

Embodied experience: A walk down memory lane

..... Katherine Price

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author explores the anthropological method of autoethnography during a walk along East Sands. Focusing on the sensorial experience, the article draws connections between the senses and memory. With these findings, the author analyzes the idea of the ‘field’ and how these interactions influenced their experience with the ‘field.’

I first step out of my flat and walk around the two orange fences guarding the trail. I feel the dirt beneath my sneakers. In some way, it makes me remember home. The dirt path I would walk my dogs along felt similar beneath my shoe, with a similar scattering of small rocks along the dirt that would make a similar soft crunching sound. Each step feels freeing, a step away from bustling pavement and towards my community of trees. The trees and I “co-create multiple narratives about [our] embodiment” (Liberone and Myers 2019) as I pass through them: with reaching branches, protect me in my haven. One particular tree sits along the curve of the path, with some of its roots exposed to the world. As I pass this tree, I am reminded of another that I encountered during a cross-country race in high school, of “the breath and the movement that we...had together” (Tang et al. 2024). Both paths contained the challenge of a protruding root where I had to mindfully lift my foot an inch higher than my normal tread to not trip. With this motion my body remembers the breathlessness I felt when I ran through the wooded portion of the race. I become more aware of my breathing at this moment.

I feel safe among the trees. The path is wide enough for both my feet but no one else. The trees on both sides hug but don’t smother me. I am alone but I don’t feel lonely. To the side of the path, Kinness Burn swims beside me, leading me to the sea. I reach the end of the trail, which dumps me along Abbey Walk. Now out of the protection of the trees, I feel the wrath of the wind howling and asserting its strength. The sounds of seagulls squawking grow louder as I cross the street to get to the harbor. Uneven cobblestones lay the path.

My heel meets a taller cobblestone while the ball of my foot falls to a lower, slanted cob-

blestone. My other foot braces to keep me upright. My feet continue to contort along the ancient path. This familiar movement reminds my body of the first time I visited St Andrews and walked along the cobblestones near St Salvator's Chapel. There was something about the connection of my feet with the earth that gave me solace. Each step was completely different, with a different set of stones to meet. I became aware of each step. At home in the United States, I would mindlessly walk on flat pavement, but here in this new environment each step was purposeful and attentive. I felt grounded and present, meaningfully connecting with the ancient stones each step. My body experienced new interactions with this environment.



While most other sites along this walk bring me memories of other places, the sensation of the cobblestones makes me explicitly aware of where I am now. The sensation of the texture beneath my shoes is a sensation unique to this space. The image above brings the reader into the same space that I was in. The viewer can see the different heights of the cobblestones, allowing them to better understand my relationship with the space and for them to form their own relationship.

The cobblestones lead me to the harbor. It is low tide, which bears a very specific smell. It has a putrid and sulphury smell that takes me back to my childhood of playing in the creeks at low tide with my family. In the harbor, the keels of the boats are stuck in the mud. A sense of concern rushes through me as I think of all the efforts my family makes to keep our boat from scratching the bottom of the sea at low tides in New York. My grandfather would be horrified. But the earth is different here: the sea floor of the harbor is a sandbox of spongy mud, whereas in New York, rocks prevail against the raging waves.

I walk along the harbor and across the bridge that takes me to East Sands. With no protection from the sea wind, I am blasted with the wind's grand puffs. I taste salt in the wind. With each step, I get a mouthful of sea salt and battle against the wind. The white noise of the waves contradicts the less-than-calming experience of shielding myself from the wind with my arms, as if I am trudging into war.

An older man and a brown fluffy dog walk towards me on the path. We both are walking in the middle of the path. My body experiences a quick shock of anxiety as I try to understand which side of the path to walk on to avoid collision. My body naturally steers to the right as is cus-

tom in the United States. I fight this instinct and stay towards the left of the path to give them room to pass, as I assume is more custom in the UK since they drive on the left. As they pass, I smile at the man and the dog stretches its neck to smell me. I pet the top of its head with two strokes and then we both continue in our respective directions. The dog's fur is soft like a blanket. I feel a rush of serotonin but also a small heaviness in my chest as I yearn for my own dogs.

Despite the dramatic wind waging war, my body feels calm being in proximity to the sea. I look out at the stone pier and then to the rocky cliffs along the coastal path. The endless sea makes my body feel free. I feel my shoulders ease and my jaw unclench. The smell and taste of the salt air along with the view of the ocean cause a comfortable feeling throughout my body. Sensations of the sea bring me back to the little beach in New York where my family goes every summer. Even though my family is an ocean apart, my body feels like they are with me because we share the ocean. Even in this new place with new textures and customs, I feel at home because it is not a new space, just a new place.

WRITING ABOUT THE 'FIELD'

Through this ethnography, I have gained appreciation for the interweaving of writing the ethnography and the physical experience. Geertz (1988) writes about how anthropologists need to get "themselves into their text" (Geertz 1988: 17). My sensory experience informed my ideas, as through the physical experience, I learned how my body interacted with the space, allowing me to then write about the relationship between the body and space. Without my embodied experience with the harbor, I may not have understood my body's relationship with smells, tastes, and sounds of the seaside and how they evoke memories of family. Investigating the relationship between embodied experience and space in this way allows anthropologists to question the concept of 'field' in anthropology.

Thinking of the field as the social interactions between other people and the environment widens the lens of anthropologists to understand their bodies as sites of knowledge. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus directly relates to this through his idea of sociospatial framework, which manifests through embodied experiences (Bourdieu 1977). The social relations of the harbor were shown and understood through my bodily interaction with it. Using sensorial methodology, rather than 'traditional' ethnographic methodologies, I was able to better understand my interactions with my environment. My body "engage[d] with its surroundings to gather knowledge about itself and the world" (Vara 2024). Using my senses allowed me to recognize a sense of familiarity with the environment. Without my senses, I might not have been able to register the nostalgia invoked by the environment. My senses were able to bridge my bodily interaction with my environment and my memory to understand my engagement with this environment. The sense of sight "is shaped by our experiences, and our 'gaze' has a direct bearing on what we think" (Stoller 1989: 39). Through my sense of sight, I was able to reflect upon what I see and how it leads my body to remember my previous experiences in similar settings. My sense of smell allowed me to transport myself back to my childhood (Seremetakis 1994). My sense of taste made my body feel calm because the taste of the salt air connected me to memories of being with my family at the beach. Furthermore, through my sense of touch and my body's movements, I was able to recognize textures and performances

of my body that connected me to memories of St Andrews. My experience with the space evoked memories of similar spaces where my body had interacted and experienced similar sensations.

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