



Affective migration: Using a visceral approach to access emotion and affect of Egyptian migrant women settling in the Region of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada



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ABSTRACT

I argue that a method situated in the everyday visceral experience of food preparation and consumption awakens the senses into being, opening up the body in different ways in relation to materials, senses, and other bodies, offering new insight into emotion and affect. While using 'the body as an instrument of research' (Longhurst et al., 2008) in this manner begins with the discussion of affective relations with food, the visceral serves as a gateway to further uncovering other affective relations with place. Affect can be understood as 'sticky', arising from encounters between bodies and objects in the environment and influenced by history (Ahmed, 2004). Migrants undergo considerable changes in their affective response as they encounter, contemplate, and embody new experiences – making them 'stick'. I offer a methodological examination of a visceral approach to inform our understanding of the affective response to migration through interviews with 11 Egyptian migrant women in the Region of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada as we prepare and consume a traditional Egyptian meal together. This study is a stepping stone to addressing affect as a significant place-making factor and to providing a method to access the visceral, emotional, and affective geographies of home.

1. Introduction

In her book *Carnal Appetites*, Elspeth Probyn marks the beginning of an era where food, eating, and the body are tools to uncover deeper themes related to identity, power, and authenticity,

Eating refracts who we are. Food/body/eating assemblages reveal the ways in which identity has become elementary, and that its composite elements are always in movement. As alimentary assemblages, eating recalls with force the elemental nature of class, gender, sexuality, nation (2000:33).

Probyn draws from Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical concepts of becomings, rhizomatic connections, and multiplicities which unravel the modern imagery of the body as a unified, stable, bounded entity. The body is perceived as a multitude of connections that bodies form with other bodies – human and otherwise – so that the body's function/potential/'meaning' becomes dependent on other bodies or materials with which it forms an assemblage. The visceral experience of food is an assemblage that offers a gateway to understanding a person's identity as well as their emotional and affective relations with place.

Social and cultural geographers who have studied the body and the visceral have turned their attention mainly to public spaces such as

festivals and parades (De Jong, 2015), political movements (Montsion and Tan, 2016; Waitt et al., 2014), marketplaces (Moore, 2014; Law, 2001) and urban planning (Sweet and Escalante, 2015). Attention to private spaces is limited to a few studies including Longhurst, Johnston, and Ho's (2009) account of migrant women cooking at home; Duffy and Waitt's (2013) examination of migrants using sound to make sense of 'home'; and Waitt and Phillips' (2016) embodied and material exploration of food waste and domestic refrigeration. Bodies and the visceral realm have become highly theorised topics for feminist geographers, and a fuller examination of visceral methodologies particularly in relation to understanding emotion and affect is a necessary next step in the discussion (Sexton et al., 2017).

In her seminal work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2004) posits emotions are products of cultural practices rather than psychological states. Bodies are given value through emotion and become aligned with popular belief and norms. As a result, emotions become material rhetoric and have affective power to dictate our life. For example, the emotion happiness comes as a happening "involving affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgment (to be happy about something makes something good) ... happiness functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then

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circulate as social goods.” (Ahmed, 2010:29). As objects are passed around, they amass positive affective value.

Ahmed uses the metaphor of being ‘sticky’ to break down her theory of affect, “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed, 2010: 29) emphasizing how ‘sticky’ entanglements of matter and affect are core to our interaction with the world. This view of affective response as arising from encounters between subjects and also between people and objects in the environment is supported by theorists such as Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari who believe affect is the result of contact between surfaces and is influenced by history (Ahmed, 2004; Grosz, 1994).

Words, or more broadly signs, ‘stick’ when used repetitively in a manner that elicits a particular emotional response. Signs often generate meaning because of their history and context but, repetitively used in a different way, a sign can begin to take on a new meaning. Recurring images of 9/11 have created a language of disgust in Western countries toward Muslims and Middle Eastern bodies. The transference of disgust has turned these bodies into a sign, making them the potential target of racial assault or abuse (Ahmed, 2004). Ahmed’s theory of affect finds its place in geography when placed alongside Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) ‘co-constitutive’ model which links subjectivities, such as affect, and locality to the creation of *sense of place*. Although affect has been deemed a significant factor in place-making, it has not been thoroughly studied in geographical literature.

Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) consider the visceral “a strategic place from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power” (462). Performative acts of food preparation and the sensual experience of consumption are thus ‘sticky’ visceral encounters that can be informative means of uncovering sense of self, the politics of home, and affective relations with the world. When examining the current literature on visceral methods, we see that the methods are often designed to inform on the visceral experience being studied. For example, when using visceral methods to examine the Slow Food (SF) movement in Nova Scotia, Canada and California, US, Hayes-Conroy’s method focused on food and food-based settings to explore how “SF guides bodies to be affected by specific foods and environments” (2010: 734). Recently, Sexton et al. (2017) considered innovative non-textual approaches to visceral methods including the use of body mapping to examine how brown women’s bodies feel violence (Sweet, 2017), developing the concept of ‘foodsensing’ as a consumer process of sensing and making sense of food (Miele, 2017), and understanding how non-human participants in healthy school meal programs influence children’s food practices (Miele, 2017). The visceral method described in this paper builds on current literature by using a visceral approach around food (the preparation and consumption of a traditional cultural meal) as an informative tool to access an unrelated visceral experience (migration to a new country). Food is a ‘sticky’ object for migrants as it is entangled with many factors including nostalgia for home, the traditional gendered role in the household, and a means to bridge the gap with a new and strange host country.

Drawing on Elspeth Probyn’s (2000) *Carnal Appetites* and furthering the work of Longhurst et al. (2009) ‘A visceral approach’ and Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010) ‘Feeling Slow Food’, I present a methodological examination of the visceral approach as a means to further our understanding of the affective response to migration through interviews with 11 Egyptian migrant women in the Region of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada as we prepare and consume a traditional Egyptian meal together. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a background to the visceral approach used in this study. The next three sections draw on empirical data collected from the interviews with Egyptian migrant women to highlight how the visceral approach effectively accesses the participants’ emotions and affective relations with place. The final section is a reflection of the visceral methodology with a discussion of challenges and limitations a researcher might encounter when replicating this process. Finally, I

conclude that the visceral approach is a highly informative method to explore the geographies and affective dimensions of home.

2. The visceral approach

The recent *embodied turn* in the literature has turned attention to social theories of the body, body ‘histories’ and understanding the embodied experience. The embodied experience has been defined as “how we feel, how we perceive, how we relate to our own bodies and the place they have in the order of things.” (Brown et al., 2011:495) Although Brown et al.’s intended use of ‘place’ is metaphorical, geographers’ interest in the literal place as it relates to the embodied experience is the basis of visceral geography. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) define the visceral as “the realm of internally-felt sensations, moods and states of being, which are born from sensory engagement with the material world” (462). While the visceral is about feeling the environment around us, it is also about the relational and the casual.

Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), Probyn (2000) uses the analogy of rhizomes to explain the relationship between the body and the mind, “[T]he rhizome spreads laterally and horizontally ... compelling us to think of how we are connected diversely, to obvious and sometimes not so obvious entities” (Probyn, 2000: 61). Within the rhizomatic framework, researchers are encouraged to ‘think through the body’ as a physical tool to access subjects under study. For people who value the slow food movement, the act of planting and tending to a garden and tasting the resulting fresh produce represents a personal sense of resistance to growing corporate food chains (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010). The visceral moves beyond the concept of a docile body awaiting an active mind. The visceral involves understanding the senses and its effect on being.

In the visceral framework, the body is an agent and the body thinks in ways neither social theorists nor biologists have understood. According to Longhurst et al. (2009) the visceral approach “is another way of thinking through the body, not just as a surface that is etched with social messages but something that encompasses surface and depth, outside and inside, solids and fluids, materiality and spirituality and head and heart. Eating involves this and more” (335). Probyn (2000) suggests eating is so intimately associated with the body that it can make us question what we think we know about the body.

The visceral experience of food preparation and consumption thus awakens the senses into being, opening up the body in different ways in relation to materials, senses, and bodies. A qualitative method situated in the visceral realm of the kitchen offers the opportunity to capitalize on the awakening of the senses to trigger memories, emotions, affect, and relations with the world. The visceral approach in this study involves using the visceral experience (e.g. tastes, textures, aromas) and the body’s performative acts that surround eating (e.g. cooking, conversing, cleaning) as a means to access emotional and affective relations with place. Interviews took place with 11 Egyptian women who migrated to the Region of Waterloo,¹ Ontario, Canada between 2008 and 2013.

The Region of Waterloo has seen a significant shift in its immigrant population over the last two decades. The 2006 Census of Canada² reports 105,375 residents of the Region of Waterloo were born outside of Canada, accounting for 22.3% of the total population. This region’s immigrant population has seen a growth of 13.6% from 2001 to 2006,

¹ The Region of Waterloo, formally known as the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, includes the cities of Cambridge, Waterloo, Kitchener, and the townships of North Dumfries and Woolwich.

² Statistics from the 2006 Census of Canada were used because in 2011 a voluntary National Household Survey was conducted in lieu of the traditional Census procedure. Due to the voluntary nature of the National Household Survey, data is not considered as accurate. Statistics from the 2016 Census of Canada were not released as of the date of submission.

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