

Introduction

Consider this short book an engaged meditation on the state of the “field” (more properly, “habit” or methodology) of sensory history.¹ It is primarily concerned with how historians of the senses engage with and write about the subject. It begins from the premise—one accepted by sensory historians generally—that, as sensory anthropologist David Howes puts it, “the sensorium is a historical formation.”² How historians have written about those formations, what (and how) they are currently writing about them, and what (and how) they might be writing about in future years constitute the underpinnings of this short study.

This is in no way a catholic survey of recent and ongoing work; instead, it is an attempt to offer a modest manifesto. It is at once a call and an invitation: a cordial invitation to historians who are unfamiliar with sensory history to adopt some of its insights and practices, and a gentle call to current practitioners to think in new ways about writing histories of the senses. The book ponders three interconnected issues. First, it traces what

we might think of as some of the origins of historical work on the senses, long before the emergence of the nomenclature of “sensory history.” It interrogates, explores, and, in some cases, recovers some important and arguably pioneering work on the senses that has been forgotten or slighted in more recent treatments. The purpose of recovering—and engaging with—this historiographical genealogy is twofold. First, it is born of my own conviction that few innovations in any field of historical writing are wholly original and that we are under a professional obligation to at least acknowledge foundational work. Second, and more importantly, I remain convinced that if the current state of writing on the history of the senses is to evolve, refine, and emerge as more interpretively powerful, we would be well advised to consult, with care, some of the earliest work on the senses. As chapter 1 shows in some detail, the strengths and weaknesses of this early work can be understood profitably by current scholars of the senses. Early work both reveals the pitfalls of writing about past senses—including missteps that still inflect some writing today—and alerts us to possible new directions in sensory history. While this work did not always fully develop these new directions, early practitioners thought carefully enough about what they were doing to allow us to pivot from their foundational insights to offer additional ways of writing about and researching the senses. It is also worth noting that early work reflected an interpretive divide on how to write, historically, about the senses; it is a divide that still has some resonance today, and reading these early works with care helps us move beyond it.

We are at an important moment in the writing of sensory history. As I document in chapter 2, it is expanding rapidly, even though it is not as new as some observers sometimes seem to think. Here, I explain the potential that sensory history holds for the study of history generally—why, in other words, the

discipline of historical writing should take the senses seriously. I offer examples, including a quite detailed illustration, not only of how sensory history expands our understanding of the past but of how its exclusion leaves us impoverished. This part of the book is an invitation to the historical profession generally to take seriously the senses and it showcases some work in an effort to incentivize that embrace.

In chapter 3, I highlight the strengths of the current iteration of sensory history and identify some of its shortcomings. Unless sensory history thinks carefully about its future, it courts the real possibility of deadening its interpretive power and slipping into quiet desuetude. If sensory history offers historians of all persuasions, times, and places a real, useful, and incisive way to write about the past, it also challenges current practitioners to attend to the historicity of the senses and the desirability—even the urgency—of engaged and sustained debate among themselves. In the third chapter, I ponder what, collectively, historians of the senses are doing with their field and suggest what else they could be doing with it. I am happy to disclose that I have been banging this drum for a couple of decades in various ways. I do so again now because while I am quite thrilled with (and, in very small part, responsible for) some of the work being produced by historians of the senses, I am concerned that without the sort of intervention I am calling for, the field will become etiolated.³ I invite current practitioners to think about how their “field” probably needs to evolve if the real interpretive dividends of sensory history are to be realized, to think about initiatives that will help the field flourish profitably and avoid lapsing into a kind of comfortable comradery that, while valuable in many ways, can unintentionally deprive us of the dialectic necessary for robust interpretive growth. Sensory history will have done its work when its habit, the incorporation of the sensate into our understanding of the past, has assumed

a naturalized quality so that historical writing generally attends to all of the senses in some fashion. At that point, sensory history will no longer be a stand-alone habit or field. Put simply, attention to the senses will be part and parcel of a historical sensibility. Until that point, sensory historians must attend to some important matters and think carefully about their own work.

Part of this call—a challenge to us all, myself included—is born of my own particular research interests. Most of it is a product of my reading of recent literature and reviews, some of which hint at a growing unease with simply celebrating sensory history as “new” and “burgeoning” and a desire to more actively critique the work that is being produced in a way that simultaneously encourages the production of more scholarship but also considers the core methodological and interpretive issues underwriting sensory history. In other words, for sensory history—as a way to “do” history, as a habit of historical inquiry—to inflect mainstream historical writing, current tensions in the field require attention and resolution. Until those tensions are addressed, historians generally will remain—wisely—dubious about the benefits of sensory history.

The third aim of this essay—also outlined in chapter 3—is, simply, not only to suggest how sensory history should be written and researched but to identify a number of topics that could profitably be examined through the senses. Some of my suggestions here are based on work I know to be ongoing and forthcoming; others reflect my own particular interests for the field; still others are hopeful suggestions. Plainly, I do not want readers to think I offer anything exhaustive here.

This book makes no pretense of offering original empirical research. Rather, it is based on my reading of the field as a whole, my main conclusions derived from what has been written and what is currently being written about the history of the senses. Certainly, what I offer here is by no means an exhaustive

survey. Such an undertaking is not only beyond the scope of a short book—the sheer volume of material already published on sensory history is daunting—but unnecessary. The principal lines of inquiry, fissures of debate, and main trajectories in the field are discernable in general terms and accessible in summary form.

Lastly, I need to point out that this book is not a critique of sensory studies generally. It is not especially concerned with, for example, how the disciplines of anthropology and sociology are wrestling with the sensate. Such a treatment is readily available elsewhere. That much said, and as will become apparent, I am very much of the opinion that future writing on the history of the senses will benefit enormously from further interdisciplinary engagement.⁴