

History in Focus

13. Follow Your Nose, Part 2

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Daniel Story

Hey, it's Daniel. In the very first episode of *History in Focus*, an episode titled "Follow Your Noes," we kicked things off with a group called Odeuropa—an interdisciplinary team of researchers in the UK and Europe exploring the importance of smell for European history and cultural heritage. They're a team using digital techniques to mine historical sources for references to smell; they're also working with chemists to recreate historical smells; and they're working in a variety of educational and public facing contexts (like museums) to help curate smell-focused learning, exhibitions, and events. Pretty impressive.

So a little more than a year after that first episode, we're checking back in with Odeuropa to hear about the progress they've made, including what they contributed in a visit to the recent American Historical Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia. We'll start things off with project lead Inger Leamans for a wider view. But we'll also visit with smellscape researcher Kate McLean who will take us back through the smell walk she led for the AHA conference through downtown Philadelphia.

I'm Daniel Story, and this is *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. This is episode 13—"Follow Your Nose, Part 2."

It's been a year since our podcast and checked in with Odeuropa, so I thought it'd be interesting to have you give us a little bit of a high level view of what's been happening with Odeuropa over the last year, give or take.

Inger Leemans

Yeah, thank you so much. So much has happened. We've been working, of course, with the American Historical Review on a couple of issues. We had the first scented card to be distributed as a publication, with the review. And we've been developing a lot in the meantime for the Odeuropa Smell Explorer. And we were very happy to see that, by the input of our historians, the computer programs are actually able to capture smell from historical texts. I was very excited by that because we promised this to the European Union, but didn't know how well he would succeed in this effort. So yeah, it has been an exciting year. We have organized a series of olfactory events, a hackathon, policy meetings with people working on tangible and

intangible heritage. And, of course, we visited the American Historical Association conference in Philadelphia, where we had two sessions and a smell walk through Philly, and we had the smell cards for the Liberty Bell smell. So yeah. So shall I stop now?

Daniel Story

That's good for now. I want to circle back to the AHA experience, but you mentioned the scented card that was included in one of the AHR issues. That was back in June of last year.

Inger Leemans

Yes. For our article "Making Whiffstory" we developed scented cards where we presented a historical perfume recreation to go with the American Historical Review issue. Yeah

Daniel Story

Definitely a first for the American Historical Review.

Inger Leemans

Yeah, and it was wonderful also to work with the perfumers on this and have them describe their sense in depth, also to design a review process for this perfume, which was also something that we had done amongst our group, of course, and in negotiation with the scent designers. But now, for the first time, we made this into a more structured review process for historical scent recreations. We were very happy with the outcomes; it helped us think about when do you think that scent recreation is actually convincing? What, when does it do a good job in bringing forth historical knowledge? I think that's what we're aiming for, right? So the scented card is nice. It helps you to connect to history in a different way. But what we in the Odeuropa project really want is to think about the importance and also necessity of using multi-sensory experiences as historical investigations.

Daniel Story

Yeah, and the AHR issue that's coming out sort of aligned with this episode, the March 2023 issue, focuses on the Smell Explorer and the sort of digital process.

Inger Leemans

Yeah, absolutely. In a new issue, we unpacked the digital methodology that is behind the auto Hopper Smell Explorer - so talking about the text mining models that we created, the image recognition models, and also very much about the semantic web technology, where we created ontologies that can bring all these different components together that are able to capture smell as a cultural phenomenon. There's a lot of computer science groups out there which are

trying to calculate the nose in a way, or do flavor analytics, to see how molecules operate, and this is actually the first computer-driven ontology of smell as a cultural phenomenon, which is able to indeed bring in both visual and textual clues. So we try to explain that to maybe a less digital humanities-oriented audience, and I hope we succeed in that, that it's not too complicated, but I'm sure...

Daniel Story

I think it's great. Can folks access the Smell Explorer yet? Is it live on the internet?

Inger Leemans

Yeah, yeah, we have a draft version running, and we really invite everyone to come and tap in. I think at this moment, we have like 250,000 smell quotes in there and thousands of images. We're still expanding it, right? So it's really a draft version, but do engage with it, and if you have questions, suggestions for us to improve them, please help us to make this the best version of the Explorer. In the end, we want to deliver the final version in the November of '23.

Daniel Story

Well, you've made so much progress.

Inger Leemans

We have a wonderful team, and actually what I really love about the project is the way humanities scholars, and computer scientists, and other scientists are collaborating together. I think it's one of the accomplishments because I've been in a lot of interdisciplinary projects before, and it's hard to not fall back on our own methodologies and concepts and expertise, of course, and that's how we are raised as scholars and scientists. So it takes a constant effort to seek each other out and to think where you want to sort of develop there and create new insights and also trust that you're not making a lead that is too far out and that is not leading to anything anymore. So it's a delicate balance. Our historian, for instance, William Tullett has been wonderful in adapting to all these digital techniques, whereas the digital groups have been really open to think more also in hermeneutic kind of things and to ask for in-depth knowledge about what it is that we as historians want to know and how we then can accommodate for that in our knowledge graph.

Daniel Story

So speaking of the diversity of your team kind of leads me back to the AHA experience. Could you take me back through the things that you did at AHA, and maybe start with describing the

team from Odeuropa that was actually their present because you represented a number of different approaches to the project, right?

Inger Leemans

Yes, we did. So we opened up by sort of general introduction to the project.

Inger speaking at AHA23: "Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this session, 'Knowing by Sensing.' [It's] really great to have you all in the room and to smell and discover the history of scents with us. We'll start with an introduction by me and introduction with a plea to make you all nose witnesses to the past. And then Cecilia Bembibre..."

Inger Leemans

And then Cecilia Bembibre, who comes from heritage science - she has a chemical background, has a lot of interest for the materiality of smell in heritage context. So, for instance, she researches a history of the smell of books, for instance. And so she talked more about smell reconstructions from a material aspect. But then, of course, we started to interact with scents

Inger speaking at AHA23: "... a meeting, so we'll stop the session right there and then invite you to the tables, do some smelling there..."

Inger Leemans

We invited the audience to smell with us and also to share their experience and their thoughts about what it is they experience. Yes, yeah.

AHA23 meeting attendee: "... unusual but I'm not, like... I'm not unsurprised by it. Like, it's exactly what I would have imagined..."

Inger Leemans

And William, our cultural historian, sort of opened up the questions about the importance of studying the history of smell and senses, doing that by making use of our sensory experiences. So what is it to research smell in our thinking about the connections between the past and present? And then Kate McLean, who is an expert in smell-walking and smell-mapping, introduced this beautiful visualization that she's making on the base of historical olfactory mapping routes, where people are walking around and trying to capture smells in an urban environment. And so she talked more about smell-walking and smell-mapping as methodologies for capturing the history and values of smell.

Kate McLean

I am Dr. Kate McLean. I am an academic researcher and a graphic designer. I work at the University of Kent in Canterbury in the UK. And my specialist subject is smellscapes, human perceived smellscapes, and smellscape mapping.

Daniel Story

So I had the benefit of being there at the smell walk, right, which was lovely. But for listeners who didn't have the pleasure of joining us on that crisp Philadelphia morning, what was it that transpired?

Kate McLean

The smell walk with AHA was the wonderful opportunity to get historians out and discovering an incredibly historic part of an incredibly historic city foregrounding their noses as the primary sense of knowing and understanding the environment around them. At the same time, it was really to sort of get them to think about history from a sensory perspective and to throw themselves back into different periods of time and contemplate what that particular landscape may have smelled like at that particular time. It's a structured walk that I've developed over a period of about the last 12 years that really enables people to engage on multiple levels with the environment around them in this new way. So the walk started in the center of Philadelphia and sort of like in Washington garden.

Audio from Kate's smell walk: "My name is Kate. Thank you for all coming to a smell walk through Philly. It's been designed to suit the city here. And we're on a little bit of a tighter timetable because the bus is meeting us at the other end. A small walk is a way of encountering the world through your nose. So encountering those first, making that the primary sense..."

Kate McLean

I'd set it up beforehand, so I knew sort of like what the distance was going to be and roughly where we were going to go, and participants were all given a map on one side of a piece of cardboard and on the other side they had a table set out for them to be able to record their findings.

Kate during her smell walk: "Any questions? We're going to walk across here, and then up the next park section over there. So we're going to keep moving. We'll have a sheepdog behind us to make sure that you keep up..."

Kate McLean

And so with a pen and noses, and a piece of printed card, we set off to collect what Philly offered one bright, was it a Saturday or Sunday morning?

Daniel Story

It was a Sunday morning.

Kate McLean

Sunday morning. You never quite know what you're going to come across because the sort of like the pre-walk, it was a slightly more grim and dismal day, and this was bright and sunny and crisp and cold and every single smell just about decided to sort of like stay inside apart from some that came up through the sidewalks. And there was like huge mists that you could actually smell the damp that came through from the metro system and the, like, the piped air that came through that. So that, that's very peculiar to only certain American towns, and we definitely don't have that in Europe to anywhere near the same extent. Groups of people walked, and they came across the smell of leaves and the smell of the earth and then try to imagine what Washington gardens might have been like when it was an ancient burial site.

Smell-walker speaking: "... just enjoying a quick steam bath when..."

Kate McLean

So that first section was largely about something that I call smell catching. So that's where you walk along, and you just absorb smells through your nose, and you breathe, and if you find a smell that is particularly intriguing, then you breathe in more deeply. And that just enables you to sort of like capture more olfactory molecules to sort of like hit your olfactory epithelium, and then for all the neural processing to start work that changes something that is a strange molecular shape into something that we form these astonishing sort of like associations and connections with, and we call them smells. So a smell doesn't really exist until we actually sort of like process it and interpret what that means to us.

Daniel Story

Fascinating.

Kate McLean

So that first section, there was a number of different things that were recorded, and we sort of like stopped to have a quick chat. It's always a really good chance for people on the walk to understand what other people had smelled ,and how they'd smelled it, and what was most

interesting. And one of the things that came through was somebody said they'd actually smell metal. And the resulting conversation that happened with some people that were local to Philly, and a little bit of exploration of what that smell of metal might have come from, and it turned out we were just downwind from the mint. And so whether that was actually the case or not, but it made that really nice connection that if you can smell metal, where might it come from? What might it be? And how might it have entered that that particular environment? And then we walked up to near where the Liberty Bell is currently housed. And then we went through and we did a section of smell hunting, which is really using your other senses to be able to spot something that looks visually interesting and then say, "Okay, what does it smell like?" And then touch something and feel its texture, and if it's got an interesting texture, what does it smell like? That's when you get much closer to the smells that are around. And then we walked down a street from there and up through to the Ben Franklin house. There's a courtyard, up there. And there's a sort of like, there's even a plaque in the ground saying that sort of like a privy was underneath there, at one point.

Kate during her smell walk: "... so favorite spot in the whole of Philadelphia, this. John Reed privy pit. You're right on it."

Kate McLean

You can conjure and imagine the smells that would have been their way back. And then we walked up to Market Street and turned to sort of like go down Market Street going towards the river.

Kate during her smell walk: "... your third challenge: we're going to walk out of here go right down market, we're going to go all the way down to a store, almost at the waterfront, called the Franklin Fountain, which is an old American soda fountain..."

Kate McLean

And what's really good about Market Street is it is one of the original streets of Philly. But it also has a number of different shops and different restaurants and cafes on it. So you get a large number of smells that come out because you've got changing temperature and activity and cooking happening, and that gives you a large variety of things to sniff out. The final section was picking an object and smelling four different instances of it.

Kate during her smell walk: "... that way. I would like you to find four examples of one thing and smell them all. So it could be four bricks, it could be four entrances to different stores..."

Kate McLean

I think particularly for historians, that's the area that they said they got most out of - the stopping thinking about smell in terms of where it comes from rather than thinking about what is actually there. So it's probably more akin to a type of historical research where you really interrogate a source from multiple different angles before drawing out a conclusion, and I think that's probably why that particular section of the smell walk resonated quite so strongly. And we finished at the Franklin Fountain, which is an amazing olfactory delight all of its own.

Kate during her smell walk: "Congratulations. I did want to make stickers to say if you have your smell bronze award for being sort of like a smell walker. I hope it's been interesting. The bus is just back there to get onto, to take..."

Daniel Story

How did you get into doing this sort of thing? You said you've been doing smell walks for more than a decade?

Kate McLean

Yeah, yeah. I'm originally a graphic designer with a huge, long-standing interest in place and also cartography. Those things to me are sort of like they're, they're naturally connected with each other. And I was looking at how you might represent a place through the different senses, and using cartography to do that. And I was really struck on the idea of how tactile cartography might sort of like represent a landscape to really create these like artworks that are used - printing presses and different techniques to produce. And then I got to a stage where I just swapped senses one day, and I moved from touch and what somewhere might feel like to what somewhere might smell like. And it very quickly became apparent to me that there was no visual language for communicating smell. There are visual symbols for textures, you can record sounds, you can take photographs of places, but there was no visual language for smell. And so that's what I developed when I was doing a Master's in Edinburgh. And then I took that on to make it the subject of my PhD at the Royal College of Art in London. And so the smell walk became the way that I collect the data in order to then be able to translate human perceived data into smell representation on maps.

Daniel Story

Is a smell walk something that pretty much anybody could decide to do or even organize in a group fashion? And if so, what kind of tips or suggestions would you give to people who want to take on this practice?

Kate McLean

It's ever so easy to do. And the whole premise behind it is that everybody can smell. And that's the joy of naming a smell rather than trying to identify it, is that you're going through your own experience. I've got a kit, which is called a smell field kit that anybody can download or just ping me an email. If you have a look at sensorymaps.com, there's my contact details are on there. And if you just say, "Could I have the smell field kit, please?", it's a PDF of what I've just described as the stages of going for a smell walk, and it's got the table in there as well, so you can actually print that out and take it on the smell walk with you. And you can record a place, you can mark a route, you can choose where to go. It's got guidance in there about saying don't do it really for more than 45 minutes to an hour, don't go much further than a mile. What I've just asked is that if you've actually done a smell walk and you've come across some interesting things, just photograph it and send it to me because I would love to sort of like build up this olfactory perception of the world.

Inger Leemans

And of course, we were able to present the new smell card that we made together with the American Historical Review, the Liberty Bell smell...

Daniel Story

Yes

Inger Leemans

... with the slogan, "Liberty Smells," with a perfume made by Carol Calvez which highlights the history of bell founding and the labor that goes into that and the smells that sort of waft from that process. There was a joy to see how we can bring in sort of tangible examples for the work that we're doing and how we can integrate these examples in our lectures and in our discussions.

Daniel Story

Some of you are also developing something for the AHR related to the #AHRsyllabus project. Is that right?

Inger Leemans

Yeah. So the second session that we were invited to participate in, at AHA was about an online module that we've created and that we hope will be online in September of this year. And it's an online module, which is called "Nosewise: How to Teach with Smells, and Why Would You?". So it sort of tries to create tangible, hands-on methods for teachers who might be

interested to work with smell in their classrooms - so short introduction video on the history of smell and then solutions for teaching with smells. So we hope that that will help teachers take up this topic, which of course is not a topic that many people will have been schooled in. This should make it easier to engage with both the topic and the methodologies.

Daniel Story

The other thing I wanted to ask is kind of what is on the imminent horizon for Odeuropa. You mentioned the completion of the Smell Explorer, are there other ventures that you're excited about that you'd like to mention?

Inger Leemans

There's the Smell Explorer, but also we're creating an encyclopedia for smell heritage in history where we present more curated entries and storylines that can direct people to the Smell Explorer. Where the Smell Explorer is more like a search environment and the encyclopedia, our curators' entries about smells, about noses - so experts smellers about the fragrant places, about smell gestures. We're also creating - and this is a very important part of our project - toolkits, which helps museums that are interested to work with smell and olfactory storytelling to actually get into this adventure. So these are PowerPoints, instruction videos, texts that explain what kind of diffusion methods you can take, but also how can you find the olfactory narratives that are of interest for your museum. We're also doing a lot of policymaking at this moment - thinking about whether we can put olfactory heritage as a concept more on the map of heritage policymakers. And then yeah, we're sort of working towards "Odeuropa Extravaganza," as one of my team members was calling it in our last project meeting in November. We're thinking about a smell culture fair where we present what we have done but also bring together all these different people interested in smell because we've been in contact with so many people who are interested to work, and they're far more than we can work with us. So we thought, well, let's create a matchmaking event where we can bring people together, and where people can bring in their expertises, the questions, and needs. So those are sort of the main issues that we're working towards in this year. It has been such a great joy to work with the American Historical Review, we feel really honored to work with this fantastic team. And it helped us to sort of sharpen our thinking. Of course, Odeuropa project is not specifically meant for historians, it's intended for a lot of different audiences, so to have this opportunity to curate what we're doing for the historical audience or for the audiences of historians has been a great opportunity. So having that open space in the review, for us, was both a playing ground but also a way to sharpen our thinking about the history of smell.

Daniel Story

It's been to our great benefit—the AHR and the readers of the AHR—that you all have made these contributions to the History Lab. So thank you for engaging with us.

Inger Leemans

You're very welcome.

Daniel Story

That was Inger Leemans, project lead for Odeuropa. We also heard from smellscape researcher Kate McLean about the smell walk she led in Philadelphia for the 2023 AHA conference. Odeuropa's latest AHR entry is in the March 2023 issue in the History Lab section. You can learn more about their work at odeuropa.eu.

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That's it for now. See you next time.