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Prologue.

Ethnographies through the nose

Margaret Bullen

Ez Donk Oraindik¹

Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (UPV/EHU)

Abstract

In this collection², we present six experimental texts on what we have learned by putting our noses to our fieldwork and engaging our sense of smell in our ethnographical practice. First, we consider what we can learn about the field when we consider smells and smelling, discovering innovative ways of perceiving and learning not only from the field, but about ourselves as researchers, making smell part of the reflexive process of our enquiry. Secondly, we ask questions about the part played by smells as we situate ourselves in the field: whether smells find us or we find them. Thirdly, we peruse on the problems of writing about smells, how to speak about something that is not spoken, and how to manage the language of smell or smells in different languages. Finally, we wonder how bringing smells into our work is a .feminist act and in what way the contemplation of multimodality—understood not in its literal sense but rather in a metaphoric application to a multisensorial and polyphonic approach to the field—enhances our anthropology and our community.

¹ Ez Donk Oraindik is a group comprising ten doctoral students and a supervisor from the Feminist and Gender Studies programme at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). The name is a play on words meaning “Not yet doctors”, and refers to the group Ez Dok Amairu (translated from the Basque as “There is no curse”). This was a Basque avant-garde movement in the mid-60s, characterized by the union of different artistic disciplines for the recovery of Basque culture in the Franco era. Ez Donk Oraindik makes a light-hearted reference to the group’s sociopolitical commitment, its status as “doctors in the making” and as women, the (n) in Do(n)k corresponding to the feminine declension of some verb forms in Basque. In this collection, half of our community has taken part.

² We are grateful to AFIT (Feminist Anthropology Research Group) for providing funding for the translation of our articles and to Wendy Baldwin for the translations themselves.

In this collection, we present six experimental texts on what we have learned by putting our noses to our fieldwork and engaging our sense of smell in our ethnographical practice. We contemplate doing ethnography through smell, and one of the first concerns of these texts is what we can learn about the field when we consider smells and smelling. As we are alerted by our olfactory system to aspects we had not previously contemplated, we not only discover innovative ways of perceiving, but we also learn *from* the field, finding out more about ourselves as researchers as smell becomes part of the reflexive process of our enquiry. So, secondly we ask questions about the role of smells as we situate ourselves in the field; to use Galan's phrasing, we ask whether smells find us or we find them, whether we locate or are located by smells. Thirdly, we peruse the problems of writing about smells, posing a riddle for ourselves—how to speak about something that is not spoken, says Sergidou, in a medium not meant for it. In addition, we are obliged to think about the language of smells or smells in different languages. Finally, we wonder if bringing smells boldly into our work is a feminist act, and in what way the contemplation of multimodality—understood not in its literal sense but in a metaphoric application to a multisensorial and polyphonic approach to the field—enhances our anthropology and our community. Our community is one of feminist researchers who talk, work and write together, who have tried to construct a common body of experiences, bringing together ways of sensing and producing an orchestrated set of texts.

After waxing lyrical on what smelling brings to our ethnographies, in the epilogue to this collection, we contemplate the loss of smell caused by the COVID-19 virus and what we miss when we miss out on smelling.

Heightened awareness of the embodiment and materiality of smell

In our texts, we take up Sarah Pink's terminology of participant perception, adding to observation a heightened awareness stimulated by the intersections of smell, sound, taste and touch. Understanding, as prompted by Tim Ingold, that the senses do not function in isolation, we follow Cardenas to stress that the senses are not independent but interconnected. Gomez guides us to the affirmation that the five senses are not attached to five separate organs as we have perhaps been led to believe, but rather work together as part of interlocking systems that combine to produce the act of perception. Our perception, then, is not merely cultural and contextual; it is diversiform and multifold. It relies on a combination of stimuli that we pick up in different ways, depending on the moment in history or our lives, on the physical and climatological circumstances, on the interactions with others or the associations we make, fantasising, connecting ideas or drawing on memories. As we tune in to our nostrils, we hear other, unexpected prompts from the sights and sounds around us. And we learn that flowers, for example, are multimodal, combining different modalities to produce visual, olfactory and chemical effects, awakening us to the possibilities of a less human centred ethnography.

As six feminist anthropologists, we have also endeavoured to incorporate a perspective that not only engages our noses but our whole bodies. We take up Donna Haraway's question, "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" (Haraway, 1990, p. 220), and propose to immerse ourselves in our fieldwork as embodied beings, conscious of our sensing bodies. This involves breaking down the divisions between body and mind, feeling and logic, emotion and rationality, but also inhabiting our anatomical body, in all its interconnected complexity. We absorb smell through the pores of our skin, we smell the heat. We attempt to mix our senses and mingle our bodies as we did in our first joint text, written during the first phase of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 and inspired by the surrealist game of the *corps exquis*³ (Agirre et al., 2020). In these present pieces, we return to

³ The Exquisite Corpse was a game invented in 1925 and played by men from the Surrealist movement group such as Victor Brauner, André Breton, Jacques Hérold and Yves Tanguy. A piece of paper was folded in four, horizontally, and each player would add their drawing in one of the squares. The game evolved to produce

the idea of fragmented bodies—split by the senses, re-joined by reassembling them in a different order—by pooling our uncommon sense and discovering together new ways of sensing, of seeing through smell, of thinking through our noses.

It is nothing new to refer to the evocative powers of smell, but we explore the material and corporal dimensions of the image or impression aroused by certain odours or aromas. The smell of wet earth after the rain in Colombia or Saudi Arabia reminds two of our Basque anthropologists of that rainy north of the Iberian Peninsula, a smell that takes them back to their childhood there—what Galan calls a passageway through time, a connection between two totally different rain-soaked earths. She refers to this as “the materiality of smell”. The fragrance that comes off the bodies of Saudis as they move—invisible, within the women’s long black abayas or the men’s Mao collared white tunics—opens the ethnographer’s eyes to the colour of smell and the presence of the unseen beneath the fabric that stirs up floral and spicy scents as she trails behind these passers-by. She pursues Ingold’s idea of materials being processual and relational, as having a tale to tell, and distinguishes between materials of emergence that evoke memories of past experiences—as in the wet earth that transports her home—and materials of fantasy that conjure up pleasurable but imagined scenes or sensations.

These texts express the sense of being in our ethnographies, being conscious of ourselves and of our bodies: what our bodies bring to the field and what the field presents to the body. Gomez, for example, describes walking as a way of being in and connecting with the world, activating the senses. As she walks through the dry and dusty land of rural Pereira, she relates how the physical contact with the smell of the hot earth chokes her, enters her nostrils, obstructs her breathing. The physical, stifling effect of that pungent odour produces a reaction of rejection of the smell itself.

In our ethnographies, we become aware of the physicality of our perceptions, of the working—or failure—of our olfactory system. Del Pino describes the interconnection between smells on the body or on clothing and the hormonal reactions of the pituitary gland, producing reactions of disgust or acceptance when presented with a “strange and strong smell” such as goat meat: “my pituitary gland, hands and clothing are now used to that strange and strong smell” she tells us, alluding to the physicality of learning to identify and react to smell. Sergidou and Gomez both describe the perception of the heat as smell, whether in the south of Spain or the west of Colombia.

Through our ethnographies, we wake up to the chemistry of smell and how the occurrence of smells in the natural environment has functions we had never contemplated before. The fragrance of flowers to attract insects for pollination or the aroma of wet earth to indicate to camels where water might be found in the desert chide at our anthropocentric view of the world, where smells are contemplated as a source of human utility, pleasure or disgust. Bullen’s text strives to resituate the fragrance of flowers in an attempt to avoid human exceptionalism, combining Haraway’s idea of multispecies landscapes with that of smellscapes. Bullen confesses herself previously unaware of the complex chemical reactions behind the production of smells, and is enthused by the new vocabulary emerging from our texts with fantastic sounding names like trimethylamine or petrichor, probably unknown to most social anthropologists. Did you know that hawthorn exudes the first, and the rain on dry earth produces the second, through the functioning of the *Streptomyces coelicor* bacteria that combines with plant oils to produce geosmin, of Greek etymology [Γεωσμίνη] the “aroma of the earth”? That the flora and fauna produce and perceive these bouquets, not for humans’ sake but for their own?

strange and unexpected figures, and incorporated words to produce fabulous or incongruous sentences. Versions of the game are played by drawing parts of the body—head, torso, legs and feet—folding the paper over and passing it on to the next person to continue. In our article, we describe how we translated the drawing into writing, associating parts of the body with how we were feeling during lockdown in the spring of 2020, and then combining them in a reconstructed communal body and experience.

The chemical and hormonal reactions open up new dimensions to our understanding of what is going on around us, something more than a sociocultural reading of smells, although these are, of course, the object of our enquiry. Being alert to our bodies and our senses is to be in touch with the physical environment that at the same time reveals sociocultural realities.

The sociocultural dimension of smell and Otherness

Some of us have taken up Le Breton's warning that perception is a way of sensing reality, but not reality itself. It all depends on what reference systems we have at our disposal and how we decode difference. This bears upon the way we detect and classify smells according to a cultural hierarchy of qualities not inherent to the odour itself but connected to social, class, and racial inequalities. Gomez reminds us that this is nothing new, that Shakespeare was aware of this when he made Hamlet declare that the mind is what decides between fragrant and nauseous. Del Pino depicts how the smell of bleach can be positively attached not only to a notion but also to a practice of cleanliness amongst the Fulbe people she works with.

However, there do seem to be undeniable realities behind some smells. Gomez reflects that the sickening smell of the dry earth that chokes her tells of the desperate need for a sewage system in the area. But it is not always so straightforward. Fernandez points to smell as a source of tension as it refers to social categories in the rejection of the smell of smoke on the clothes of an adopted child—related to the poverty of her origins—by her adoptive parents. Their desire to erase the smell by laundering poses questions around the reinforcement of the westernized, commoditized normalization of smells.

This leads us to another question: of Otherness or sameness, foreignness or belonging. Sharing smells is shown to be crucial for creating community, a stamp on a shared identity or the mark of having taken part in a common activity, as when Gomez joins a communal work party and realises at the end of the day that her sweaty body is not repulsive but expressive of being part of a team. Just as washing a baby's clothes reassigns the adopted child's place in a new family, our own bodies can acquire new smells that re-situate us in our fieldwork as we join in group activities or learn to appreciate different smells and recognise their culturally specific meanings or associations.

Nonetheless, the specificity of the context means that the appreciation of smells is transitory and changing. Although beguiled by the Saudi smell, on reflection, Galan feels that the perfume that pleasantly overpowered her then would not have the same effect back home.

Here we present six different cultural contexts: from the desert of Saudi Arabia to the carnival of Cádiz from rural Colombia to a Chinese orphanage and back to the Basque Country, from the washroom of the Fulbe to an English rose garden. Six totally different smellscapes that piece together perfumes, odours, fragrances and aromas and draw exquisite sensory pictures.

Writing pictures that smell

How smell resides in physical phenomena or is conveyed through different media and received via other senses is revealed by Sergidou, who uses Merleau-Ponty's reference to Cézanne's brush—that we should be able to smell the paint of the trees—as she sets out to draw smellscapes of the south of Spain.

As Moeran points out, in order to communicate fragrances we have to have recourse to metonymy and metaphor:

“Generally speaking, odours of all kinds are highly elusive and often cannot be directly named. Many languages have virtually no vocabulary to describe them, except in terms of the other senses of sight, sound, touch and taste – which may be why Sperber (1975, p. 115–116) has suggested that there is no taxonomy of smells and that the only way to classify them, therefore, is by referring to their causes (in other words, to the smell of fresh green leaves, fish, plum blossoms, tobacco, sweat, and so on)” (2005, p. 107).

In Sergidou’s text, we have a fabulous example of the literary skills used to create vivid descriptions of the smells of the south of the South and conjure up the smell of the heat in so many ways—as burnt cement, sunburnt skin or the air from a hairdryer—blending sights with sensations and sounds with tastes in a multidimensional *tour de force*. Indeed, she asks whether text is sufficient to capture the experience of our ethnographies but shows language as action through an exquisite cutting and pasting of the senses.

The very language of smell is a challenge that we have met not only in the writing but also in the translating of our work. As we are native speakers of Spanish, Basque, English and Greek, we have worked with our translator, Wendy Baldwin, who has painstakingly sought out the words to express in English what we had written in Spanish, in some cases filtering through our other linguistic registers. We are immensely grateful to her for enriching our vocabulary of smells and providing the right turn of phrase for that elusive fragrance or pervasive odour⁴.

Smell as an act of feminist anthropology

The difficulty of writing smell, together with the hierarchy of thought over senses, has led, in Le Guerier’s view, to the relegation of smell to necessity or hedonism: “a primitive, archaic, needed sense, one more important to sensory pleasure than to knowledge” (Le Guerier, 2002, p. 4). In this sense, it is relevant to focus on the anthropology of the body, the emotions and the senses, developed from a feminist perspective, as well as the decolonial challenging of the separation of body and mind expressed by Arturo Escobar (2014, p. 16) in the invitation to “sentipensar” (in Spanish, “feel-think”), to think both from the heart and the head, to co-reason using emotion and reason together (Agirre et al., 2020, p. 98–99).

We especially privilege the reflexive and situated ethnographies that are precious to feminist anthropology. And all of us situate ourselves in that school.

But focusing on smell brings an added edge to this feminist take on the field. We argue that smell—as with the other senses and sensing in general, occupies a place in feminist vindications, where female smells or the femininity of smell come under analysis. Del Pino points out that not only smell but touch and taste are associated with the female body and notions of wildness, irrationality and the exotic. In European and North American societies, particular smells are attached to particular types of women (Moeran, 2005, p. 113), especially notable in relation to the archetypical maiden (fresh, floral fragrances and names) and the seductress (spicy, exotic tones and animal associations), and this is symbolized in literature, art and the commercialisation of perfumes. Classen distinguishes three different olfactory and symbolic types for females in western tradition: “fragrant for exemplars of ideal womanhood, foul for socially unacceptable women such as prostitutes and witches, and spicy for alluring but dangerous *femmes fatales*” (Classen, 1993, p. 9–10).

⁴ In the articles that follow, wherever it has been possible to find the original English version of the sources we quote literally, we have substituted that for the Spanish version. Where this has not been possible, Baldwin has translated the quotation into English and the Spanish reference is included in the reference section.

So smelling is taken up by all of us as a feminist practice: as a way of perceiving through the body, overcoming the androcentric gaze not only by questioning the male viewpoint but the point of viewing in the literal sense, indicated by Garcia Grados as ocular-centrism (2017), as the privileging of the senses of sight and sound.

On another note, the choice of certain themes (sensuality and sexuality, for example) is often prompted by an interest in or critique of “women’s affairs”, as in the feminist performance of the Carnival chirigotas of Cadiz. The scatological jokes and bold insistence on naming female sexual organs and their smells, denouncing, for example, the denigration of “pussy as fish”, reveals how women’s sexuality is subjugated through derision, using the interpretation of smell as a powerful tool to corrupt and distort.

And so, we invite the reader to join us in putting our noses to the ground, to take in the smells, to sniff the tracks and follow the traces to make new discoveries... Just smell!

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Margaret Bullen (Nedging, Suffolk, U.K., 1964) is a feminist anthropologist living in the Basque Country since 1991 and lecturer in the Department of Philosophy of Values and Social Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country since 2005. She graduated in Modern Languages (Bristol, 1987) and obtained her Ph.D. (Liverpool, 1991) on cultural and socio-economic change amongst Andean migrants in Arequipa’s shanty towns, Peru. She is a member of AFIT (Feminist Anthropology Research Group) and maintains research interests in migration, identity, language, as well as a gendered perspective on gender and symbolic systems- and focus on women’s participation in festive rituals. She teaches on the doctoral programme of Feminist and Gender Studies and forms part of the group “Ez Donk Oraindik” with her students.