A Taste for Things: Sensory Rhetoric beyond the Human
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Amidst rising agricultural pollution, poor conditions for livestock animals, and disparity between “high” and “low” food cultures, gustatory taste has come into contemporary public rhetoric as a generative ethical and civic capacity. My project considers the potential of an activist focus on sensation to support environmentalist and social aims. In so doing, I develop the Enlightenment view of aesthetic taste as a rhetorical capacity in order to build a rhetorical theory of sensation. Enlightenment thinkers, I argue, embraced aesthetic taste as a site where rhetoric and ethics mingle, and yet in promoting its cultivation, they fell into a problematic elitism. The post-Enlightenment, Marxist discourse on sensory emancipation developed on the connections of rhetorical and ethical capacity, situating this capacity as a problematic site of power deserving intervention. I evaluate to what extent this discourse managed and failed to overcome Enlightenment elitism, and forge connections between the Marxist tradition and the current call among new materialists such as Bruno Latour for an immanent, compositionist reworking of critique. My final two chapters consider how a theory and critical practice of sensory rhetoric is elaborated in contemporary activist efforts from the industrial food exposé to the slow food and farm to school movements. My inquiry generates a rhetorical theory of sensation that integrates “new” and traditional materialist approaches to rhetoric to develop on the connections between rhetoric and ethics.