



Editorial

Smells like food studies

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At the end of May 2026, I was part of a five-day, international gathering at [Rongo University](https://www.rongo.ac.ke/) in Migori County, Kenya, focussed on the successes, challenges, and knowledges related to agroecology. We were about forty-five people, and the meeting included student and farmer presentations, workshops on storytelling and problem-solving, visits to a nascent avocado plantation and an experimental farm, and innumerable one-on-one conversations. The whole was infused with a spirit of solidarity and commensality, even as we navigated differences of discipline and modes of expression. Comprising the second face-to-face encounter of the seven-year, SSHRC-funded FLOW (Food, Learning and Growing) Partnership, it was a key occasion to exchange ideas and perspectives on agroecological production in multiple global regions—everything from recipes for organic fertilizers to tactics for engaging policy makers in supporting traditional farming practices.

In our planning and lead-up to the meeting, I sometimes joked that we were all coming together *to smell each other*—my shorthand for breaking out of Zoom’s confines and spending time together in physical proximity. The FLOW Partnership brings together several dozen practitioners, producers, and academics across ten regions of the globe, and the vast majority of our contact is virtual. Despite many of us having relationships going back more

than a decade (thanks to PI Alison Blay-Palmer’s extraordinary connection-building), we mostly know each other through screens and speakers. Beyond seeing and hearing, we don’t have much sensory contact.

For me, therefore, “smelling each other” meant learning about each other in more casual circumstances—often involving food and drink—so that our communicative skills could become better attuned to the *how* and *why* of our exchanges, in addition to the more normative *what*.

Ultimately, though, we really did do a lot of smelling. Some touching, too, through hugs and handshakes and help getting in and out of vehicles. A third “lower” sense—tasting—was reserved for the food we ate (hello HR!), yet we did develop a sense of each other’s *tastes* when it came to art and literature, daily scheduling, epistemologies, and humour. The five days of visuals and conversations in Migori generated copious notes, ideas, solutions, questions, and research directions, but they also engendered a powerfully anchored sense of trust, care, and allyship—feelings that were not necessarily connected to the use of our “higher” senses.

In the last couple of months, I have been wondering more about my off-hand joke about smelling each other. In the early writings of Western scholars on the senses, smell was portrayed as coarse, even vulgar, along

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with taste and touch. They were considered animalistic senses—embodied and subjective, difficult to measure (Borthwick, 2000). Sight and hearing were celebrated and minutely unpacked as our “higher” senses, leading to the intellectual valorization of practices such as painting and architecture, music and oration, literature and mathematics. If you could see it or hear it, it was noble; if you had to touch, taste, or smell it, it was base.¹ This framing persists in our academic worlds, in which sight and sound are privileged as more “legitimate” tools for data gathering.

My mental meanderings on smell brought me back to two moments when I had a sudden, strong sense of how smell performs in lived experience and, potentially, in academic contexts. The first was during the mid-1990s, in New York, where I was then living and working as a book editor. I was also trying to activate a more theatre-focussed life for myself, and was taking classes for stage acting. During one exercise, our teacher had us pair up randomly and hold one another closely, face-to-face, moving fluidly and in sync as if we were slow dancing. I was teamed up with a slightly larger man, quite handsome, about my age or a bit younger. It felt both pleasingly intimate and somewhat uncomfortable, and, as an acting exercise, surprisingly safe.

The teacher then told us: *Okay, now take a risk.* No other instruction, no advice. Intuitively, though, a risk-act suggested itself. I leaned in a little closer to my partner and smelled his neck. I’m not sure if it was audible, and I don’t remember what risk he himself took. We were then told to pull apart and perform an improvised, non-dialogue scene in which we were to express a distinct emotion. We did. The results were... what? *palpable? striking? buffeting?* Very notable, in any case, whatever the touch-based adjective. Risk brings trust: that was the acting lesson. But what I did not quite understand, more broadly, was why smelling someone seemed risky.

Flash forward twenty years, and I am in Seoul, South Korea, in the international breakfast room of a hotel with a handful of colleagues from the University of Gastronomic Sciences. It is the start of my postdoc and the end of our week at AsiOGusto, a Slow Food–partnered conference and exhibition. I have been tasting wonderful mushrooms and grains and ferments and soups over the last days, and

I am enrobed in a rich peacefulness. The focus of our time here has been gastronomic communications, food culture pedagogy, and experimental epistemologies. We have also been eating very intentionally. A royal banquet, a workshop lunch of kimchi and heritage rice species, a Buddhist monastery dinner. The tastes have been quite new to me; the narratives, too—full of a holistic sense of food’s everythingness.

As I sit in the breakfast room spooning up dumplings and miso soup and rice with pickles, I realize that taste is not my primary learning modality right now. It is smell. And it is my *own* smell, yet also not the one I am more usually familiar with. It is a cloak of aromas that are both of my food and of myself, of my *self* and of an *other* much larger than food. In wonderment, I scribble a few words into my creased notebook: *an olfactory ethnography...? an (auto)ethnography performance...*

I have never succeeded in developing the methodology for an auto-ethno-something based in olfaction. (I can only imagine the SSHRC—no, NSERC!—adjudicators reading my grant application...) I know, too, why such a project has never come about, and I am sorry that it may be a good long time before it does. Smell: the least-trustable, least-controllable, most-evanescent, most-temporal of the senses. So potentially valuable to food studies, yet so generally relegated to cookery and aesthetics.

Sensory scholar Viktoria von Hoffmann has written extensively on the genealogy of the “low” and “high” senses, including the ways in which historical biases against smell, touch, and taste have shaped—and failed to shape—contemporary understandings of art, science, food, and numerous other fundamental practices (see von Hoffmann 2012; 2013; 2016; 2022). Philosophers such as Hegel, Kant, and Schopenhauer denigrated smell, tying it to transience and consumption, and naming it intrusive, ungrateful, and anti-objective. Today, I think we suffer an ontological hangover from having overconsumed their ideas—either first-hand or through discursive derivatives.

On a very different note, anthropologist David Howes once posited that sensory studies is the “first” discipline, noting that without our senses, we have no awareness or understanding of the world around us.² Along with co-authors, he expanded human sensing (including more

than just “the five senses”) to the notion of the *sensorium*: “the entire perceptual apparatus as an operational complex” (Bull et al., 2006, p. 5). As part of the sensorium, the senses are indelibly embedded with and within social and political constructs, future expectations, and past experiences of sensing. Together, the whole sensing corpus and its context become an entangled mechanism for meaning making, yet non-separable from the systems of meaning they co-construct. A systems-thinking interpretation of the senses, in other words.

In the last weeks, it has been both urgent and difficult for me to frame this text. I know I already value smell in many ways—as risk, as experiment, as thrill, as comfort—and I know that what was a joke in the FLOW context was also entirely serious. I am convinced that experimenting with olfactive epistemologies can produce value for our field, yet I am also mindful of the urgencies of polycrisis and decolonization and concentrations of power that clamour for our attention. I have felt caught in a swirl of no/but, much as I try to embrace yes/and.

And then I return to what happened in Kenya, and the zero-sum-nature of olfaction all sublimates away. I smell the tilapia stew and the two types of ugali and the beef samosas and the steamed arrowroot. I smell the Migori farmers’ dedication to their land and to both traditional and innovative agroecological practices. I smell the media savvy of communications master’s students and the pride felt by their Rongo professors and collaborators. I smell the diesel fumes and telcom advertising and red soil as Eric drives us down a potholed highway—as well as the mosquito spray and roasted peanuts and hope and kindness that linger in his van. I come back to Montreal, and those smells are part of my smell, and I smell them again, and I call them sensorial knowing and memory, as well as solidarity and trust and capacity building.

Many languages use one verb to cover smelling, sensing, hearing, and feeling, suggesting either a historic conflation of the “lower” senses or a discursive acknowledgment that the rationalist project to isolate the senses has been problematic. Whatever the interpretation, it prompts thinking about how to deploy the wholeness of the sensorium within food studies and food systems research. We have a diversity of sensory-informational channels at our

disposal: wouldn’t using more of them generate a broader diversity of understandings about food? Endless academic arguments support *not* engaging with smell (and/or taste, touch, proprioception, nociception, interoception), yet I sense that they are mostly grounded in fear and uncertainty about perceived legitimacy.

I wonder now, as you read this: Can you recall a moment when smell intervened in your knowledge-making pathways, or surprised you, or made you feel at risk? Did it complement other data you were gathering? Did it make you question that data or the results you generated? Could the moment have been repeated, unpacked, documented, or formalized? Are you tempted, the next time you meet your colleagues and research partners, to lean in a little closer and smell them, either surreptitiously or with a preceding caveat? Can you imagine what solidarity and partnerships and care you might build in that way?

The specific aromas of Rongo University’s conference room and kitchenette and avocado grove have mostly dissipated for me, translated into other forms of knowing. Embedded within my sensorium, the people and foods and conversations and hope are now a web of trust and confidence, reassuring me and inspiring future work, exchange, and mutual support. The composition of that web is both of me and of them, of the past and the future, of groundedness and of curiosity. I know it. I can smell it.

Endnotes

¹ Notably, the “low” senses are also more often associated with female-gendered practices and knowledges, while the “high” senses are those that are deployed in fields that were conventionally masculinist-framed.

² David Howes and his partner Constance Classen have written extensively on the senses—I do a disservice to the depth of their work here, but this is an editorial and not a review article. See the References for additional work.

David Szanto is a teacher, digital producer, researcher, and artist, taking an experimental approach to food and food systems through design, ecology, and performance. He is the co-managing editor of *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* and the host/producer of the journal's podcast, [Digesting Food Studies/Concentré d'études sur l'alimentation](#). Having previously taught at Concordia University, l'Université du Québec à Montréal, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, he currently teaches part-time in the George Brown Bachelor of Food Studies program and works as a freelance academic.

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