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DEBATE TITLE: Better than text? Critical reflections on the practices of visceral methodologies in human geography

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Better than text? Critical reflections on the practices of visceral methodologies in human geography

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Abstract: This co-authored intervention discusses themes on the thinking and doing of visceral research. 'Visceral' is taken here as that relating to, and emerging from, bodily, emotional and affective interactions with the material and discursive environment. There has recently been a distinct and necessary turn within the social sciences, particularly in human geography, towards the need for more viscerally-aware research practices. Building on such work, this collective intervention by leading visceral scholars offers two key contributions: first, it critically examines visceral geography approaches by considering their methodological contributions, and suggests improvements and future research pathways; and second, the authors extend recent visceral geography debates by examining how to conduct this type of research, providing reflections from their own experiences on the practicalities and challenges of implementing visceral methods. These observations are taken from a diverse range of research contexts - for example, from gender violence and community spaces, to the politics of 'good eating' in schools and social movements (e.g. Slow Food) - and involve a similarly diverse set of methods, including body-map storytelling, cooking and sharing meals, and using music to 'attune' researchers' bodies to nonhuman objects. In short, this collective intervention makes important and original contributions to the recent visceral turn in human geography, and offers critical insights for researchers across disciplines who are interested in conceptually and/or practically engaging with visceral methods.

Introduction

This collective intervention discusses themes on the *thinking* and *doing* of visceral work.¹ There has been a distinct and necessary turn within the social sciences, particularly in human geography, towards the need for more viscerally-aware research practices. Feminist geographers and non/more-

¹ This set of interventions builds upon a visceral methodologies panel at the 2015 American Association of Geographers (AAG) conference (Chair: Alexandra Sexton; Speakers: Robyn Longhurst, Mara Miele, Allison Hayes-Conroy, Elizabeth Sweet and James Ash). This panel was supported by the editor's PhD studentship from the ESRC [grant number ES/J500057/1], an SSPP Small Grant for Postgraduate Research from King's College London, and a Small Grant from the Department of Geography, King's College London.

than-representational theorists have done much to motivate this shift (e.g. Longhurst, Johnston, & Ho, 2009; McCormack, 2008). Their work has sought to 'unfix' the liveliness of life in academic enquiry and recognise "bodily difference" in the research process (Hayes-Conroy 2010, p. 735). It has also called for research that "better cope[s] with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds" (Lorimer, 2005, p. 83). As such, a (re)valorisation of everyday experiences and practices has been evoked, focussing attention on "what is present" within these occasions (Thrift, 2007, p. 2), and rethinking how 'the social' is considered researchable (Lorimer 2005, p. 84; Miele 2011; Sweet & Ortiz Escalante 2014; Ash & Gallacher, 2016). These contributions have opened conversations regarding what forms of knowledge and indeed what types of subjects are considered valid in academic enquiry, and in turn instigated a much-needed critique of the dominance afforded to knowledges/subjects that are 'accessed' via discursive and visual methods (Paterson, 2009; Bennett, 2010; Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2015). Such work has exposed the moral and political hierarchies of the sensory toolkit used and made legitimate by most social science methods; as Crang (2003, p. 501) notes, these have tended to produce "very wordy worlds" that neglect important questions around what it means, how experiences differ, and how it *feels* to be a particular body—researcher or researched—amongst other (non)human bodies (Hayes-Conroy, 2010).

The higher value historically ascribed to sight and sound—and as such, text and discourse—in Western scholarship has contributed significantly to the other senses being deemed too 'bodily' and non-scientific for research purposes (Crang 2003). Yet another reason for this bias towards the visual and audio has arguably been one of methodological ambiguity. While the visceral turn in social science enquiry has argued strongly for more engagement with embodied knowledge, discussion of exactly *how* to go about this type of research remains limited and often does not include in-depth reflections on its practicalities. This set of five short interventions seeks to do both: that is, make contributions to the validity and importance of visceral work in human geography and the social sciences more broadly, as well as explore its practicalities. Amongst the themes covered, the authors consider innovative non-textual approaches to the more-than-social world, explore ways of attuning to (non)human bodies,

and reflect on the institutional barriers and 'real life' applications of visceral methods. In short, these interventions provide much-needed, original reflections by leading visceral researchers that deliver key theoretical *and* practical considerations for those seeking to 'get at' the more bodily aspects of the visceral realm in geographical research and analysis.

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OTHER TITLES IN THIS DEBATE:

1. **Hayes-Conroy A.**, *Critical visceral methods and methodologies*, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.03.017>
2. **Sweet E. L.**, The benefits and challenges of Collective and Creative Storytelling through visceral methods within the neoliberal university, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.03.018>
3. **Miele M.**, On sensing and making sense, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.03.019>
4. **Ash J.**, Visceral methodologies, bodily style and the non-human, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.03.015>

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