FEMINIST VISCERAL POLITICS
From taste to territory

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Introduction

Feminist visceral politics refers to the elaboration of political ways of thinking, acting and being that take seriously the visceral realm of life: the sensations, moods and states born of our corporeal engagement with the material world. The notion and impulse of visceral politics build on diverse legacies of interest in and engagement with bodily experience from within feminist geography and wider feminist scholarship (e.g. Bondi 2005; Longhurst 2001, 2005; Longhurst et al. 2008; McWhorter 1999; Moss and Dyck 2003; Probyn 2001; Thien 2005). The (first) authors of this chapter began thinking about feminist visceral politics in their research on food–body relationships (e.g. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008, 2010). Examining the visceral experience of food meant digging into the ways in which social concepts like identity and difference ‘mattered’ to how bodies reacted to, tasted or were otherwise drawn towards (or away from) different kinds of foods. And, it meant paying attention to the situatedness of food experience – to the ways in which structures of power enter into bodily judgments of food (as well as food spaces, ideas and events). In this chapter, we ask what it means to ‘do’ feminist visceral politics, both in and beyond research. The chapter evaluates the actions and outcomes of three distinct projects, all of which were influenced by theories and methods broadly related to feminist political theory, corporeal feminism and body studies.

This chapter is not focused on research findings per se; that is, we are not interested in portraying the data that these projects generated in ways that argue for a singular, coherent story of social scientific discovery (Davies and Dwyer 2007). Instead, we are interested in practice. The outcomes we aim to consider are flexible, transferrable models for action that build from feminist theory and feminist geography – they are the embodied, relational and, indeed, the visceral ‘things’, both intended and unintended, that (can) happen in the research process that allow us eventually to arrive at a conclusion of sorts: the deepening of relationships; the reframing of concepts; the creation of new ideas or paths forward; the witnessing of complexity and contradiction. We call these ‘things’ models, rather than findings, because we want to emphasize them as examples (though not blueprints) of how one might ‘do’ feminist visceral politics. These models for action come both from our own research events and practices and from the
events and practices that we set out to study – and usually from a combination of both. As such, they are illustrations of what might emerge when we focus our energies on recognizing and harnessing the politics of the visceral body.

Before we turn to discuss the examples from our research, however, a note on complexity and contradiction: over a decade ago, Gail Davies and Claire Dwyer (2007) identified some important shifts in the impulses that drive (some) qualitative research in human geography. In particular, they noted – especially among researchers interested in questions of affect, phenomenology and materiality – a rejection of the idea that the purpose of research is to generate clarity and reduce uncertainty. ‘In place of the pursuit of certainty in generating representations of the world,’ Davies and Dwyer noted,

there is recognition that the world is so textured as to exceed our capacity to understand it, and thus to accede that social science methodologies and forms of knowing will be characterized as much by openness, reflexivity and recursivity as by categorization, conclusion and closure. 

2007, 258

Certainly, in our own work, as well as in much of the scholarship that we have been inspired by, themes of hybridity, relationality and the rhizome feature prominently. In this work, the binary between the empirical and theoretical seems to fall away, replaced by an (open, partial) attempt to witness and explain complexity and contradiction within particular, embodied contexts.

But (why) is it so important to witness and explain complexity? What does a recognition of contradiction lend to the doing of feminist visceral politics? When we focus on research findings, ‘complexity’ is arguably neither surprising nor particularly helpful. Indeed, everything is complex (and many things are in contradiction). But when we focus on the praxis of complexity – on what to do with it – the outcomes of our work can be far more valuable. For example, the recognition that taste preferences are a complex amalgam of structural inequality, cultural knowledge and messy biosocial relationships can be immediately valuable to someone who is struggling to understand their own food–body relationship. And such a recognition can also be valuable, at a policy level, to nutrition practitioners or public health professionals who seek to intervene in particular food habits or behaviours. However, the practice of complexity takes both creativity and courage. Many in the academy are so well trained in the craft of critique that doing seems at times formidable, even unthinkable (lest we be critiqued ourselves). And although many of us do, via our research, we position our doing as methods and findings in order to justify and clarify our interactions with the world and hide the ‘messy bits’ that might make our research seem less conclusive (Jones and Evans 2011). Similarly, the practice of policy writing (at least for nutritional policy) seems wholly oriented to the task of simplification (such that the food messages that we receive are predictable and repetitive, and often also ineffective).

What would it look like to ‘do’ complexity in the practice of research? What would it look like to embrace, even encourage, contradiction in the articulation of research outcomes and policy recommendations? Our research experiences have motivated us to ask these questions, if not to begin to seek some situated answers.

The three examples that we discuss in this chapter – a project on critical nutrition in Philadelphia, PA; a project on the food adequacy of displaced women in Medellin, Colombia; and a project of peacebuilding in Colombia that grew out of the second example – together provide a glimpse of feminist visceral politics as both vital and mundane. While we provide clear evidence of why doing feminist visceral politics is important – for example, it remains sensitive...
to diverse experiences of real bodies and it uncovers aspects of life often overlooked by other approaches – we also express why it challenges us to want to ‘do’ more. Especially as ‘feminism’ and ‘feelings’ are further vilified in corporate, conservative and mainstream discourses, the most achievable and effectual outcomes may be idiosyncratic and fleeting rather than generalizable and sustained.

Critical nutrition: co-producing a different approach to nourishment in Philadelphia, PA

The authors have a long-standing interest in nutrition, not just the science but the ways that nutrition knowledge and practice become pulled into the reproduction of social identity, the methods and motivations behind attempts to intervene in people’s food habits and behaviours, and especially the biosocial mechanisms through which bodies come to be differently nourished. Critical nutrition, as a field of study, has emerged from the recognition that ‘it is vital to defamiliarize nutrition, to undo its taken-for-grantedness in order to understand better its sociological and cultural underpinnings, as well as the effects that it has beyond improving or failing to improve dietary health’ (Guthman 2014, 2). More specifically, much of our own impulse in pursuing critical nutrition work came from the recognition that ‘hegemonic nutrition’ – in short, the mainstream discourses and practices of nutrition, which promote standardization, decontextualization and expert knowledge (see Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013) – is largely ineffective and sometimes even harmful to the advancement of bodily well-being. Thus, we began to wonder about how we might ‘do nutrition differently’ (ibid.), in ways that are open to the complexities and contradictions of everyday food-body relationships. In other words, what would it look like to practise nutrition through the lens of feminist visceral politics?

Over the course of a few years, Allison and Jessica Hayes-Conroy developed an ongoing, working relationship with several staff members of the Norris Square Community Alliance (NSCA) of Philadelphia, PA, including especially Yoshiko Yamasaki (a collaborator on this chapter). NSCA is a community development corporation that was founded over thirty years ago by a group of women who wanted to ensure a safe and healthy neighbourhood for their children. Residents of Norris Square are encouraged to be active at all levels of the organization. The scope of the NSCA is wide, including issues such as affordable housing, employment training, early childhood education, community organizing and more (NSCA 2015). Recently, through Yoshiko’s guidance, the NSCA also began a project to enhance nutrition education for children and families. Allison and Jessica’s connection to the NSCA emerged through our work in critical nutrition as both researchers and teachers. Through conversations with Yoshiko, we began to develop a series of dialogue-based activities (workshops) that would benefit both students of critical nutrition (at Temple University) and the families and staff of NSCA who are interested in nutrition education.

The overarching idea of the critical nutrition workshops (which were held at the main NSCA building over several days) was to experiment with the practice of critical nutrition and to encourage dialogue about the potential utility of doing nutrition differently – critically, contextually and viscerally. Participants included staff and parents, with students and researchers facilitating. The workshop format sought to counter the expectation of expert-led nutrition education by enrolling participants as experts of sorts – of their own desires and cravings, daily life habits, obstacles to change, and so on – and the researchers (us and our students) as the anti-experts (Heyman 2010). The dialogue first centred on participants’ own experiences and concerns regarding bodily nourishment, then on the idea of critical nutrition
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itself and, finally, on the potential utility of employing critical, embodied perspectives in
nutrition education.

The most significant outcome was arguably not the data itself (although we did record
the conversations, transcribe and analyse them) but rather in the (ephemeral) energy that the
workshops evoked in many of the participants. There was a tangible dynamism as we worked
through various issues, ranging from doctors and fat stigma, to the draw of a slice of pizza after
work, to the hidden assumptions behind the term ‘food desert’. The dynamism came not from
a sense that we were ‘getting somewhere’ (we weren’t, really; there were no clear next steps) but
rather from the doing itself – the fact that the dialogue enrolled participants (however briefly)
in the production of critical knowledge about bodily nourishment, especially about feelings
surrounding the nourishment of their own bodies. In this context, our own attempts to share
critical nutrition ideas with the participants functioned as way ‘to diffuse power and knowledge
production, [so as to] not perpetuate a closed realm of privileged knowledge’ (Heyman 2010,
315). This point is particularly important, given that much of the scholarship in geography
about bodies, food and affect can feel impenetrable to a non-expert.

Regarding complexity and contradiction, we might note that the dialogue itself, as well as the
broader relationship between us (scholars) and NSCA staff contained much of both. As critical
theorists with an interest in ‘practice’, we frequently find ourselves needing to work alongside
and through structures of knowledge that we are – well – critical of. Many funding streams for
food-based interventions, for example, require outcomes assessments to test the effectiveness of
nutrition education. Are students able to identify a vegetable correctly? Did staff initiate regular
use of nutrition lessons? We attempted to translate our own critical nutrition work into such
metrics with only minimal success. Similarly, obesity prevention has become a dominant frame
and motivating force for many nutrition intervention initiatives, often including standardizing
metrics such as the Body Mass Index (BMI). These ideas and impulses circulated our collective
conversations in a variety of incongruous affective capacities – as disdain, hope, envy, anxiety,
scepticism, and so on – that both disrupted and affirmed the metrics themselves. Although our
own critical instincts drive us to interrupt these modes of assessing bodies and health, our scep-
ticism comes not (only) because we have witnessed how alienating and oppressive these metrics
can be but, more basically; because they tend to ignore and discount the ephemeral, affective
work that can happen when we provide a space for critical praxis.

It is likely impossible to trace the micro-effects of the NSCA workshops that we convened,
but this does not indicate that they were not meaningful. We know, for example, that the events
provided broader meaning to Yoshiko’s work. (She said so.) We know, too, that the events provided
the space for intellectual curiosity and emotional sharing that some community members had
been desiring. (Again, they said so.) Part of the work of ‘doing complexity’, then, involves pro-
viding a communal space for critical praxis, where complexity and contradiction are not just
inevitable but encouraged. This might seem a mundane point but, if so, it is telling that so much
nutrition policy aims at the opposite: simplification, universal messaging and cookie-cutter
protocols. What would nutrition policy look like if it embraced – even facilitated – complexity?

Food adequacy: cooking up affective partnerships in Medellin, Colombia

In a small project on food adequacy in the city of Medellin, Colombia, Allison and another
researcher partnered with leaders from a community-based organization, La Colonia de San
Luis, which accompanies families from rural areas of Antioquia, Colombia, who were violently
displaced to the city. Part of the initial idea of the work was to broaden the scope of ‘adequacy’
in food security policy and academic conversations (Hayes-Conroy and Sweet 2015). Food
policy work seldom considers the complexities of embodied experience, and food adequacy is often assessed on the basis of calorie counts and macro/micronutrients. So, the work wanted to understand how the displaced women encountered food in the city as distinct from the rural areas from which most had been displaced, and specifically how they evaluated the adequacy of the food that they found there. Hayes-Conroy and Sweet talked with displaced women who were charged with procuring food for their households. They also planned, shopped, cooked and ate meals with the women. They returned a year later to create a ‘body-mapping’ event, which tried to understand the bodily impact of violent displacement to the city including, yet moving beyond, food insecurity. Body mapping (see Figure 35.1) offered a way to visualize, express and materially understand the ways in which displaced women judged and assessed their bodily experiences with displacement – documenting everything from blistering feet and paused menstruation through heartache and concern for children to emotions like relief and nostalgia.

The stories that the work uncovered contained plenty of complexity and contradiction. For example, the women generally viewed the food that they could access in the city as less fresh and less healthy and/or tasty as the food back in their rural homes, but certain brands were viewed favourably. Also, almost all the women had moderate to severe household food insecurity yet demonstrated a hesitancy about eating food from the ‘urban industrial food system’ or feeding it to children. Many food-insecure women communicated the importance of food in terms much broader than alleviating hunger or providing necessary nutrition – the importance of sharing meals, of having connection with or control over food production and exchanging ideas through cooking, eating and feeding all were significant aspects of food adequacy, for these women. And, finally, women had had both positive and negative emotions surrounding their experiences in the city since their displacement.

In light of such complexity, the writing that came out of this project pushed not only for an expansion and recentring of how we define and value (adequate) food, beyond that which is assessable through nutrition status alone, but also, and more broadly, for more sensitive and adaptable kinds of social policy. We asked how we document, understand and create more a flexible metrics for adequacy that speaks to women’s diverse visceral experiences of food insecurity. How do we create social policy that is sensitive to different embodied experiences? Such musings were a small part of the visceral politics that were sought and (partially) accomplished through the project. To be clear, the ‘doing’ of feminist visceral politics in this case does not refer to the type of intellectual output, nor to the research events or to the participatory methods per se, but to the ways in which specific thoughts, actions and connections were invigorated by the work with particular people in a particular place. In other words, feminist ‘doing’ is always specific to context and is neither contained in certain methods (like group interviews or body-mapping), nor given in scholarly approaches.

So the ‘doing’ of feminist visceral politics in this case looked much like relationship-building: the researchers and participating women dreamed up delicious meals, went shopping and worried about our children together; we listened and spoke, we cooked and learned, we tasted and ate, we defined and redefined, we decided and changed our minds, we misunderstood each other, we showed joy, fear, anger and appreciation. At the end of the small research project, what did the ‘doing’ of such feminist visceral politics actually do? Certainly, it did much less than anyone had hoped with respect to challenging and resolving food insecurity. Sharing women’s experiences and stories was valuable to all, but offered little change. Instead, the most important outcome of the work may be an outcome that is hard to quantify in academic terms: it inaugurated an affective partnership – a connection through which some participants shared the motivation to continue to work together. This partnership – centred through the
Figure 35.1  Body map.
organization La Colonia de San Luis – has shifted in unexpected ways over the last six years and has enabled new achievements and new goals (some of which are described below), as well as some false starts and dead ends. It has been unsurprisingly complex and contradictory, just like the stories that we set out to understand, yet has permitted the expansion of an affective network of people accompanying other people in their life work.

The next section takes off from this idea of an **affective partnership** and describes how prioritizing feminist visceral politics allowed us to nurture a vexingly unspecific vision for change that came alongside one particular set of affective partnerships.

### Embodied social transformation across borders: the case of the Legión del Afecto

Growing from the partnership inaugurated through the research described above, Allison Hayes-Conroy began working with community leaders and youth (both women and men) from La Colonia de San Luis and, later, with others from a partner organization called Casa Mia (including Ximena Quintero Saavedra, a collaborator on this chapter). Allison’s work with these groups has focused on a peacebuilding initiative known as La Legión del Afecto (hereafter the Legión), which La Colonia and Casa Mia helped to build. The Legión could be described as a network of affective partnerships on a large scale. It is a social initiative with much history, piloted in the early 2000s as a collaboration between these community organizations and progressive academics who were interested in building an everyday kind of peace in violence-afflicted rural and urban territories. As it began to mobilize many young people across Colombia, the Legión grew to become both a social movement and a programme of the national government in over 35 different locations (see Hayes-Conroy and Saenz Montoya 2017; Hayes-Conroy, Saenz Montoya and Buitrago 2017). Much of this network was built by paying attention to the corporeal need for affection and coming up with diverse ways – for instance, dance, music, ritual, theatre and shared meals – to communicate it in order to rebuild urban and rural territories in and through peace. Today it exists, unfunded, as an uncertain but potent network built through thousands of individual efforts on non-violent, affective relationship-building across the country in some of its most precarious locations. Allison’s work on the Legión has been largely ethnographic, accomplished over five years with much support from other collaborators close to the initiative, students and colleagues, including Jessica Hayes-Conroy and Ximena Quintero Saavedra.

To be clear, our work with the Legión has centred on the youth and leaders in the network, who share the experience of economic and social precarity, rather than with the top officials who came to manage the initiative as a government programme. The research events were largely determined by Legión praxis and involved many dialogues, journeying and visiting, and witnessing and acting in celebratory and/or commemorative events.

In what ways has our work on peacebuilding in and around the Legión carried out feminist visceral politics? Through the work, we have tried to take seriously the affective model that the Legión has developed, learning how to describe it accurately, emphasizing the Legión’s legacy and history (the good and the bad), understanding its power structures and working with its youth to write about, talk about, reflect upon and otherwise support and improve the potential of its peacebuilding. The model itself is an example of visceral politics; it is a way towards a social transformation that emphasizes sensations, feelings and corporeal dispositions. **Lo efectivo es lo afectivo** (‘the affective is effective’) was the motto that the Legión gleaned from a radically non-violent leftist priest who himself practised peacebuilding through the 1980s and 1990s along similar lines. The Legión has developed lenguajes alternativos (alternative languages) that use the
body (through things like dance, music, sport and more) to communicate feelings, ideas and visions for the future. While the Legión has largely organized around generating positive affects and feeling through its public assemblies, the realities of its organizing have been far from rosy. Not only have youth had to find ways to collectively cope with trauma and loss but their participation generated unexpected challenges and hard social, economic and emotional choices. Thus, although our work has sought to shore up the potential of the Legión’s model, practising feminist visceral politics has also meant asking hard questions about power, racism, sexism and economic inequity in its past and present. It has meant learning to be silent and learning to listen to stories and reflections told through multiple means (not all verbal). It has meant being present with young leaders as they talk about the future; and it has meant making places where we can be present together to have those conversations. And it has meant giving up any chance that all of this will fit together neatly into one intellectual package containing a perfectly crafted set of publications about what it all means.

Our writings on the Legión inevitably contradict each other. The doing of feminist visceral politics with the Legión has meant using our academic and empirical expertise to tell stories in ways that are valuable to our partners and that continue to build strategic partnerships for our work towards a ‘fuzzy’ common goal (peace/non-violence/anti-precarity/social transformation). The action plans and goals of the actors in and around the Legión are themselves ripe with contradiction and complexity. While non-violent social transformation is a commonly held ideal, in practice the work has been full of political ambiguity, economic tension, passions and ideas, challenges and opportunities, each of which pulls actors apart as well as together (c.f. Butler 2015). How do you tell the story and convey the needs of the Legión as a powerful social initiative in such a context? In the academic world, what theoretical framework do you pick? In the policy world, what strategy do you push? Work in and with the Legión has been a continual negotiation of contradictory ideas and practices and complex needs. What do we do with that complexity? Externally and internally, a common expectation of social initiatives is that they have clearly defined goals and political or social intentions. Yet, one of the magical aspects of the Legión as an affective network has been the way that it draws in diverse, often once-conflicting actors (e.g. people on different sides of the armed conflict), who tend to have differing visions about the future of the initiative. The praxis of complexity in this case has thus meant working with youth and leaders to try to understand and build a future for the Legión that does not try to erase this complexity but to remain an effective and influential model for social transformation.

Conclusions

Our intention in this chapter has been to focus on the doing of feminist visceral politics rather than on the findings that emerge from such doing. These two things are not mutually exclusive, but researchers undoubtedly tend to privilege the latter. Our suggestion is simply that the outcomes of this doing — the ephemeral happenings, the affective traces, the partnerships built and the futures imagined — matter, and that indeed they may be as meaningful as the findings themselves. Perhaps feminist visceral politics, then, is a different way to understand and to build ‘place’ as it is understood in geography, with connotations of nuance and situated meaning-making; or, perhaps feminist visceral politics is another form of privileging ‘small data’ (Delyser and Sui 2013), as a counter (or counterpart) to big data. Through this chapter we have argued for a way of recognizing, for those of us who desire our research to do something (to effect change), that the doing of feminist work need not always be measurable, concrete and academically admissible for it to be important. We should not let the intellectual push for momentous

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and transformational work overtake the diverse possibilities of the messier doings that we so rarely consider as research outcomes yet which actually do the work of connecting discrete projects or publications to actual bodies and places. At the same time, in each of the three research examples that we discuss, feminist visceral politics expands the very importance of the body beyond its traditional bounds; from the tastes of community members in Philadelphia and Medellin to the rebuilding of territory through attentiveness to feeling, feminist visceral politics also demonstrates the power of the body to shape both research and community practice.

Note
1 The material described is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) under Grant #1452541. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF.

Key readings

References