Volume 4, Issue 1

Multimodal & Multisensorial Memories

Amy Mack

Multimodal & Multisensorial Memories

Amy Mack

Abstract
In this Recit, I reflect on the sensorial power of social media and images and how these can prompt a return to the best trouble: fieldwork memories. As a millennial and white settler scholar, I argue that social media is a space for building and maintaining field relationships with interlocutors and former research team members. Moreover, during the global Covid-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, they provide an opportunity to return to a comforting space and time that has changed dramatically. These multimodal engagements provide relief in uncertain times as well as an opportunity to reconnect with old relations.

Sarah Pink (2012, p.2) calls on ethnographers to "be more explicit about the ways of experiencing and knowing that become central to their ethnographies." I extend this call to include how *memories* of these experiences can also be central to ethnographic entanglements, particularly those memories that are multimodal and experienced through social media and smartphones.

"Click here to view your most liked photo of 2017!"

A Facebook notification implores me to open the app and view a past post via their "memories" function. It's the summer of 2020 and I am working away on my doctoral project in the middle of a global pandemic and racial reckoning. My doctoral work explores the Canadian far-right, which is a sharp turn from the collaborative and care-centered Raising Spirit project (Mack & Newberry, 2020; Rappaport, 2008). Feeling the fatigue of wading through angry social media comments, I put away my work for a moment and revisit an old memory.

It's an image of fieldwork from 2017, a time when we were deep in the throes of ethnographic research with Blackfoot youth and Elders. Specifically, it was a day spent in conversation with one another while picking sweetgrass. We had driven 45 minutes west of our university, along gravel roads and through farmers' fields, to get to the site where the ceremonialist on our team was waiting to teach us. Our task was to pick armfuls of the long grass with vibrant purple ends under a relentless prairie sun. Over many hours, we slowly amassed enough sweetgrass and we carefully bundled it up into soft pashmina scarves, which, if held closely, still smelled faintly of the fragrant stalks months later.

The grass, burned during prayer and ceremony, is integral to Blackfoot spirituality and research relationships. The exchange of sweetgrass occurred at the end of every interview and conversation we had with community members. It is seen as a thread that ties people

together. The stalks we gathered that day have long since burned, yet the image of that day ensures that the memories and relationships woven together endure.

My field memories, like this project, became multimodal by accident; they were, and are, experienced through the senses and social media platforms.

Figure 1: *Facebook memory of picking sweetgrass*

We are complex bundles of knots and lines that lead out in every direction without beginning or end. I see this as a tangle in which we bundle ourselves up with others and create meaning and relations (Ingold, 2015). Lines can be cut, and knots untangled, and scholars who conduct lengthy field work can attest to the devastating effects of ruptures in fieldwork that result in severed ties. Yet even a cut bundle of lines preserves memories in their form. This is not to suggest that memories are fixed, rather even distant or damaged ones can be sensorially invoked or triggered through practice and prodding (Pink, 2012). Here, the idea of rhizomes is appealing as they persevere through breaks, ruptures, and cuts. They spring up along old lines and create new ones (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). What then of the multimodal lines we throw out between ourselves and our colleagues and interlocutors, from sweetgrass to Facebook tags?

The photo, like many images from that summer, was originally shared on Instagram and reposted to Facebook. These digital environments were sites of deep and repeated entanglement for the team. It was where we engaged after work, repeated inside jokes, and vented our frustrations. Some of the photos that reappear via digital spaces do not trigger happy memories, but rather remind us of the traumas, ruptures, and shatterings we encountered during our field work (Mack and Newberry, 2020). Yet, when I look at this image in particular, I remember the jostling of the jeep and the sound of our laughter as we drove. The momentary anxiety as the jeep bottomed out on a tractor rut. I remember the smell of the prairies and intense heat that greeted us when we exited the vehicle. It is an embodied experience that is felt and known. Yet this is also an *emplaced* memory as it speaks to the situated nature of my body within a particular environment. Emplacement moves beyond embodiment in that it is attentive to the material and sensorial environments and the digital photo triggers memories of these environments (Pink, 2012).

Now, when the image resurfaces in my Facebook feed, I have the option to reshare it, which results in new lines and engagements. New friends and colleagues may "like" it or comment on it, prompting me to explain the day or share details of the project. More than once, this has created new research related relations as new colleagues are drawn into my networks of collaborators. I may also share it directly with members of the team, which often evokes conversations about the day and the project, but also how each person has been since the field season. Messages of *"This came up on my feed today. How are you doing"* are exchanged. This revives old bonds while creating new knots. It demonstrates how much distance there is between us temporally and spatially, while simultaneously evincing the power of memories to re-establish bonds.

The photograph invoked a sense of what that place felt like, namely the heat and smell -- yet, the current place, geographical and temporal, in which the memory is experienced has shifted. So too has the digital space it occupies. These are now field sites in their own right for my doctoral work on the far-right, and they carry with them unpleasant emplaced memories of interacting with antagonistic interlocutors. To further complicate matters, many of these team members have left Facebook and this presents as a rupture in our collective digital ecosystem.

I write now during a moment of international ruptures and I am far from my kinship and care network. My willingness to engage with this memory, to reach out to my collaborators however possible, is amplified. I construct it as a moment of care for myself and those in the image. This is the good trouble, as Donna Haraway (2016) might say; it is the kind that encourages one to return to complex relations and unfinished ideas. Yet, these entanglements are fleeting, however, as we must all continue to follow out new lines that lead us away from Raising Spirit and into new places, projects, and relations. Many exchanges end with a longing to occupy the material and sensorial space again: *"Yeah, I'd rather be picking sweetgrass today too. The pandemic sucks. If you need anything, let me know."* And we carry on along our lines until one of us stumbles upon a digital memory to revisit.

References

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F., 1987. *Thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia.* Translated from French by B. Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Haraway, D. J., 2016. *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Ingold, T., 2015. *Life of lines.* London: Routledge.

Pink, S., 2012. *Doing sensory ethnography.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Mack, A. and Newberry, J., 2020. Brown paper chronicles: Refusal and the limits of collaborative design work with Indigenous youth. *Collaborative Anthropologies,* 13(1), pp.77-108. doi:10.1353/cla.2020.0001.

Rappaport, J., 2008. Beyond participant observation: Collaborative ethnography as theoretical innovation. *Collaborative Anthropologies,* 1, pp.1-31.

Amy Mack is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta. As a cultural anthropologist, she specializes in digital anthropology/ethnography, as well as digital storytelling and literacy. Her current work explores the Canadian right-wing social media landscape and attends to both its white and male supremacist aspects.
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7803-1737