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Editor's Notebook

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One of the many gifts that my wife has given me came one day this past February in the form of a sample vial of cologne with a strange label. The stinky stuff is one of several scents produced by the Paris fashion house Maison Margiela in a line called “Replica,” fragrances that claim to reproduce familiar aromas and the warm memories to which they are purportedly connected. The haute couture company’s line includes scented candles that recall a beach walk in Calvi, 1972; body spray that evokes a Brooklyn jazz club c. 2013; and eau de toilette that renders “patchouli and fresh bud, Woodstock, 1969.” Really. The liquid in my vial, called “At the Barber’s,” claims to recreate the “shaving and leathery notes” that one would have inhaled whilst reclining in an upscale tonsorial establishment in Madrid, 1992. It’s arrestingly strong. I’m saving it, and plan to apply the whole vial right before my department’s next meeting in the hopes of triggering an early adjournment.

The company’s pitch is clever commercial bunkum, of course, but the idea that odor can elicit in our minds particular spaces and places in time appeals to me intellectually. And, apparently, I’m not alone. Since the 1980s, geographers have been exploring the concept of “smellscape,” which asserts that it is possible to map the sources, migrations and boundaries of identifiable smells in a given space—a room, a house, a neighborhood, or an entire city. Smell, like sight, sound and touch, is central to the ways that human beings mentally map their surroundings—how we tell ourselves where things are. We do this, unconsciously, with the spaces we routinely visit at work and at home; we do it more consciously, with the places we have visited only once or irregularly. Odors—from

food, waste, livestock, machinery and other things—mark our experiences of specific locations and drive us to construct olfactory memories of those places. And we attach meanings to those smells. Recently, a raft of scholarly studies have attempted to create physical maps of the smellscapes present in selected places: Edinburgh, lower Manhattan, central London, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Newport RI, and others

(“Communicating and Mediating with Smellscales” in Henshaw, McLean and Medway, *Designing with Smell* [2017]). There, student researchers and interested others engaged in charted “smellwalks,” carefully recording the sites and strengths of a variety of odors they detected in the air. In the vanguard of this strand of research is Dr. Kate McLean, a senior lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University in England, whose research has produced several sensory maps, including one of Glasgow that pinpoints, during one visit in 2012, whiffs and wafts of wet moss, hot Bovril, sausage, perfume, diesel, dust, carbolic soap, and the River Clyde at low tide. Likewise, one June 2015 “scentscape” of Singapore plotted pleasant plumes of curry, jasmine, perfume, wood, and seawater. McLean sees great promise for this field of study and encourages all of us to explore and map our own environments; to take what she calls “smellfies” (www.newscientist.com, 29 May 2015).

The idea of smellscape has migrated beyond the disciplinary boundaries of academic geographers. Motivated by its commercial promise, urban designers have begun to think of ways that smell can be incorporated into the city spaces they engineer. Intrigued, too, are a handful of historians who wish to trace the history of smells and how humans have interpreted them. At root, odors are themselves historical topics: measurable phenomena, but fleeting, transient and subject to change over time. Any smellscape, as J. Douglas Porteous, a pioneer scholar in the

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field wrote in 1990, “will be non-continuous, fragmentary in space and episodic in time, and limited by the height of our noses from the ground” (*Landscapes of the Mind*). For historians, knowledge of smellscape from the past is limited, too, by the patchy nature of documentary and artifactual evidence that remains to tell them what societies of the past smelled like. In short, we *know* that past societies stank, but we must have the *proof* to show that they did. That challenge, of recreating olfactory worlds lost to us in time, is addressed by Virginia Tech historian Melanie Kiechle in her 2017 book *Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America*. “Nineteenth-century Americans wrote about stench as nauseating, intolerable, pestilential, noxious, suffocating, disgusting, and deadly,” and “petitioned their aldermen and state legislatures for stench abatement.” But, she adds, articulating the character of odors in the past is difficult both because our ancestors had so few words to describe them and because “manners prohibited [people from] discussing smell in polite conversations” (6-8).

Does Bridgewater State have a smell-scape? Oh, the mind races. For me, a 21st-century smellfie of BSU would chart the sickly sweet cinnamon that

escapes daily from the floor-level kitchen windows of Tillinghast into the Quad. It would include the smell of old paper and binding glue from the center of the Maxwell stacks; the metallic newness (still) of computer labs and other technology in the Moakley Center; the salty, stale and sweaty tang of athletic work in Kelly and Tinsley gyms and of academic engagement in our classrooms when, occasionally, the heat comes on a week too early in October and stays on a week too late in April. And more. My smellscape might overlap with those of many others here on campus, but it would differ, too, from those whose weekly routes and routines cover different ground. And all of our BSU smellfies today would differ from our school’s smellscapes of the past.

And what were *they* like? One hundred years ago, before incessant automobile traffic and commuter rail, 14-hour on-campus food service and air conditioning, tobacco bans and modern laboratory storage, old Bridgewater Normal must have had its own peculiar funk. Nearby ironworks, the Old Colony Railroad and a boot-and-shoe factory would, when the wind was right, have provided their own industrial contribution. But, in the late 1910s, rural smells would have dominated. Bridgewater

was in the sticks—only 8,000 people lived in the whole town. Photographs from the era show us wide-open parkland that abutted school buildings, with expansive lawns, and nature-study gardens outside. Inside, there were polished wooden desks and floors and, in the dormitories, parlor rooms with heavy carpets and draperies. Yearbook entries recall some of the scents that created lasting impressions of life at Bridgewater Normal for its graduates: appetizing aromas from commuters’ packed lunches stored until noon hour in the buildings’ cloakrooms; the odor of the Mayflower verbenas in the school greenhouse; a whiff of hydrogen sulfide in a Kindergarten-Primary class. And this memory of the school nurse’s room, in a segment of a mock epic poem called “The Song of a Visitor,” written in the meter of *The Song of Hiawatha* and published in the *Normal Offering* in 1917:

With this second bit of knowledge
Entered I a red brick structure;
But the odor of antiseptics
Drove me frantic, as I
Climbed the winding stairway.
“Hush!” ’Tis but the precincts
Of our faithful Medicine Woman,
She, who cures all ills and sickness,
With her store of yellow lemons...

I can smell it all now. If only I could bottle it. I’d label it “Nose of Normal, Bridgewater, 1918. A bouquet of commitment, ambition, hope and promise.” Paris, here I come.



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