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MAKING SENSE OF SENSES INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY NOYES

Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto

I interviewed Dorothy Noyes, Director of the Center for Folklore Studies, and Associate Professor of English, Comparative Studies, and Anthropology Ohio State University, Columbus (United States). Currently, her research interests involve the collective representations of plural societies, the social organization of vernacular creativity, and the history of international cultural regimes. Her primary fieldwork is in Catalonia, Spain, where she has studied the politics of local festivities. It was her book *Fire in the Plaça* (2003) that put some questions to my head about senses and encouraged me to get engaged with sensual experiences of ethnographic fieldwork.

EK-K: Why, in your opinion, senses are important part of writing ethnography?

DN: The ethnographer has to take the senses seriously for two reasons. They are the channels through which human beings engage with the world and with one another. They are also the channels through which the ethnographer studies these human engagements. Both of these points are obvious if you're studying painting or food ways or festival, less obvious if you're studying something like politics or everyday social interaction. In that case it may seem like all you have to do is talk to people or watch them talking.

But language is only the top layer of social communication. It was privileged in the modern ideology that understood communication primarily as the transmission of referential information about topics unconnected with the interaction. Today language is being dethroned both in practice and in scholarly analysis. In an age of user-generated multimedia, many young people can create video mash ups more easily than academic prose. I'm writing a paper right now about transgressive gestures in French politics, and YouTube tells me more than the newspapers do about how young people evaluate the conduct of Nicolas Sarkozy. In turn, politicians are more

than ever aware that their look and their interaction style affect their electability more than their actual ideas do. (Think of Sarah Palin!)

From an analytical perspective, it's not news to scholars that most conversation is more about building and maintaining social relationships than about conveying new information. How bodies are aligned in space, what kinds of touching and gesturing go on, the raising of voices and taking of turns, eye contact, all of this matters as much as the referential content of the words spoken.

And all of it is intensified when an ethnographer comes in as an outsider. We tend not to be conscious of our "rules" about interaction and the presentation of self, and we can be attracted to one another or alienated by one another through such simple things as standing close, wearing jewelry, or asking an unexpected question. More intensely than everyday encounters, the ethnographic encounter is what Robert Cantwell calls "ethnomimetic," with each side watching the other carefully and trying to accommodate to the other's expectations through subtle mutual imitation. Or, in some cases, to reject the other by performing difference.

EK-K: During my stay here in the United States, I have tried to learn how to write academic text, not only understandably, but also in a nice way that would communicate my experiences and thoughts. Do you think sensual experiences can be communicated through text and language?

DN: Of course they can, but not perfectly. Nothing can be communicated perfectly. Even the verbatim quotation of a verbal utterance loses tone, timbre, context. Of course it's much harder to put the taste of wine or the exhaustion of having danced all night into language: not only are you reducing the original experience, as any representation must, but you have to translate it into a completely different code. So we have to start by recognizing the inadequacy of language to reproduce experience. But the basic semiotic processes of indexicality and metaphor can still get us somewhere. We can point to the quality of experience by showing all of its observable concomitants: who was there, what the weather was like, what we drank, what music was playing. I can't give you the experience, but I can show you how I got there. And insofar as you have had comparable experiences you can get the general idea. There is also metaphor, using a familiar domain to represent an unfamiliar one: a common strategy for describing religious experience. Metaphor too relies on bodily experiences common to us as a species: being warmed by the sun or thrown into cold water, being suckled or beaten.

Another mistake is to think of text and language as devoid of sensory impact. I won't talk about the materiality of text, typeface, and print, but a great deal has been written on that subject. Reading is a corporeal experience, and reading from a scroll is different from lying in bed with a printed book or reading hypertext online. But language itself works on the body as well as the mind, through rhythms, phonological patterning, tempo, intonation and so on. Language can also be gestural, breaking out of ordinary rhythms to call attention to itself. And not just in poetry spoken aloud. Prose read silently can still mimic sensory experience--a point made famously by Leo Spitzer in his essay "The Style of Diderot," which demonstrates how prose rhythms

can reproduce the experience of orgasm. Timidity or lack of verbal skill often prevents ethnographers from attempting such iconic prose. But I think it is possible, without abandoning the conventions of academic writing, to shape an ethnographic text in ways that mimic its object, and in my book on the Patum I tried to approximate some of the patterning and some of the rhythms of the festival itself. What I learned in doing this (and Roberto da Matta has also discussed) was that festival is structurally comparable to social theory, a delineation of the meaningful features of local social reality. But theory works through abstractions and festival works through sensory typifications, isolating the key contrasts and parallels in size, stance, motion, and surface texture that are felt to situate members of the community.

Finally, there is something positive to say about the reduction that language makes necessary. (I'm speaking here as an ethnographer of a certain age, capable of writing academic prose but not of producing video mash ups.) When I was in graduate school in the US in the late 1980s, we were appalled by the power of representation to oversimplify social phenomena and take agency from the people being represented. And this was a very appropriate anxiety, given the ways in which ethnographers had contributed in many historical situations to the stereotyping and often the direct oppression of subaltern populations. So we worked very hard to fill out our representations, to put in more voices, more context, more senses, more of everything, and even so I used to lie awake in bed and cry about the crime I was committing by attempting to write about other people. Some of us gave up and wrote only about ourselves. Others redefined the ethnographer's role as a kind of technical assistant to subaltern communities in representing themselves in public--which made the ethnographer useless once communities gained access to video cameras, the Web, and so on. Without intending to, the field became timid and self-limiting.

Happily, we got over it. After many years, I and others have made our peace with the truth that scholarship is not the same thing as community membership (although of course one individual often performs in both roles) and the other truth that representation is not reality. I have even concluded that this is a good thing, provided that we observe humility in the face of the task. Representation is reduction, by definition. We can't think without simplifying: without reduction there is no art and no thought. (See the great 18th century English novel *Tristram Shandy*, in which the hero sets out to tell the story of his life in full, with all relevant detail. After 900 pages he has still not gotten beyond the night of his conception.) Reduction helps you to see patterns that you might not otherwise find. It helps you to find common ground between situations--and that means also finding common ground between people, which is impossible when you insist on the irreducible uniqueness of every local phenomenon. And language is the scholar's primary instrument of reduction (for the moment, anyway; your generation may figure out how to do scholarship through *Second Life*), giving us labels for phenomena and a syntax in which to place them. It's absolutely imperfect, and we have to keep striving to use it better. But it gives us a bridge between experience in one setting and experience in another setting.

EK-K: You have done fieldwork in Spain, Catalonia and participated in the festivity

called Patum (which is an onomatopoeic name). You describe and analyze your experiences in your latest book “Fire in the Praça” (2003). Patum must have been indeed a highly sensual experience?

DN: The Patum was very hard for me. By temperament I am what they called a “library rat”, almost wholly incompetent in any other setting. To throw myself into a crowd and put firecrackers on my head took extraordinary effort. But I found out that I was not alone in finding the festival difficult, and that the community in fact has a highly developed informal pedagogy for bringing people into it as well as a long warming-up period to get themselves ready for it. Americans tend to imagine festival as pure “blow-out,” going south to somewhere warm where people have no inhibitions, drinking themselves stupid, and throwing their clothes off. In Berga, I discovered that you have to learn wildness just as you have to learn civilization. Traditional festival doesn’t happen among strangers you’ll never see again, but among people you live with every day, who have known you since childhood and who will see you again on Monday. It happens among people who often don’t like each other very much, who are rivals for common resources, often in societies where political pressures demand a great deal of everyday self-repression. It’s not easy to throw off habits of self-preservation: presenting a smooth façade to the world, avoiding enemies, holding your elbows in. Drinking and dancing all night and playing with fire provide a release that is both liberating and dangerous. The festival’s techniques of the body force this release on you, a surrender of personal power as well as of personal responsibility that is frightening before it becomes thrilling. You are deprived of sleep, mastered by rhythm, moved by the crowd and not your own feet. The hangover is not just from the alcohol. The ethnographer gets a kind of hangover too: it’s not easy to return to the library when the drum has gotten into your head and is making your toes tap.

EK-K: In the spring, you are teaching a graduate course on performance theory. What kind of advises would you give to somebody that considers doing fieldwork and studying rituals or other performances related to sensual experience?

DN: Be prepared for that hangover. If you do the work right--which means accepting every invitation, following every pathway opened to you, and getting dirty and burned--you will not go home the same. Some people undergo a conversion and never go home at all. Most of us go home and live frustrated between two worlds. Academic questions suddenly seem too far off the ground, academic genres and discourse a violation of reality, and personal life is typically shaken as well. Food doesn’t taste right, home looks ugly, friends and lovers seem strange. Apparently I sang and danced in my sleep and also sat up in bed talking in Catalan for a month or two after coming home; it took me much longer to recover my ease in the university. The more completely your body has learned to live in the new situation, the more challenging the readjustment. Perhaps being conscious of the challenge can help; more likely you just have to be prepared to suffer it and help those around you to suffer it.

EK-K: Last I would like to ask a difficult but intriguing question: to what extent do you think sensual experiences are cultural and vary between different people and different times?

DN: Sensory experience can build social bridges. Otherwise “love would be meaningless,” as my former student Yücel Demirel once told another student agonizing over the impossibility of cross-cultural ethnography. Sex is the basic and extreme case of how people who are very unlike can come together and form a bond. In the broader social world, we have commensality--eating together, an acknowledgement of our common human need, a feature of ritual in every religion I know of. (The opposite of eating, defecation, is frequently invoked in folk social criticism as what brings down the king and the Pope to the level of ordinary humanity.) In Berga, a town that experienced heavy immigration in the second half of the twentieth century, it is understood that sensory experience is a means of social integration. Before immigrants could speak the Catalan language they could move their feet in the *Patum*. Living in the same neighborhoods as natives, playing together as children, drinking with them in bars, and especially sharing the powerful sensory experience of the festival, immigrants gradually acquired a history of experience in common with natives and were integrated: the same applied to me as an ethnographer. In the mind of the natives, integration was a matter of degree: you could get deeper and deeper in the more you participated, and that meant that the native-born could also drop out and become marginalized. This meant inclusion on the native terms, of course. When immigrants started to come from greater distances and to assert their own habits of dress, cooking, and so on, immigration began to be felt as a problem: there was sensory alienation when new scents and sounds intruded. But Brad Erickson, studying a coastal city in Catalonia with a stronger economy than Berga's, has found that in Vilanova i la Geltrú the natives have been more open to sensory infiltration and that the exchange in both everyday and festival contexts is more two-way between native-born and immigrants.

Of course the life of the senses is shaped by history and material conditions; it's organized by language and genre and all of the patterned habits we take in as children. So yes, it's cultural. But I like the materialist approach they took in Berga: you'll never feel just what we feel, but if you spend time with us, eat what we eat, move as we move, you can get closer to it. Our common species life does tend to create what Mary Douglas called “natural symbols.” High and low, left and right, fast and slow, smooth and rough, sweet and bitter, are not identically resonant across cultures but they give us some common experiential starting points. Do I know how the Berguedans feel the *Patum*? Well, sort of. Do I know what my husband means when he says he loves me? Well, sort of. It's not something it would be wise to interrogate too deeply. The ethnographer can't get at human interiority, and perhaps it shows more respect to our informants not to attempt it. What we can observe and describe are the outward and visible forms in their contexts. Forms are patterns of language, sound, movement, or matter more highly organized than what surrounds them: they call attention to themselves. They are shaped in performance, under the pressure of circumstance, by human habits and codes and hands and intentions; they work

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back on humans through a multisensory apparatus, and are received as experience. But they are recognized, reproduced, and transmitted as form. For me the object of folklore studies is not, in the first instance, experience or communities or cultures, but this life of forms.

EK-K: Thank you for the interview! It seems to me that people make sense of the senses by living, using, and reproducing folklore.

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