensations like heart palpitation, stomach jitters, or trembling hands as feelings which have found linguistic correspondence with various named emotions (e.g., fear, shame, joy) (Moon, 2005). Psychology has referred to "visceral factors" as "drive states," which include emotions as well as hunger, thirst, sexual desire, pain, and cravings (Loewenstein, 1996). While the "visceral" has slightly different connotations in each case, it broadly refers to a realm in which bodies are affected, registering feelings, sensations, moods, emotions and so on (see Anderson (2006a) for more on distinctions between affect, feeling and emotion). It is perhaps due to this connotation that the term "visceral" has come to be associated with non-dualistic relational philosophies, such as the works of Gilles Deleuze or Luce Irigaray; seen as a way to overcome mind/body dualisms, these thinkers invoke the visceral in developing epistemologies and ontologies that are more faithful to the dynamism of biological life (Lorraine, 1999). I first came across such a use of the word "visceral" in reading Probyn's (2001) *Carnal Appetites*. Probyn reminds us how the gut – the viscera – has been used colloquially to describe bodily thinking: e.g., "gut feelings." She draws upon notions of viscerality as a vital means of understanding how the body actively participates in the unfolding of human behavior and meaning making.

Qualitative methodologies for understanding this activeness of the body have proved challenging (Crang, 2003), yet numerous fieldwork examples exist of researchers attending to various bodily, affective, and sensational realms. During fieldwork, scholars have paid attention to their own bodies (Longhurst et al., 2008; Reich, 2003; Turner, 2000), their own feelings and emotions (Holt, 2004; Widdowfield, 2000; Wood, 2006) as well as the bodies, feelings and emotions of those they research (Bennett, 2004; Dyck and Mclaren, 2004; Datta, 2008; Holt, 2004). Furthermore, various substrands of human geography, particularly affect geography, feminist geography, and geographies of emotion have begun to develop techniques and tools through which scholars can explore these bodily happenings (Anderson, 2005; Davies and Dwyer, 2007; Latham and McCormack, 2004; Longhurst et al., 2008; Thein, 2005). Feminist scholarship has been particularly helpful in this regard by insisting on bodily difference and the need to specify the diverse experiences of different bodies in research (Davis, 1997; Jacobs and Nash, 2003).

[1] For more on alternative versus conventional food practices see, for example, Allen (2004).

[2] Latour refers to setups as "artificially created," which is not to imply that they are unimportant or unreal; on the contrary, their importance comes from the particular way it has been contrived as a system that teaches bodies to differentiate between things in the world. It is, hence, as real as all other systems.