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Putting my nose to my fieldwork: what does fieldwork smell like?

Noemi Gómez Mendoza

Abstract

What does fieldwork smell like? Through this suggestive question, in the following lines I intend to explore my ethnographic work in Puerto Caldas, Colombia, through the sense of smell: a proposal that invites us to leave aside observation—the star sense in anthropology—and pay attention to other more forgotten senses that also influence ethnographic work, such as smell. Sniffing my ethnography allows me to identify the melting pot of smells that surround me as I walk across the land and that compose a new aroma, intertwined with my own, that sums up the sense of that territory, of the food, the people with whom I relate. This smell automatically affects that "other" smell from outside: that of the researcher and her research. Will we continue to smell the same at the beginning and at the end of our ethnographic work? What implications does this change of smell—or its absence—have on our research?

Walking among smells and memories...

Walking is an opening to the world. It restores (to us) our gladness at being alive. It submerses us in an active form of meditation and requires that all our senses be fully in operation.

(Le Breton, 2015, p. 135)

I step off the minibus and start my walk, one foot after the other, and my body begins to perceive and connect with the landscape. This perception entails both sensing and remembering, recognizing and relating (Sabido, 2016, p. 70); it goes beyond a physical reaction to the world's stimuli—it involves the meanings that I give to what I sense as I interact with the surroundings, transforming that perception into a "meaningful experience" (ibid.). I smell like dry earth, I smell like heat—I don't dislike it. The smell is not the same as the smell of the city of Pereira, where the smell of car exhaust, wet pavement and tobacco dominates, giving me a nagging cough and making it difficult to breathe. In contrast, this new smell of dry earth invites me to breathe in deeply and reminds me of my childhood walks in the mountains with my sister and my father. I relax and start to enjoy my walk over the dry earth that leads to my destination.

There are *cambuches*^[1] along the roadside, sitting on the old train tracks. I look ahead and the first mototaxi^[2] passes by, kicking up a curtain of dry earth which, along with the mototaxi's exhaust, completely surrounds me, penetrates and impregnates me, all the way into my nostrils. I don't like the smell, I reject it. I cannot breathe; the smell of the dry earth mixed with the mototaxi's exhaust is so strong, so pungent it stings. I have to stop before I can go on; I scratch my nose and take a few breaths until I can smell the dry earth that had first gladdened me and invited me to walk.

I keep on walking. But I can still smell that bad smell of dust mixed with mototaxi exhaust, I cannot shake it off. The smell is of something rotten, like when I was younger and would go out at night and come across that spot where everyone would urinate. I look to my left and see that the Old river^[3] is at low tide, making manifest to my sense of smell one of the community's needs: a sewage system. The smell is from the stagnant wastewaters that expose people and animals in the area to diseases. I walk faster, trying to avoid breathing in as much as possible until I can smell the dry earth again. I can't smell it very strongly yet, but at least I no longer smell of rotting things. I start to breathe deeply again and I find that now familiar smell: dry earth. I look about and realise that the people around me do not react in the same way; as Le Breton (2017) points out, perception is a way of sensing reality but is not reality itself. Perception is thus mediated by different cultural systems and histories, and when faced with the same sensations, we do not decode the same information—our interpretation depends on our own reference systems (ibid). This means that no single truth exists within a community when it comes to smells; there is "only a multitude of perceptions based on one's perspectives, expectations, social and cultural affiliations" (Le Breton, 2017, p. 2). If this smell triggered, for me, the memory of going out at night, for others in my surroundings, it might have reminded them of the community's lack of a sewage system, the warning against fishing that day, or perhaps they simply did not notice it.

I arrive at my destination: the association called The Beginning of the Rainbow.^[4] Some colleagues who had arrived, by motorcycle, before me greet me with a hug. I identify a new smell, a strong smell that is totally different to the mosaic of smells I encountered on my walk, and it signals that someone from the outside is here, a "stranger" (Larrea, 1997, p. 45): it smells of perfume. "I wonder how I smell", I think, "I must smell 'bad'": a combination of sweat, dry earth and, why not, that rotting smell I had attempted to flee from. But do I really smell bad? Or is it a new smell that renders account of the landscape I walked in? These musings make me think of how the meanings we give to smells are not usually neutral but instead responsive to a social order and hierarchy (Howes, 2014, in Sabido, 2016), strategies for distinguishing social classes, social inequality and racism (Larrea, 1997, p. 21). And hence, as Synnott (2003) tells us in paraphrasing Hamlet, "nothing is fragrant nor malodourous, good or bad, if thought does not make it so" (p. 440). In this case, in relating perfume with a good smell and the smell of the countryside to something bad, one could be making a connection with belonging to a social class: "the distribution of smells symbolises how a society structures its classes, whether through body odour or through the quality and cost of fragrances" (Synnott, 2003, p. 447). Were the smells I had identified signalling the different population groups that live in the same territory? Was perfume a marker of distinction?

The smell of meeting: sancocho

The smell of cinnamon can be part of any place or any environment where, either as children or adults, we were allowed to be and share. And remember forever.

(Soto Marata, 2021, p. 342)

After working for several hours in the garden and under the sun with the other colleagues who answered the association's call to the Convite^[5] "Minga^[6] Pa Acá", I take a break and look around

me: although we are wearing hats to protect us from the sun, our faces are sweaty. The sweat mixes with the sunscreen we're wearing; this is a smell that I do not notice, surely because it's a shared smell. I look at my sweaty hands; they are covered in dirt, and a burst blister is evidence of my inexperience in working the fields; I bring my hands to my nose to smell them, as if, by doing so, I could identify their state. They smell terrible, an odour that mixes the strong smell of sweat with the smell of sweat-stained wood. Further proof of my lack of familiarity with working the earth?

It is approximately 1:15 pm and we're all going to lunch. We put down our shovels and hoes and sit in the hall, as they serve us a bowl of *sancocho*.^[2] I sit next to Daniela, and I smell the hot soup. She looks at me and laughs; just a few weeks ago, we were talking about the impossibility of eating hot food when it's hot outside. In smelling the *sancocho*, although it smells delicious after a long day of work, the heat that I smell shrinks my stomach and takes away my appetite; this smell of heat covers me with such weight, it's as if it has filled me up. This sensation illustrates that human sensoriality is not the sum of independent senses;^[3] the senses are interconnected and, following Cárdenas, "the human body is a system whose sensoriality is rooted in participation (...) [whether] through synaesthesia or a synergistic process of global apprehension" (Cárdenas, 2014, p. 35).

Amid the laughter, confessions and planning of my upcoming birthday (turning 30 doesn't happen every day), we finish our lunch with smiles, glad to have shared a good meal after a day engaged in communal work in the *minga*. I breathe in and smell the traces of *sancocho* left in the bowls: a smell that makes me smile and makes me feel glad; a smell that reminds me of shared time and space, the communal work and all the relationships woven together during that sharing. *Sancocho* smells of community, of collective labour and meetings that bring different people together to work toward a common good—in this case, food sovereignty. Although each of us arrived smelling of a favourite perfume, in the course of walking, working, and sharing in the same space, we've all been affected by each other and by the landscape, acquiring a new smell that, at first, I don't identify. My partner arrives to drive me home and I think to myself, "I must smell bad". But again, I wonder, "why would I smell bad?"—it's the new smell that I shared with everyone throughout the day at Convite Minga Pa Acá, which makes me think of everything that was shared that day. As Pepi Soto Marata notes in quoting Françoise Héritier: "[...] what happened fades away, but the essential remains, [...] it resurfaces with the furtive allure of an evocation, with the shiver of a sensation, the surprisingly vivid and occasionally incomprehensible force of an emotion" (Héritier, 2012, in Soto Marata, 2021, p. 342). The smell of earth, rotting things, *sancocho*: the whole melting pot of smells will be the memory of what I lived with that community, of a meaningful shared experience.

Notes

^[1] Cambuches are "improvised" houses built from many types of materials (cardboard, plastic, wood, guadua (a plant belonging to the bamboo family)). This type of housing is characteristic of marginalised areas and low-income people in Colombia.

^[2] The mototaxi or motoraton is a popular form of transport provided by residents of Puerto Caldas (mostly men) to the population given the lack of a public transport system.

^[3] The name of the river in Spanish is La Vieja.

^[4] Its name in Spanish is El Comienzo del Arcoíris.

^[5] A *convite* is to invite a community to a shared meal in order to work on a common project, in this case, a community garden.

^[6] "The term *minga* is associated with community work done by the Amerindian communities in the Andes mountain range from Chile to Colombia" (Lopez, 2018, p. 2).

^[7] *Sancocho* is a type of soup that contains meat and vegetables; in this instance, it was made of chicken, potato, yucca and plantain.

^[8] The five senses, according to Western tradition, are hearing, sight, taste, touch and smell.

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