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Idoia Galán Silvo

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Materiality through Smell: Earth and Fabrics

Idoia Galán Silvo

Abstract

This sensory research delves into the materiality of smell during fieldwork. It explores how aroma, through the wet earth, perfume, through the fabrics that cover women and men in Saudi Arabia, and the scent of the body—of the unveiled skin—bring us closer to the sensorial experience of smell in anthropological research. The capacity of smell is evocative and creative: on the one hand, to recreate and bring us back to previously lived experiences and, on the other, to create new pleasurable experiences in the field; smells are presented as a source of discovery for ethnographic, feminist, and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) in the context we are investigating.

Willingness to undertake an ethnography intertwined with the anthropology of the body and the emotions means immersing oneself in fieldwork through participant perception (Pink, 2015). It is to assume an embodied experience in a particular, anatomical and sensing body—that of the anthropologist, situated between a social “we”, constituted by the community one is immersed in, together with one’s prior cultural context conditioned by the society and environment of origin. As ethnographers, the field predisposes us to “relearn to see the world” from the experience of our anonymous life (Merleau-Ponty, 1975[1945], p. 402) and to situate ourselves there, “to become body” (Torras, 2007, p. 20). At the same time, fieldwork gives us the opportunity to experience and carry out an unbiased sensory ethnography, supported by a feminist participant perception that “would help to overcome the androcentric bias reproduced by participant observation as an eminently visual and auditory practice” (García-Grados, 2017, p. 126).

The ethnographic vignettes that I present invite us to do research through smell. Let’s put our noses to our fieldwork! Let’s use our noses to read tell-tale signs of ethnographic traces. Sniff around your memories, reader! Take in the smell of lived or imagined experience. Just smell!

Aroma of wet earth

The average temperature in the compound¹ in Saudi Arabia was thirty-odd degrees. In the months of June, July, August and September, it would often shoot to over 40 degrees, and there were highs of over 45 degrees. On a few occasions in June, I experienced 48 degrees but, mercifully, in July and August, I was back in the much cooler Basque Country. I rarely saw rain—twice a year at most, in December and January.

¹ The compound where I did my fieldwork between 2011–2016 was an enclosure where a group of people from 103 nationalities lived and worked in Saudi Arabia. It had two parts: a technological university and a small town. The compound was separated from the outside of Saudi Arabia by natural physical barriers—such as the desert sand and the Red Sea—and artificial ones—a concrete wall, a wire fence, and a police checkpoint.

But when it rained, it was usually in torrents and for a short time, a couple of hours at most. Enough to soak into the ground, for people to step away from their workstations and watch it rain; enough for the children to celebrate in the school playground, soaking themselves.

Permeating my body, the humidity that smelled of soil triggered the smell of stormy summer afternoons in Irun (the Basque Country), my place of origin.

In particular, the rain was a moment to perceive the smell of a different earth, its aroma a passageway to my childhood (an unassigned smell in the present recreates a past childhood, as two different earths become soaked).

After the rain, the atmosphere, like the ground we put our noses to, and the aroma itself, like the smelling body, conveyed a sense of initiation, clear and unblemished.

The perfume, the fabrics that cover women and men in Saudi Arabia

The way in which women's bodies were rendered invisible under the fabrics of their abayas had an eye-opening effect on my sense of smell, and led me into a new world of imagination.

To my nose, at least, the colours had a smell.

I apprehended the black perfume of the women's abayas and the white perfume of the men's tunics. In Saudi Arabia, perfume had a texture and a colour.

Through smell, the absence or negation of bodies became surfeit or affirmation. The black fabric that flowed with the movement and cadence of women's steps, and with the aid of a slight gust of wind, could transform into an abaya that smelled strongly of roses, of spices, of eye-watering intensity, revealing the anatomy of the female body hidden underneath the fabrics.

Something similar happened with the men's white tunic. A Mao collar made of immaculate white fabric, marking the anatomical perimeter of the male neck, served to support the Adam's apple. The white fabric, sometimes silky, flowed with stylish elegance in the form of an A-line dress falling straight down to the feet. The counterpoint to this aesthetic harmony was movement, broken by the feet and hands. The male tunic always had large side pockets, not only providing a place to hold belongings but also a place for hands to dip into and move the fabric against or away from the body: outlining his silhouette, presenting it to the eyes of others.

One noticeable difference between the two types of garments, the women's and the men's, was the width of the tunic at the bottom and the difference in what it suggested. The women's abaya widened as it went down, increasing the amount of fabric and accentuating her movement by creating a wave as she walked, especially if the abaya was slightly open, the very last snaps left undone—as was usual in the compound—so legs were visible up to the knees. The men's tunic was closed and fell straight down to their feet, such that when elegant young men sometimes wanted to show off, the width was enough to stretch the fabric and outline the contours of their legs as they strode. A pair of expensive cufflinks (made of silver, gold or semiprecious stones) affixed to wide cuffs topped off the impeccable image of the men when they were really dressing up.

Nevertheless, for both Saudi women and men, each and every time the dancing fabrics moved, they were accompanied by a strong and deep aroma that was also, depending on how long you had been in the country, intoxicating.

It pleased me more each time, though I doubt I would find such extravagance as pleasant now.

I must admit that, on more than one occasion, I would ensure I crossed paths with a Saudi woman or man just to purposely inhale at the moment our bodies moved through the same space. To smell the pleasure that lies in wait immediately afterwards, remaining in the wake of the path travelled by those bodies, preparing myself to move forwards. To keep smelling and enjoying an aroma full of nuances which might be bergamot, different varieties of roses and spices, wood and/or roots—the always unmistakable Saudi smell.

Three questions permeate fieldwork: Where do we smell from? Do we look for or are we found by smells? Do we locate or are we located by smells? Let's find out!

David Le Breton (1999) connects the separation between body and mind to individualism (as the hegemonic way of being in Western society) on the one hand, and to the hegemony of rationalism

and positivism in social research, on the other. Through the two ethnographic vignettes described above, I embrace the idea of “thinking from and with the body” in order to advance our theorizing “concerning the female subject and the feminist political subject” (Esteban, 2011, p. 48). These vignettes place smell at the centre of study in order to uncover old hegemonic inequalities and bring ourselves closer to new theories in the anthropology of the senses.

In this article I take up Donna Haraway's suggestion to “seek perspectives from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (Haraway, 1988, p. 585). That is, I use the capacity and materiality of smell to apprehend the surroundings in which I am researching and generate knowledge from the empirical sensorial experience of the field.

In my fieldwork experience in a compound in Saudi Arabia between 2011–2016, my capacity to smell aromas, perfumes, and the smells given off by certain fabrics presented me with the opportunity to empirically investigate certain theoretical approaches. From this starting point, Tim Ingold (2013) urges us to describe the properties of materials as a way of telling stories, precisely because he views them not as fixed attributes of matter but rather as properties that make the materials “processual and relational” (Ingold, 2013, p. 13–39).

In following this trail, in my sensory investigation, I discover that the evocative power of smell connects wet earth and white and black fabrics with their materiality. I discover what I call “materials of emergence”, that is, materials that evoke memories of experiences, like the earth; there are also materials of fantasy, that is, imaginary and pleasurable sensory constructions in relation to certain materials, like fabrics.

Careful fieldwork allowed me to resignify those evoked pleasurable experiences—whether from memory or imagination—by means of the capacity to smell material emergence. Thus, at an empirical level, by way of the smell of the earth and its power to evoke the past, smell is revealed to be a structuring element of memory; at the same time, it is through the perfume of the fabrics, the bodies and their invitation to enjoy that smell is revealed to be a structuring element of pleasure, and in particular of the imaginary that urges me to travel along a particular path in order to enjoy a pleasurable ethnographic experience.

In short, recalling via our sense of smell allows us to bring forth from memory a lived pleasure and from our imagination a pleasurable or sensual moment that is still to come. After all, “the body's memory emerges over the course of a life from key happenings in our life” (Del Valle, 1997, p. 61)—and, to that, I would add, whether lived or imagined.

Brief contributions to the materiality of smell

The materiality of smell could be used as an anthropological method, one that makes it possible to analyse diverse sociocultural contexts by contrasting perceptions of smell. At the same time, the materiality of smell allows us to draw a parallel between sensory systems and empirical experiences in fieldwork and the perceptive systems triggered by previous cultural baggage and our everyday sensory experience prior to undertaking the ethnographic endeavour.

And so, might we re-construct ethnography as a method, a technique, and feminist writing based on the sensory? Let's return briefly to the theoretical support for this discussion to find answers. If, as Le Breton (1999) points out, the separation between the body and the mind in the West is due to individualism, rationalism, and positivism, and if participant observation—a primarily visual and auditory practice—reproduces an androcentric bias (García-Grados, 2017), then these two empirical sensorial passages—written from the ethnographer's smelling body and taken together with the triggering power of the materiality of smell—constitute a strategy for feminist resistance in fieldwork. In other words, this sensory ethnography, undertaken using the sense of smell, is feminist in that it defends sensory perceptions other than sight and hearing, perceptions such as smells, textures, and movement. It is also feminist-activist in that it highlights the importance of the anthropologist's situated knowledge generated by her subjectivity, her emotions, and her memories and constructed pleasures, as is seen here in the smell of the earth and the perfume of fabrics.

Thus, investigating the materiality of smell in Saudi Arabia from a feminist ethnography of the body and emotions allows us to not only compare different contexts but also explore “compatibility” (Strathern, 2005[1991], p. 35–38) and the parallels in the knowledge that investigations of landscapes provide us with (Strathern, 2005[1991], p. 54). In short, it can bring us closer to a feminist view of social and cultural sensory diversity through a dialectical and situated relationship of bodily and sensorial implications—even from pleasure or the imagination—and away from binarisms and androcentric hierarchies.

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