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Tell me, what does the south smell like? Ethnographic smellscapes pain(ted) with Cézanne’s brush

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Abstract

In this paper, I present experimental autoethnographic smellscapes based on my ongoing doctoral research; this research studies the participation of women in the Carnival of Cadiz and explores scenes of embodied feminist critique performed during carnival festivities. Inspired by the idea of Cézanne’s brush, mentioned by Merleau Ponty, I first explore how smell is written—or, what my ethnography smells of. Second, I endeavour to map sensorial itineraries and destinations, travelling through spaces wherever the analytical, anthropological and bodily category of smell leads me. I paint a poetic and dialogical portrait through the act of smelling as I try to translate smell to loved ones and as I discover how the south of the south smells. The smell of Cadiz eventually leads me back to my homeland, Cyprus, as I sniff the field *with* and *for* others.

“Son de chirigota, sabor de melaza,

Guantánamo y Rota...

¡Que lo canta ya un coro en la plaza!”

Habaneras de Cádiz^[1]

I landed at the airport in Jerez in the winter of 2019, weighed down with bags and hopes, excited and terrified to be starting “the great ethnographic study” for my doctoral thesis²¹ on women’s participation in the Carnival of Cadiz. My bags were too heavy. They were full of books, clothing for all seasons, notebooks adorned with colourful flowers waiting to be filled in, pencils, a camera, a voice recorder, lots of shoes, baggy trousers—all the things I would need to pull off the image of the anthropologist that resided in my imagination.

My bags held not only objects but also all my perceptions, abilities, fears and memories (Σεργίδου, 2022). These were the real devices for collecting, recording, connecting, measuring distance and proximity, the tools for translating and interpreting the culture of Others. Perhaps I was the tool, following Hastrup (1993, in Gefou-Madianou, 2011), who noted that the most important scientific tool is the researcher herself. Her active participation engages her spirit, cultural baggage, thinking, body and senses.

I stress the word *weight* to emphasise the emotions I entered the field with. A weight that I felt painfully on my skin and that reminded me throughout my trip that my bags were too heavy. I mean this last part literally. I could not lift them, and the journey was a torment. It was through this process that I became aware of my body and its limitations. I realised that, as an ethnographer, I would, by necessity, inhabit both my new city and my ethnography (Gregorio, 2019), and I would do so with my body and my senses, in spite of the limitations imposed by my taste for food and alcohol that triggered my migraines and my fear of the dark.

This awareness of the corporality of research continually pushed me beyond the text and toward the desire to give into the ethnography before writing. Later, another question would arise. How and through what means can lived experience be captured in an ethnography? Is text sufficient for describing my participation in the carnival rituals? A comforting answer came from Papagaroufali (2002, p. 13), who sees language as action, distancing itself from the ontological distinction between language and practice. One possible route, then, would be to identify embodied points of entry into my ethnography. Thinking through the body (Jackson, 1983). In short, “thinking of the body as a subject, as a site of resistance and a site of reflection” (Esteban, 2013). These reflections inevitably led me to the philosopher Merleau-Ponty and his concept of the body as a whole; to the idea that “my body is, not a collection of adjacent organs, but a synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world” (2002[1962], p. 272). The philosopher reminds us that “Cézanne said that you should be able to paint the smell of trees” (2004[1948], p. 62). This statement by Cézanne is, for me, an ongoing riddle and a desire—speaking about something that cannot be spoken in a medium that is not designed for it. That is, smelling with a paint brush, as Cézanne suggests to us through Merleau-Ponty.

The smell of the heat

My first memory of the airport in Jerez that winter is the smell of the heat hugging my face. I feel the exact sensation when I go back to my native country, Cyprus, each time I emerge from the aeroplane. As a wave of heat greets me, I smell the south. After living for several years in Greece, also part of southern Europe, and then having decided to move to Cadiz to do fieldwork, I thought I would simply still be in the south. But when I smelled the familiar air that first day in Jerez, on my way to Cadiz, I was aware that I was heading to the south of the south and that, paradoxically, I was going from home to home, to a town just like my

native Limassol. From that moment, smell was both my guide to this new south and my tool for remembering and making comparisons to the place where I no longer lived.

One of the memories that emerged during my stay was a game that I used to play with someone very dear to me—Aphrodite—who had lost her sense of smell as a child. Because she could not smell, I would often describe the smells she was missing to her, translating them to other senses and situations. How would I describe my first smell of the south to Aphrodite? And all the ones that came after it? Our game would always begin with her question: “Tell me, what does this thing smell like?”

Her: Tell me, what does the south smell like the first day?

My dear, the instant I emerge from the aeroplane it smells like burnt cement, it smells like sunburnt skin, it smells like the air from a hair dryer and it smells like southern voices that drop their s’s, it smells like salt in the background and like black hair. It smells like a bottle of olive oil forgotten in the backyard. It smells like the road and like home. It smells like the bags I can’t lift.



Figure 1: It smells like weight. Jerez Airport,^[3] Winter 2019.

Her: Tell me, what does the south smell like in Cádiz?

It smells like a wind that doesn't let you walk. It could lift you up, like Mary Poppins. The market smells like murmurs. The city smells like bare feet in soft sand. It also smells like humidity that makes your bones hurt and it smells like the shade of the back lanes. The city smells like Havana and tastes like manzanilla wine. It smells like women sitting at their windows in la Viña, talking. It smells of unemployment and sadness, it smells of *hola quilla que tal?* It smells like women who walk proudly in the fair. It smells like when you hear the voice of Estrella Morente singing *Volver*, when you hear *La habanera* sung by Silvia Perez Cruz or the voice of Camarón while driving through the countryside of Cadiz.

It smells like highway

Please see HTMP version for accompanying video.

Figure 1: It smells like highway. A journey through the province of Cádiz with my roommates Nieves y Nata, Spring 2019

Her: Tell me, what does the south smell like during Carnival?

It smells like when the crowds press against you in the narrow streets, it smells like wanting to go on stage. It smells like the greasy hands of friends reaching for fried fish, it smells like urine in the streets and like feminist slogans like “our pussy smells like pussy, not fish”. It smells like shit cupcakes carried by women dressed as Catholic nuns. It smells like fear, when carnival is over and you walk home alone at night, and like bravery, when you say “no means no, not everything goes during carnival”. It smells like sweet gossip at rehearsal. It smells like how it feels when you trust a stranger with a secret while you have the voice recorder on. It smells like how it feels when you listen to a stranger who has become your friend and is named Pilar and she drunkenly tells you: “This chirigota will always be yours”.



Figure 2: It smells like greasy hands. Eating with my Carnival group. Cadiz Spring, 2019.



Figure 3: It smells like nuns wearing shit cupcakes. Cadiz, Spring, 2020.

Her: Tell me, what does feminism in the south smell like?

It smells like a paint brush submerged in a bucket of purple paint. It smells like the heat that comes off the body of a loved one when you hug them. It smells like when everyone is talking at the same time and it's all a jumble. It smells like not feeling at home and like a new idea that you'll take home with you. It smells like when you're out protesting and it's sunny and your face gets burnt. It smells like how your soul opens at the sight of the women dancing flamenco around a bonfire. It smells like what you want to be and it smells like what you'll never be again.



Figure 4: It smells like purple. A feminist activist in conversation during a performance at the Falla Theatre, Spring 2019.

Pain(ted) smellscapes in lieu of an epilogue

In *The Breast of Aphrodite*, Nadia Seremetakis (1997, p. 2) mourns the loss of a peach from her childhood. She reminds us that its absence “reveals the extent to which the senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence”. I wonder if the hot air that hits my face every time I step out of an aeroplane will return me to my native Limassol. It is, perhaps, a question of “a non-discursive memory linked to the concept of embodiment, a term that emerged from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, in the sense of something lived through bodily experience and personal internalisation which involves an emotional process”

(Del Valle, 1999). If the body is a mnemonic place, if memory is habitual (Κράββα, 2020), then the senses reveal a geography of one's very self. In my case, the smell of Andalusian heat reminded me of a pending return to Limassol via Cádiz.

The ethnographer Roger Sanjek (2019[1990]) wondered if memories are fieldnotes. He concluded that his very self was a fieldnote. If ethnography is a fieldnote, the senses and the memories that a researcher draws on make up a counter-archive. Perhaps this counter-archive is a response to one of the dangers mentioned in Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), wherein the researcher is possessed by "archive fever", which is associated with the hormesis of death.

But in compiling this counter-archive, which sense should I prioritise? Citing Geurts (2003) and Howes (1991), Sarah Pink (2011, p. 264) notes that sensory anthropologists concur that "the notion that there are five senses attached to five sense organs is a modern western construct, not necessarily applicable in other cultures". According to Ingold (2000), the ears and eyes are not separate keyboards but rather part of a whole that encompasses the act of perception. Similarly, Paul Stoller (1989, p. 5) defines sight as "the privileged sense of the West" as he recalls Songhay, where "one can taste kinship, smell witches and hear the ancestors". They remind me of Cretans when they say "I hear the smell", and this brings me back to Cézanne's paint brush and the question of for whom and with whom to paint a smell? Just as the organs and senses work together, so too are people connected. Thus, the ethnographer engages her senses, connects with her interlocutors and cohabits her ethnography, creating new coinhabitants and conversing with loved ones, like Aphrodite.

My approach to sniffing out my ethnography in other ways is my way of reconnecting with Aphrodite. It is an approach that prioritises embodied, subjective and social experience, channelled through the emotions and simultaneously charged with personal and cultural significance (Bullen, 2017). The different smells that I collected during my two-year stay in Cadiz go beyond a contra-archive and constitute a desire for a multimodal and polyphonic discourse, an alternative to the dominant and androcentric narratives that insist on a positivist view of data collection. Perhaps it is a matter of experience, since it is through the ethnographic smellscapes that I return to my carnival body. A stinking body that swears, gets hurt, remembers, enjoys, wears disguises and smells the field while moving through a place that is at the same time familiar and foreign.

The ethnographer, an ethnographer, sniffs the field with and for others and thus re-writes her smell, writing herself (Cixous, 1976) with Cézanne's brush.

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Notes

[1] “Sound of a *chirigota*, Flavour of molasses, Guantanamo and Rota, A carnival choir is now singing it in the plaza!” (lyrics translated by Katerina Sergidou). The poem “Habaneras de Cádiz” (1984), written by Antonio Burgos and set to music by Carlos Cano, has been a popular song of the city of Cadiz with countless recordings and interpretations by all kinds of soloists and ensembles. A *chirigota* is both a Spanish folksong and the group that sings it, performed during the Carnival of Cadiz and usually satirical. The reference to the cities of Guantanamo and Rota reveals another similarity between Cuba and Cadiz, since US military bases are located there. The strong link between Havana and Cádiz is highlighted in all the verses of the poem.

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[3] All photos were taken by the author.

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Katerina Sergidou is a Cypriot social anthropologist with a background in History-Archaeology and in communication and cultural studies. Since 2017 she has been elaborating a jointly supervised doctoral dissertation at the Department of Social Anthropology and Philosophy of Values /University of the Basque Country (UPV) [doctoral program of Feminist and Gender studies] and the Department of Communication Media and Culture of Panteion University as a fellow of the Greek State Scholarship Foundation (IKY). Her dissertation is on women's participation in the carnival of Cádiz (Andalucía), through a feminist-anthropological perspective. She has undertaken research in Greece and the Spanish State, which has resulted to several journal articles, co-editing books, presence in international conferences and public writing. Her research interests include contemporary carnival festivities, feminist methodologies in social research, popular art and politics, the concept of feminist hegemony, feminist activism, and feminist writing.

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