
Editors' Introduction

Intimate senses/sensing intimacy

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In his preface to *Intimacies*, Adam Phillips describes how the act of collaboration with Leo Bersani began as an attempt to discover a 'new story about intimacy, a story that prefers the possibilities of the future to the determinations of the past' (Bersani and Phillips, 2008, viii). Imagined as a speculative – and collaborative – engagement, their book explores various meanings of intimacy in both its content and its form. We share that desire for a different story about intimacy, and we invoke their experiment to underscore our wishes for this special issue of *postmedieval*. But the 'past' of our inquiry is not quite theirs. Bersani and Phillips aim to discard the heavy injunctions set by psychoanalytic narratives about our developmental history, which '[tell] us ... that our lives depend on our recognition that other people – those vital others that we love and desire – are separate from us' (viii). Taking up their challenge in a post/medieval spirit, we turn to a more distant past, one that is itself supposedly separate from us, riddled with cultural difference, to consider how we might *sense* being together, even across time and space.

Sensory experience, past and present, is for us anything but determined or detrimental to a future-oriented optimism about relational embodiment. We have, therefore, sought essays that increase our understanding of the ways that people, places, and things became intimates in the medieval and early modern periods. Literally overlooked in favor of recent attention to visual culture, past habits of smelling, touching, and tasting emerge here to challenge the reign of

the gaze as determiner of subjectivity, power, and pleasure in/with the other. Visual culture continually earns pride of place in humanistic and posthumanistic study, and cultural history too often repeats the story of vision's ascendancy and its triumph over the other senses during and after the Enlightenment. Many scholars working on sensation in contemporary culture and in the past have demonstrated how this assumption is simply untrue. Our issue thus draws from this work and the multiple fields in which the primacy of vision and the limitations of the 'visual turn' in scholarship are under new scrutiny. The five essays here each offer their own substantive contribution to this broader project of sensory recovery. To draw out the potential of their work on the non-visual past for new stories about intimacy, however, we have followed them with responses written by scholars of present-day cultures. We hope this pairing of past and present suggests ways in which intimate relations can resonate across time to join a broader conversation about how we feel together.

Such a project is as embodied as it is scholarly. The very term 'intimate' renders the self as a being in space, one with an 'inner' dimension that is both separate from the world at large, yet at times, remarkably close to it (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The designation of taste, touch, and smell as senses more 'interior' than others located them close to the core of personhood. But their operation simultaneously suggested that the human body was open, porous, and vulnerable to its environment. Associated with fleshly forms of knowing rather than enlightened reason, these 'intimate senses' rooted a body in its material environment even as they defined its boundaries. Mapping the sensing body spatially, we might say, gave us intimacy. Yet intimate sensation is not idiosyncratic. The alternative definition of intimacy uses spatial proximity as a metaphor for affect, suggesting that sensory history provided a language for describing the collective social body as well the individual one (*Oxford English Dictionary*).¹ The 'closeness' accorded to intimate sensations came to describe both abstract and material sets of social relationships in the early modern period. We still rely on these metaphors when we designate others as 'close' to us (Bromley, 2012, 6).

The spatially proximate quality of intimacy can be a handicap for historians, for our objects of study are often anything but 'close' to us in space and time. The intimate senses of taste, touch, and smell can seem especially remote even as they promise a different approach to understanding the past. Often perceived as too ephemeral to persist in their original forms, the odors, flavors, textures, temperatures, and somatic pressures of the past appear destined to linger primarily through textual description. And reading texts, for us in the present, all too often registers as entirely visual activity.

We are not, however, actually reduced to nothing but eyes when we read, even if we may temporarily forget our non-visual sensations in some processes of suture. Even photographs, for example, smell, and the smell of old photographs can be an influential force in our interaction with them. New work in neuroscience suggests that our brains, at least, make less of a distinction than

1 From its earliest uses in English, the adjective 'intimate' could refer to either 'inmost' ('This faculty is very intimate And near the Centre,' 1647) or 'close in acquaintance' ('an intimate friend of his,' 1635). (OED, 'intimate' A.1.a, A.3.a). Both meanings are afforded by the Latin *intimus*.



we might think between actually smelling a lily, seeing someone else do so, or even reading about someone doing so.² This provocative work suggests that the sensory world of the past is not as remote as we think. ‘Sensuous scholarship’³ aims to recall those other sensations and a more diversified reading body. Ultimately, however, a truly sensuous approach to the past may require that academic scholars take on some unaccustomed roles. In her Afterword to the 2010 issue of *The Senses and Society*,⁴ art historian Corine Schleif (2010) argues that ‘Exploring and conveying the multisensory worlds of the past using the multimedia possibilities of the present should not be left to the entertainment industries’ (161) and that scholars have an ethical obligation to get involved in not just the analysis but also the re-production of past sensory experience. Taking up Schleif’s challenge would demand that scholars act as curators, technicians, designers, artists, and above all, *feelers* who admit to our own position as embodied subjects affected by our sensuous relations with the objects of our study.

This would be a scholarship that would value sensitivity over objectivity and that would challenge the sensory hierarchies in which proximate relations between analyst and analyzed currently unfold. For this reason, anthropologist David Howes has described recent work in this area as a ‘revolution’ in scholarship (Howes, 2005, 4) wherein the senses are not just the latest topic in the study of embodiment, but a *means* to more profoundly materialize our seemingly disembodied practices of analysis. In his contribution to our *postmedieval* issue, Howes highlights some of the ways in which our authors (and their methodologies) connect with broader shifts in the field, suggesting that there is much to be gained by abandoning worry about losing traditional facades of objectivity in favor of more intimate connections.

Intimacy, though, is not always pleasurable or even comfortable. The essays here grapple with some of the more sinister and unseemly aspects of past sensory regimes even as they explore the possibilities of re-imagining sensory hierarchies. Mark M. Smith, for example, examines the long duration of olfactory stereotypes about the stench of social ‘others,’ connecting medieval European myths about *foetor Judaicus* with modern ones about the ‘smell’ of Jews and African Americans. Smith’s essay focuses on the paradox at the heart of such erroneous beliefs: the proximate nature of smell required an intimate familiarity with those marked as other, even as such stereotypes worked to erase this knowledge, relying on assumptions about vast social differences and, more disturbingly, working to enact those differences through violence. His comparative approach challenges easy assumptions about the denigration of olfaction in modern culture by demonstrating the sheer range of olfactory-otering across historical periods. It is a history made up of many intimate – and often violent – encounters between people.

Such intimate violence often leaves its mark on skin. Patricia Cahill’s essay reminds us of that fact through her reading of Middleton and Rowley’s

2 The brain’s reaction to representation as if it were personally experienced is one of the potential implications of recent study of ‘mirror neuron systems.’ See Iacoboni (2009) for an introduction to this research.

3 See Stoller (1997, ix-xviii) from whom we borrow this phrase, for discussion of sensation in scholarly practice.

4 The journal, together with the ‘Sensory Formations’ book series edited by David Howes (both published by Berg), have been foundational in giving shape to sensory studies as an interdisciplinary field. The 2010 issue of *The Senses and Society* is devoted to ‘The Five Senses in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.’

The Changeling, a Renaissance English play known for its investment in tactility. Its famous ‘glove scene’ – where one character imagines ravishing another while stretching his hand into her lost glove – has been read as a rape, but Cahill’s analysis suggests that even forced tactility is never unidirectional. The play stages intimate knowledge as haptic and thus reflexive; its violence unfolds across another’s skin and back again. Touching and feeling are linked and link us: a character’s pock-marked face, another’s ruptured hymen, a spectacularly charred corpse, and that discarded glove all mark a violent desire for tactile connection, even if violent and destructive.

In her essay on medieval sacred space, Laura Gelfand offers her take on a different, though related, paradox about intimate knowledge: though sensation is experienced as an innate truth, it often results from carefully constructed stimuli. Medieval copies of the Holy Sepulchre are such realms: designed to engage the entire body of the devoted pilgrim, these sacred spaces mimicked accounts of pilgrims to the Jerusalem site where they were often locked overnight into the overcrowded, stuffy, and unlit tomb, left to navigate by feel its sacred interior. Although these reproductions lacked visual accord with the original, they were designed to trigger a similar kind of sensory experience. In this way, they were important zones of devotional practice, so much so that they were increasingly subjected to control by church authorities who wished to reorient them to align more broadly with church dogma. Gelfand’s argument about sensory simulacra, particularly of encounters with the divine, reveals the complicated ways that sensory knowledge can be both visceral and socially constructed.

Hristomir Stanev’s essay makes a similar claim, examining how olfaction triggered and undermined attempts to regulate the stench of the city under the aegis of public health. Smell, he argues, is both individuated and aggregated, a fact that the sensorium of London’s public theatres relied upon heavily to stage realistic representations of city life. Anything but ephemeral or fleeting, the smell of London lurked in its theatres, which acquired their own unique olfactory *mélange*. This created a strong and unpleasant material resonance with plays that staged both growing fears about the effect of urban crowds on public health and the intransigence of stench within certain spaces of the city. Intimacy thus becomes less about the connection between discrete bodies and more about the (often overwhelming) ways in which we are materially connected through involuntary and often revolting sensation.

Where Stanev’s essay ends, Julie Singer’s begins, provocatively suggesting that intimacy can be ‘revolting’ in both senses of the word. In the medieval play *Farce nouvelle des cinq sens de l’homme*, the protagonist ‘Lhomme’ gets intimately reacquainted with his own waste as the ‘Cul’ (asshole) successfully rebels against the privilege of the ‘higher’ senses. Lhomme’s ass tops his head in a flipping of the traditional sensory hierarchies elevating vision and hearing. Yet, as Singer argues, any standard sensory paradigm is already contested even before Cul forces the point, since Lhomme’s initial roster of recognized sense



organs surprisingly omits the nose in favor of the foot. Cul, a particularly 'productive' potential sense organ, simply takes the body's possible reorganization even further by suggesting that human body is inseparable from its effluvia. Singer's essay thus demonstrates that sensory history can align usefully with disability theory by further dismantling normative anatomies.

Singer's essay thus reflects one of the broader goals of this collection: to put sensory history in intimate dialogue with disability theory and other contributions to the study of embodiment. Some of the essays in this issue already address the afterlives of medieval and early modern discourses of the intimate senses: Smith tackles the problem of unexpected historical durability, medieval to modern, in his discussion of the smell of Otherness; Gelfand considers the re-emergence of haptic architecture for Christian worship in the example of the Holy Land Experience theme park; and Stanev makes a case for the impact of Renaissance drama's olfactory topoi on later legislation about urban management. But we have also turned to scholars from other fields of research to help suggest connections between early sensory history and current directions in the multidisciplinary study of the senses.

Our responders bring expertise from anthropology, disability studies, cultural geography, theater and performance studies, medicine/neuroscience, and rhetoric. Yet while their reflections give us a taste of diverse approaches to sensory scholarship, they nonetheless share certain convictions about its future. The most consistent and powerful of these is that it is time to get away from the five-sense model and trace out new constellations of sensing. David Howes argues that historians need not adhere to the Aristotelian schema of the parallel five as the most period-appropriate, since it has never been the only paradigm, even in European philosophical writing; other body parts (besides the eye, ear, nose, mouth, and skin) have been thought to be sensory organs; particular sensations have been re-assigned to different senses; and the designation of vision as the most sublime sense could be a subject of debate.⁵

Part of the ability of sensory studies to disrupt 'assumptions about the unity of the sensing body,' as Howes proposes that it do, lies in its potential to identify the contested and therefore shifting forms of sensory experience. The historical fluidity of sense experience is suggested further by Mark Paterson's argument that, 'in the formation of sensuo-spatial memories' such as those attached to a homeland for immigrants, 'a multiplicity of sensory channels' cross one another and fuse in synesthetic combinations. A smellscape such as that created by immigrant cooks or Renaissance playhouse patrons is rarely experienced only by smell, and the odors (or lack of odor) present may be meaningless when not coupled with simultaneous tastes, sights, and sounds. Even what we may consider a singular sense may need to be rethought, as Jonathan Cole implies when he notes that recent behavioral studies suggest that 'our perception of tastes and smells can be conditioned to a larger extent than we realize by expectation, knowledge, and the other senses.' The sense of taste, Cole notes,

5 Though historically robust, the five-sense model has nearly always proved difficult even for its adherents (see Farina, 2012, 293–294).



is particularly hard to disentangle from that of smell, but even seemingly more separate sensations, like those registering sound and flavor, can be connected in ways that the five-sense model does not register.

Some provocative examples of different sensory clusters are sketched out by Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren and Georgina Kleege. Kochhar-Lindgren invokes Gilles Deleuze's suggestion that we think of sensory 'microperceptions' capable of folding into different combinations of 'macroperceptions.' As an example of the latter, she offers the 'Third Ear,' a form of hearing that relies in part on non-auditory perceptions to experience and interpret a soundscape. Writing about Helen Keller's sensory life, Kleege cites her provocative riposte to the assumption that the blind and deaf must remain ignorant of sights and sounds. Keller's satisfying experience of these sensations is a testament to the abilities of the synesthetic body, an embodiment that remains under-acknowledged in scholarship written by and for the sighted. Indeed, our responders as a whole urge us to be attentive to non-normative sensing bodies, as they not only suggest a broader spectrum of sense practice and sense preference but also demand that we think through the politics of sensory history.

Our 'new story about intimacy' is thus one that is very old: it reminds us that sensation is an intimate threshold of knowledge that emerges in the fragile and ephemeral space that exists between our futures and our pasts. It beckons for a more sensuous connection with the past that can resonate in the present, even as it builds on the material ways in which we are already interconnected. And it hopefully inspires us to feel differently about those.

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