

## Book Reviews

*Arousing Sense: Recipes for Workshopping Sensory Experience*, by Tomie Hahn. University of Illinois Press, 2021. 186 pp.

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*Arousing Sense: Recipes for Workshopping Sensory Experience* by Tomie Hahn is a practical pedagogical workbook in the form of a wide-ranging collection of imaginative prompts, or “recipes,” for sensory exploration. Accessible and engaging, the exercises offered are intended to support both workshop leaders and solo practitioners in cultivating awareness of what, and how, they sense, as well as in expressing this embodied knowledge through writing and other artistic forms.

Sensory awareness—attention to how we experience the world through our senses—is a central concern of Hahn’s artistic and scholarly research, as well as her decades-long teaching practice. In her 2007 monograph, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*, she explores how sensory attention shapes both cultural and individual realities through ethnographic accounts of the non-verbal, embodied manner in which *nihon buyo* (traditional Japanese dance form) is transmitted from master to student. In *Arousing Sense*, Hahn draws from her experience as an educator to share how attention to our everyday sensory experiences can make all of us, regardless of training or specialty, more sensible to ourselves and more available for playful and meaningful collaboration with the world around us.

Hahn’s approach is grounded in the conviction that all knowledge is mediated through the senses, and that deepening one’s sensory awareness can therefore be of benefit to artists and researchers in any discipline: “No specialization needed” (1). Each sensory exploration is offered in the form of a recipe, including preparation and detailed, step-by-step instructions. In addition to playfully referencing the sensorially rich and often ritualistic quality of meal preparation and consumption, the recipe format is fitting to the nature of Hahn’s lesson plans. Like cooking recipes, they are detailed but not rigidly prescriptive—as any chef knows, the best meals include improvisation, and are seasoned to taste.

Hahn opens the book with a personal introduction that orients the reader to her background as a performing artist and ethnographer (whose research encompasses such diverse areas as Japanese traditional performing arts, Monster Truck rallies, and Deep Listening), to the complexities of her racial and cultural identities (Japanese-American and German-American), and to her commitment to the power of sensorial experience. A second introduction explains

how to use the book in straightforward terms, detailing the format of each recipe to come. The core of the book consists of thirty-one of these recipes, primarily oriented to group workshop engagement, but which can be adapted for individual, personal exploration. Each recipe includes all the necessary ingredients for a successful workshop, including: a preface reflecting on how the exercise was inspired or developed; notes on any necessary pre-workshop preparation, space, or materials; an “opening announcement” script that the reader is invited to borrow or adapt should they find it supportive; and step-by-step instructions for the workshop itself. These instructions are followed by additional resources and references that point to the range of directions a given exercise can be taken for different audiences. The last section of each recipe shares potential post-exercise discussion topics, with particular attention given to those that would be productive within the contexts of sensory studies fieldwork and the creative arts.

While the collection of sensory prompts engages a range of artistic forms, including movement, sonic art, drawing, sculpture, and performance, the practice of writing is central throughout. Freewriting in particular is employed frequently, as a “kind of writing (or drawing) that directly stems from . . . bodily experience” (142). Depending on which way you turn them, Hahn’s recipes can be understood as sensory explorations designed to generate a kind of writing that emerges out of the body sensorium, or they can be approached primarily as creative sensory experiences that are then processed and reflected upon through writing. In the book’s resources section, Hahn traces the history of freewriting from Surrealism and Dada through its popularization by Peter Elbow, and shares examples of essays, poems, stories, and fragments of sensory descriptions produced in her workshops.

The exercises Hahn offers for our engagement are varied, playful, and multi-layered. Designed to be adaptable to diverse backgrounds and experiences, they engage a range of sensory modalities (students smell, touch, listen, gaze), modes of expression (they sculpt, draw, move, write), and class organization (they explore as individuals, in pairs, and as a group). A particular favorite of mine, “the reticent composer,” invites students to compose a one-minute “private” sound piece by exploring sounds that can be heard only from *within* their own head (such as by rubbing one’s own ear or tapping the teeth with the tongue) (30). Another, “Wearables,” challenges students to design and build a subtle or dramatic bodily adornment (a “wearable”) to wear to a future class, as an embodied exploration of identity presentation and code-switching (101). Some recipes unfold over a handful of simple steps, while others require multi-part explorations that might take place over several sessions.

Grounded in Hahn’s long engagement with teaching in a range of settings, *Arousing Sense* demonstrates a deep commitment to radical pedagogy,

which is apparent in the accessibility, generosity, and care of her offerings. These recipes take seriously the well-being of both teacher and student, with exercises framed in terms of their ease, adaptability, and potency for generative, transformational experience. Hahn asks in her opening introduction: “How can students and teachers, together, find a sense of well-being that fosters well-being?” (3). The response offered in the subsequent series of workshop recipes is that of collaborative sensorial exploration that is attuned to political, social, and cultural situatedness. Crucially, Hahn’s experiential engagements embody her conviction that “theory needs to follow practice, and not the other way around” (11). As such, practices and sensorial explorations are foregrounded, while references to readings and theoretical texts supporting key concepts or related ideas are cited but optional. This allows the reader to dive in and out of different recipes, take them into their own directions, and use them in their own ways and with their own emphasis.

One of the key contributions of *Arousing Sense* is supplementing radical theoretical frameworks for pedagogy with hands-on teaching examples for how those principles might be put into practice in flexible and culturally responsive ways. The book is inspired in part by Hahn’s own experience of having wished for hands-on lesson plans that embody the revolutionary pedagogy of critical theorists: Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed,” Aaron Stoller’s “emergent pedagogy,” and bell hooks’ teaching as a “practice of freedom,” to name a few. As Hahn explains: “while I held many of these radical, groundbreaking *theoretical* foundations in my storehouse, I realized I had little substance—*actual in-class teaching examples*—to arouse sense in the classroom” (3). *Arousing Sense* works to redress this lack.

As befits a practical guidebook, the language remains clear and direct throughout, even as it shifts between the personal, the poetic, the anecdotal, the clearly explanatory, and the academic, depending on the section of each recipe and the character of the recipe itself. The text as a whole provides a range of both access and entry points for the reader. This is a book to try out, to carry around, to experiment with. It invites your collaborative participation, from the sensory prompts woven throughout that the reader is invited to pause and partake in, to the continual encouragement to glean from Hahn’s offerings while making them your own, to the wealth of references to supplementary texts offered to support deeper critical engagements.

Inherently interdisciplinary, *Arousing Sense* is a wonderful resource for those teaching in any creative modality (including movement/dance, music/sound, and creative writing), as well as the fields of communications, journalism, ethnography, and psychology. Educators will find the book’s thoughtful scaffolding, attention to varied cultures and contexts, nuanced reference points,

and breadth and depth of leader notes to be invaluable in expanding the sensorial awareness and expressive capacities of both their students and themselves.

*Troy, NY*

### **Works Cited**

- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Herder and Herder, 1972.
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