I Was There, and This Was Data: A Sensorial Refusal of Abstract Knowledge

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We are living in a data overload. Human behavior and the world are constantly rendered into algorithms, dashboards, databases, visualizations, and AI. Yet data are never neutral artefacts. The aesthetic choices embedded in standardized forms that promise clarity and objectivity discipline how we think, believe, feel, love, and change, while narrowing how the world can be sensed and known.

In this essay, I use "data" in a deliberately tensioned way: to refer to both the practices, relations and decisions through which they are produced, or data-making, and to standardized formats—datasets, indicators, visualization—that constitute data-as-representation. Across both, data operates through hierarchy, privileging visual, textual, and quantifiable perceptions while excluding affective, sensorial, and embodied forms of knowing.

Drawing on my PhD research with Africa's Voices Foundation (AVF)—a Kenyan NGO producing citizen-data for development assessment and awareness programs—and my academic training, I examine how these hierarchies shape research and development practices. Here, development operates simultaneously as a way of seeing and a set of practices, enacted through data as both instrument and justification. This essay interrogates the role of data practitioners (myself included) in reproducing epistemic violence by adhering to dominant definitions of data that numb actions, decisions and interactions of the textures and motions of lived reality.

Rather than expanding what counts as data, this essay exposes its limits. Only incorporating affective and sensorial experience into existing frameworks would still reproduce the same hierarchies, where meaningfulness is defined as a condition of inclusivity. Instead, I propose an aesthetic-sensory epistemology as disobedience, that does otherwise in the face of modernity and questions the assumption that rendering something as data is what makes it matter.

I offer vignettes from development data practices in Kenya (data-making) and academic ethnographic writing (data presentation), attending to what exceeds dominant data constructs. These encounters expose data's boundaries, opening the space to forms of knowing that resist abstraction and remain grounded in their natural construct, in what simply is.

Development, Research, and the Making of Data

While data is promoted as a tool for empowerment in "data-poor regions,"[1] its production in and about non-Western people remain shaped by hegemonic development discourses and data colonialism.[2] Promises of inclusion often conceal donor-driven logics that reduce people to "wishlists,"[3] where participation becomes ticking the "data gathered box."[4] Consequently, non-Western people are only useful as data points, to be transformed into commodified outputs and used as buy-outs in reporting, statistics, archives, and technologies.

Through work with European development actors (NGOs, development agencies and consultancies) and research alongside data practitioners in non-Western settings, I have observed how these practices operate through what social anthropologist Jon Harald Sande Lie describes as "developmentality:" a mode of power that aligns local data work with donor-driven logics of abstraction and accountability. Within this ramework, epistemic violence emerges not only through what data captures, but through what it excludes.[5] Ordinary affects—affective, sensorial, and embodied forms of everyday knowledge—are routinely

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[1] Jonathan Cinnamon, "Data inequalities and why they matter for development," *Information Technology for Development* 26, no. 2 (2020/04/02 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2019.1650244.

[2] Stefania Milan and Emiliano Treré, "Big Data from the South(s): Beyond Data Universalism," *Television & New Media* 20, no. 4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419837739; Linnet Taylor and Dennis Broeders,
"In the name of development: Power, profit and the datafication of the global south," *Geoforum* 64 (2015).

[3] David Everatt, Hein Marais, and Nobayethi Dube, "Participation…for what Purpose? Analysing the Depth and Quality of Public Participation in the Integrated Development Planning Process in Gauteng," *Politikon* 37, no. 2-
3 (2010/12/01): 236, https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2010.522333.

[4] Helen Kennedy, "Living with Data: Aligning Data Studies and Data Activism Through a Focus on Everyday Experiences of Datafication," *Krisis* 38, no. 1 (04/29/2018), https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.38.1.37184.

treated as excess or meaning-less in the "wording of the world."[6,7] By privileging visualization and standardization, data aesthetics strip away that which is central in non-Western knowledge experiences. For those who have no control in the process and its rules, the abstraction of life's spectacle in the name of "data" is of greater detriment to them, as others are writing their stories in their names.

Breaking away from abstract notions of "progress" or "community" in non-Western settings requires that data practitioners embrace radical thinking and deliver epistemic care. Acknowledging my own complicity in reproducing the same asymmetries I seek to redress, I use this essay as sensorial and aesthetic experimentation to disengage from some of the practices I have taken part in while researching, thinking, and doing development.[8]

The Sensorial Life of Data

Through sound and touch, these vignettes explore the limits of data within developmentality in the work of AVF.

1. Sounding Attendance

I am sitting in a church made of corrugated metal somewhere inside the Kakuma Refugee settlement, Kenya. The room is divided between parents on the left and children on the right. They are sitting in silence. An AVF team member is talking through a microphone, explaining why we are there. The speech, in vernacular English, is set in a motherly tone, emphasizing on "YOUR kids are the future, take care of them".[9] *Apart from the spoken word, the sporadic humming at questions, arrangement in chairs and rustling of papers, there is no other noise. The microphone takes over everything, it's loud and grave, while the metal walls divide us from the outside, not letting anything else travel in.*

After almost 2 hours, we are nowhere near the middle of the session; but neither me nor

[5] Jon Harald Sande Lie, *Developmentality: An Ethnography of the World Bank-Uganda Partnership* (Berghahn Books, 2015).
[6] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
[7] Vanessa Machado De Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021).
[8] Cal Biruk, *Cooking Data: Culture and Politics in an African Research World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
[9] Direct quotes have been rephrased for the sake of showing the emphatic tone towards the subjects of the meeting.

the participants know that. Some babies start crying from time to time, as their mothers have been sitting for far too long. The room is hot: I am uncomfortable and I have to get out continuously to take a breath. The back door lets me out quietly. Outside, the world embraces me again, wind whooshing in my hears, carrying the bleat of some goats in the distance.

After 3 hours, we can hear some kids passing on the outside of the church: school just finished, so they are all chitchatting on their way home. But unless you are standing in the door frame, you would not be aware of their voices; inside, the sound of the microphone stays with you, creating a bubble, taking you out of earth, out of reality.

This storied fieldnote centres on the sounds I registered during a field visit with the AVF team in Kakuma. Although I was constantly taking pictures, my focus on the sounds came out of curiosity; as ethnographic immersion exposes you to more information than your methods are conditioned to capture, I tried to think of data in other ways than the written or visual. Revisiting my notes, sound emerges as central to how constructs like "participation" and "engagement" are enacted. For example, the depiction of tired, crying babies and their mothers withdrawing from the meeting to calm them down convey gender imbalances to participation. The humming in agreement to statements, sometimes showing a partial passivity and others an actual sense of agreement, was an atmospheric meter of relatability.

These sounds exposed forms of important information that remain uncapturable as data, not because they cannot be recorded, but because they are not recognized as valuable or meaning-*full*.[10] This reflects a learned sensorial bias in development data-making practices, which was also further observed in the second vignette.

2. A touchy experiment

After months with the AVF team, there were so many conversations around how to innovate on their data visualizations that I decided to take the opportunity and facilitate a day where we could experiment with thinking and doing otherwise. As I recollect the memory of that day, an instance comes to mind:

I am standing in front of the team in a meeting room, surrounded by tables covered in craft materials.

[10] De Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity.*

- *Me: "Let's have fun, guys! Let's think of data in another way that you are not used to! So, please, do not think in terms of shapes, colours, and numbers to represent stuff. I do not want colour-based definitions of like, oh, women are pink and men blue."*

  a few moments later...

- *AVF team member (presenting their data physicalization): "We are seeing, for example, paid work: we've got men at six and women at four. So here you actually see one, two, three, four, five, six (blue beads). And for women, one, two, three, four (pink beads)."*

In this vignette, I asked the team to think outside the box by physically representing fictional data on gendered differences in labour and leisure time in Tanzania. What I had hoped would open a space for experimentation instead revealed how quickly dominant ways of seeing and feeling data return, despite attempts to do otherwise.

Even when invited to move beyond numbers, participants used materials symbolically rather than sensorially. In this case, shapes (balls and pushpins to indicate numbers) and the malleability of objects (rubber bands to be cut, Play-Doh to be shaped) took precedence over the textural characteristics (elasticity, softness, prickly, roundness) of the materials. This showcases that, even when data is made physical, hierarchization persist.[11] But this hierarchy is not inherent to data: it has been constructed.

The moment of this vignette is important precisely because it fails. It shows the narrow imaginative space data practitioners are trained to operate within that stops them from doing otherwise. To break from this and think of data through touch requires that we think beyond changing its format. We have to care about what a Tanzanian woman feels through her hands and skin when working in her garden, not just how it can be recounted. To linger with touch, then, is to open data-making to a slow unlearning—one that invites material sensation back into knowledge formations long disciplined by abstraction, one that invests in the

[11] Silvia Cazacu et al., "Disentangling the Power Dynamics in Participatory Data Physicalisation" (Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Association for Computing Machinery, 2025).

disciplined by abstraction, one that invests in the flourishing of life.[12]

Staying with Experience: Experimenting with Academic Form

Fieldwork attunes the body to affects and sensory relations that academic writing often flattens. The following excerpt of a day in the field experiments with non-writing to stay with experience rather than extract it.[13]



08:00 – I wake up. The sound of Nairobi's river has become the background melody of my life here.

08:37 – I stand outside my building waiting for my Uber Boda to pick me up. Someone pulls up to me.

Niaje? Do you need a lift?

No, don't worry, my boda is on its way, but thanks!

08:40 – [my lunchbox tucked between me and the driver]

WOOOOSH WOOOSH WOOOSH 

(wind and smoke in my face)

zigzagging through traffic

[same flower seller in the corner as always] 

09:25 – I arrive at the office, they are working on a project about philanthropy.

11:53 – Someone starts talking with their colleague.

Are we going for a walk?

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[12] Cazacu et al., "Disentangling," 3.

[13] I approach non-writing as a disruptive practice of academic writing. I don't consider it creative writing in itself, but an extension of the lived experience of ethnographic fieldwork, as what becomes ordinary. Non-writing only reports happenings, feelings, thoughts, and atmospheres as they are, without academic repertoire, analysis, or aim at moving the reader, nor keepsake intention as ethnographic diaries might pursue. Thus, non-writing acts as a mirror of lived reality, without performance or intention.

Yeah, let's go [slowly everyone stands up]
laughs *Ah, today is a nice day*

12:11 – As we walk, we talk about traffic in Nairobi
I would never drive in Nairobi, I would die!
Plants and trees and differences between Kenya and Spain
Mangoes are so expensive in Europe, you can pay sometimes 200 Kenyan shillings for one *(around 1,5 euros)*

NO WAY! That is crazy!!

12:22 – Most of my colleagues buy yogurts for lunch; others do their weekly shopping or get takeaway.
I buy some tangy tomato crisps
I love those crisps

12:37 – We walk back to the office. The area is very nice, with lots of greenery and actual sidewalks, and full of office workers also on a walk. These streets look nothing like other areas of Nairobi.

17:40 – I have plans in the afternoon, but my friend cancels on me and I get frustrated.
I'm not feeling like going out, plus it's too far…
Should we have drinks at Gecko?
I feel a bit apprehensive to go by myself to this event.

But I go anyway.
It is more than a social event; it is related to my research.

18:18 – I arrive to the place. This is a new spot that just opened in a rapidly gentrifying area popular with Nairobi's "cool kids." Someone asks for my ticket at the entrance
(I get frisked by a security guard)

Somehow, if it wasn't for the frisking, I would get the feeling that I'm back in Europe.
I go upstairs
[The place is practically empty

18:20 – I order a drink and sit in a corner.
(the drink is too bitter)
People start to arrive

18:23 – *Sorry, is this seat taken?*

No, please, go ahead

(the ice of my drink has watered down the alcohol and it is no longer so bitter)

18:26 – I see a friend of mine next to the bar. I met him at a hiking club.

Hey! How are you?!

Hug

Hey! I have not seen you in a while! And you came to this, you will love it. I'm actually one of the organizers

Oh really? I didn't know!

Yeah, and we just came back from the youth communist rally, so everyone is already very pumped for this

More and more talk in the background

18:34 – *Okay guys! Please, gather around! We are going to start our Drunken Lecture for today about "Art and Politics"! Come closer!*

19:07 – *You cannot separate art from the artist!*

shouting

shouting

shouting

(I feel excited)

shouting

They are agreeing with the speaker's statements.

19:32 – I decide to leave; the speaker has lost control of the talk and people are gathering in small groups to have small discussions.

This vignette does not produce alternative data but holds experience in a form that resists extraction. Affect moves through timestamps, fragments, and sensory cues that exceed what is typically recognized as data.[14] The ordinary affects of Nairobian life—the slow accumulation of disappointments frustrations, and hopes—are embedded in the political

and social fabric of the city. And yet, in the same way, what remains unsaid also carries meaning. I have threaded silences through the excerpt as intentional forms of "mediated perception"[15], gesturing to moments when data-making is quiet, ambient or affectively scattered, and which rarely enter dominant data constructs.[16]

Beyond a possibility, this essay argues that data should be thought of and made otherwise. My concern is not to propose a better representational form, but to question what happens when we seek norms and methods whose only intention is to redress messiness and personality. In this way, data is not only shaped by methods and tools, but by privileged sensibilities.

I refuse the requirement that only what can be made meaningful as data matter. By attending to sound, touch, silence and ordinary affect, I instead refocus data to also be made of the meaning-*less* and the more-than-human. I'm trying to make a practice out of *the ordinary*, without exoticizing the normal or discovering anything new, but just being *plain and simple* to what data should be.

I'm saying *no* to the distance research practice often demands. I refuse to the making of *others*, to the pointing of fingers, to the abstracting of realities or theorizing of behaviors. I'm just saying things how they *are*. Data is not an abstract, theoretical, non-human thing; it is a lived, embodied,

affective part of us. And as something connected to humans and the world, it is messy, noisy and silent, to be touched and felt. Treating data as an affective and sensorial practice is not a solution, but a refusal to let abstraction speak in place of lived experience.

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[14] Note how '**' marks those senses that could be gathered from others, '()' marks my own sensorial and body information and '[]' shows any atmospheric or spatial information.

[15] Grace Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* ((Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[16] Lisa Blackman, "Researching Affect and Embodied Hauntologies: Exploring an Analytics of Experimentation," in *Affective Methodologies: Developing Cultural Research Strategies for the Study of Affect*, ed. Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015).