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The body beyond the face: rethinking multispecies connections through sensory ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the body beyond the face allows multispecies anthropology to embrace a multisensory perspective, opening new possibilities for detecting and understanding the subtleties of interspecies connectedness. The body, transcending any single sense, reveals its multisensorial potentialities: touch evokes emotions, sight inspires visions, hearing deepens into attentive listening, taste fosters companionship, and smell rekindles memories. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's views on the body and my ethnographic work with pigeons and donkeys in Pakistan, this article contends that a bodily oriented, sense-based approach has the potential to generate new forms of knowledge and reimagine relationships that transcend species boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Ethics; body; face; sensory ethnography; multispecies anthropology

This article explores the intertwinement between multispecies anthropology and multisensory anthropology by rethinking the critical role of the body beyond the face. A sensory approach to the body is not a new concept. Scholars have long recognized the senses as mediators between mind and body (Bull et al. 2006, 5), thereby not only bridging the Cartesian divide but also, as Howes (2003, 4) points out in *Sensual Relations*, challenging the historical association of Europeans with the mind and reason and non-Europeans with the body and senses. This emphasis on the body has been reinforced by Michael Jackson who, in *Thinking Through the Body* (Jackson 1983), viewed it as an active foundation for cultivating relationships and understanding metaphors. A focus on the body has subsequently enabled scholars to explore experiences such as pain beyond language (Mazzio 2014; Scarry 1985), illness and healing (Desjarlais 1992), and bodily decoration (Munn 1992). Geurts (2003) conceives the body as a locus for perceiving cultural rituals, mythology, language, childrearing practices, and material culture, while Classen (1993) considers it central to gaining experiential insights into Inca cosmologies. Accordingly, the study of *Techniques of the Body* (Mauss 2007; see also Synnott 1993) remains crucial in sensory studies, sometimes helping to examine the lived and moving body as a means of acquiring knowledge through running and walking (Larsen 2023), understanding the relationship between sense and place (Rodaway 1994), and positioning the scholar's body as a site for sensory analysis and training (Stoller 1997).

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In this article, I draw on sensory scholarship to explore the bodies of more-than-human Others. More specifically, I engage with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) perspective on the body to examine the connection between multisensory and multispecies anthropology. Deleuze and Guattari illustrate this connection through the example of a tick forming an assemblage with a mammal, utilizing its active, energetic, and perceptive characteristics. The tick remains on a tree and drops onto a passing mammal by harnessing the gravitational energy of its fall and actively latches on. Crucially, the tick's olfactory ability to detect the mammal's sweat triggers this decisive action – it is this sensory experience upon which the tick's survival depends. This multisensory relationship between the tick and the mammal, which underscores interspecies entanglements, allows Deleuze and Guattari to bring the focus on the body:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (1987, 257)

Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on the body grants me access to sensory experience, or what they call the "perceptive." By focusing on the body, they guide me toward understanding how a multisensory approach can foster a deeper "affective" and "ethical" engagement with more-than-human Others. It is "affective" because it explores the multidimensionality of bodily and emotive perceptions, and "ethical" because it shifts the focus *beyond the face*, emphasizing the centrality of the body.

The face serves as a foundational concept in Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other (*Autrui*). In *Totality and Infinity* (1991, 210–213), Levinas contrasts the face of the Other with Heidegger's conception of "Being," arguing that an ethical stance emerges through the unconditional acceptance of the alterity of the Other. According to Levinas (1991), the face has lost its ethical and political significance due to its vulnerability, and it is the self's primary responsibility to restore the Other's face and alterity through a welcome.

Jacques Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000), reflecting on Levinas's approach to ethics, reaffirms the significance of the face of the Other that, Derrida argues, enables the self to extend a welcome. This welcome is not only guided by the ideal of unconditional hospitality but also involves, to some extent, relinquishing one's own position in the encounter. According to Derrida (1999, 35), it is the face of the Other that shapes Levinas's understanding of acceptance and welcome, ultimately defining his ethics: "Discourse, justice, ethical uprightness have to do first of all with welcoming. The welcome is always a welcome reserved for the face."

However, there are two issues with this understanding of the face. First, for Levinas, the animal face is secondary to the human face: "The human face is completely different and only afterward do we discover the face of an animal. I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed" (Levinas et al. 1988, 172). Levinas's most well-known animal example is Bobby, a dog he describes as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany"—an intelligent and loyal companion who ultimately becomes a faceless other because he lacks "the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives" (Levinas 1990, 153; see also Rose 2011, 30). While the "self" comes *after* the Other, that "Other" could not be an animal – a simple denial of true alterity. "What could Bobby be missing?" Steeves (2005, 24) asks in an insightful essay examining Levinas's refusal to

grant the animal a face: “How can this *not* be a face? ... The dog’s face is all there, all familiar, and with all the expressions of sorrow, accusation, guilt, and joy ...”

Second, according to Levinas, the face of the Other demands that the self ethically accept its alterity (1991, 79–81). This acceptance is realized through unconditionally welcoming the Other with the face into one’s home. The home, once belonging to the host, starts belonging to the guest – echoing the French word “*hôte*” which means both “host” and “guest.” Yet, as Levinas places all emphasis on the face of the guest, the host’s face somewhat disappears. But what if the newly arriving guest is the colonial Other, coming to colonize the home that once belonged to the host? How could the alterity of the guest’s face justify the centuries of brutality, violence, and occupation perpetrated by those who once arrived?

Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 2003), however, propose dismantling the face altogether to shift focus to the body and the head – the loci of perceptive experiences.

The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be overcoded by something we shall call the Face. (1987, 170)

As the face is dismantled, the focus shifts to the body, thereby allowing to comprehend connections through diverse sensory modalities (Bruns 2007, 711–713; Hantel 2013, 110–112). Only when the face is deconstructed and merged with the body, Deleuze and Guattari help us understand, that multispecies lifeworlds be conceived distinctly, enabling an exploration of relatedness through ethical encounters.¹

As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) go beyond the “faciality machine,” their focus on the body and the perceptual illuminates the multispecies angle. For instance, In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), their conception of the body extends beyond the human domain, drawing examples from various species of animals (rats, wolves, wasps, cats, lobsters, dogs, owls, whales, elephants), plants (lilies, cotton, orchids, trees, rice, weeds), and other more-than-human entities (rocks, zombies, viruses, sandstones, vampires, stars, ice) [see Roffe and Stark 2015, 10]. In anthropology Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas have been particularly influential in the “ontological turn.” Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Viveiros de Castro 2014), a book that advocates a radical shift in Western anthropological frameworks through concepts such as “perspectivism,” was initially conceived as an homage to Deleuze and Guattari’s thought from an anthropological standpoint, and yet it turns out to be, from all its possibilities, a critique of that imagined book.² Just as Deleuze and Guattari help Viveiros de Castro to propose a recognition of alternative realities, they also aid me in tracing the interconnections between sensory experiences of the body and multispecies relatedness.

Building on the theoretical possibility of engaging with the body beyond the face allows cultivating a multisensory understanding of the more-than-human Other and opens avenues for ethical, affective, and perceptive companionship. This has been demonstrated by numerous anthropologists who employ multisensory methods to explore multispecies worlds. For instance, Petitt (2023), in her horseback ethnography, uses both filming and poetry to highlight the multisensory connection with the body of the horse. By centering sensory experiences, Petitt develops a conception of multispecies intersectionality that decentralizes not only the human perspective but also the species

dyad. Similarly, Hartigan's (2020) ethnography of wild horses in Spain *dismantles* the focus on the face, exploring multiple meanings of domestication through a connection with the animal's body.

Observational films also effectively capture the multisensory experiences of connecting with animal-Others by attending to the body beyond the face. Indian observational filmmaker Shaunak Sen's multi-award-winning documentary, *All That Breathes* (Sen 2022), captures the sensory world of two brothers tending to injured black kites that once soared through the polluted skies of Delhi. Sen visually contrasts the chaotic urban landscape of one of South Asia's megacities with the subtle beauty of hovering black kites. Close-up shots vividly illuminate tactile interactions with the birds, while the sounds of flapping wings and distressed cries create an immersive sensory experience for viewers. This engagement with avian bodies deepens an understanding of multispecies care and labor, the climate crisis, and the ethics of co-existence in a changing world.

Similarly, visual anthropologist Natasha Raheja's *A Gregarious Species* (Raheja 2023), a compilation of found footage on locust outbreaks in South Asia, critically shifts focus to the body beyond the face. The locust's face is never welcomed, nor is its arrival seen as that of an ethical Other. Instead, as Raheja carefully demonstrates, locusts intrude and wreak havoc on agricultural fields, destroying the nutritional future of humans within minutes. Yet, the relationship with these infiltrators' bodies is ever-changing. At times, locusts are cooked into protein-rich dishes such as locust biryani and locust karahi, inviting frustrated peasants to consume the very creatures that devoured their fields. At other times, locusts are beheaded, hanged in frustration, or humiliated for trespassing and attacking the homeland. When swarms settle on crops, their bodies are targeted for eradication through insecticide-spraying drones. By foregrounding locusts' swarming movements, sounds, taste, and extermination, Raheja uses the insect's body to raise important questions about the Anthropocene, ethics, and border intrusion.

My ethnographic work with Pakistani pigeon flyers (Kavesh 2023a) focuses on the pigeon's body to think about the ethics of relatedness and border intrusion in a changing South Asia. The pigeon's colorful variations, softness, ability to fly and return to the loft, and capacity to be trained and win competitions allow millions of pigeon flyers in Pakistan to foster a multisensory connection with their birds. Every day, these flyers climb onto their rooftops in the morning and afternoon, and welcome their avian companions as ethical Others, feeding them handmade food, flying them in the sky, and, in the process, fulfilling their personal enthusiasm. However, this cherished experience with the pigeon's body can sometimes transform into a threat, particularly for those living near the tense India-Pakistan border. For instance, when a pigeon, disturbed by a sandstorm or a predator, miscalculates its landing and ends up in the neighboring state, it is sometimes identified as a "spy" and subjected to being caged and x-rayed for border intrusion (Kavesh 2024). In both cases, whether welcomed as an intimate Other on the rooftop or captured as an intruding foreigner, the body of the pigeon and the associated multisensory experiences play a central role in shaping people's ethical responses to the arrival of more-than-human others.

Unlike pigeons, whose bodies transform into a persona of a threat along Pakistan's eastern border, my recent ethnographic work with donkeys and donkey keepers reveals that these equines face a rather different threat on Pakistan's northern border. From 2011 to 2015, over 140,000 donkeys were killed, and their hides, valued at more

than 200 million Rupees, were exported to China for the production of *ejiao*, a traditional Chinese medicine (Kavesh 2023b). However, since donkey meat is considered *haram* and ritually polluted, sending only the hides to China raised concerns that Pakistanis might unwittingly consume prohibited donkey body sold as *halal* (permissible) beef. To address issue, the Pakistani government banned the trade of donkey hides to China in 2015. Despite this, in 2019, the government established the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa-China Sustainable Donkey Development Program under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, proposing the construction of new shelters for donkeys in Dera Ismail Khan and Mansehra to meet demand in China and export at least 80,000 donkeys. In October 2024, the federal government further updated this plan, announcing the construction of a slaughterhouse near the Gwadar Port to facilitate the annual export of bodies (meat and skins) of more than 200,000 donkeys to China.

The depletion of foreign reserves, depreciation of the Pakistani rupee, and declining exports have gradually resulted in widespread poverty in Pakistan. Approximately one-third of Pakistanis, already living in destitution, struggle to afford food, pay electricity bills, and meet their basic needs. In this context, the government's donkey trade scheme with China appears to offer a profitable opportunity for many impoverished donkey keepers. In reality, however, many resist. For these donkey keepers, the animal is not merely a source of income but a living being capable of feeling pain and expressing suffering, not just a work companion but a cherished member of their families, and not a commodity whose body must be traded but a trustworthy being with a distinct personality, behavior, and unique ways of communication. Through ongoing interactions with the bodies of their donkeys, these keepers cultivate multisensory experiences, opening a window to reconsider the values of multispecies interdependence beyond face.

To conclude, the integration of a multisensory approach into the study of cultures, human interactions, and material and symbolic relationships has significantly contributed to sensory ethnography over the years. However, a sensory perspective has often been overlooked when it comes to understanding cross-cultural perceptions and attunements toward animals or exploring their lifeworlds. Focusing on multisensory aspects, especially by exploring the body beyond the face, can enable anthropology to more effectively capture more-than-human relatedness.

In this short essay, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) provide me with key conceptual tools to explore pluralistic approaches in anthropology, transcending traditional Western theoretical confines (Biehl and Locke 2010). Their emphasis on the body helps me go beyond the face of the Other and reimagine ethical, affective, and perceptive understandings of connectedness and companionship. For example, Pakistani pigeon flyers develop a deep sensory connection with their pigeons' bodies through bird sounds, physical contact, observing the birds' breathing, and even tasting the feed before giving it to their pigeons. This bodily focus not only enhances their sensory engagement but also allows them to relate to pigeons as sentient beings capable of communication beyond language. As I examine the sensory interactions between pigeon keepers and their pigeons and understand the shared vulnerabilities of donkeys and their keepers, this helps me understand why people structure their daily lives around their animals and form interspecies bonds.

Howes (2019, 24) notes that sensory and multispecies anthropology can guide anthropologists in capturing the nuances of more-than-human engagement. His observations prompt further questions: How can emphasizing the sensory capacities of the body enhance the scholarly investigation of more-than-human interrelationships? In what ways does multisensory anthropology offer new methodological practices for experiencing worlds beyond humans in affective, ethical, and creative ways? This essay aims to open new avenues for considering these questions.

Notes

1. For instance, as Derrida famously wrote, “I am inasmuch as I am alongside the animal” (Derrida 2008, 10; Lawlor 2008, 183).
2. For Viveiros de Castro, Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “becoming” remains crucial; it is, “a difference that is positive rather than oppositional . . .” (2014, 112). However, feminist thinker and multispecies philosopher, Donna Haraway (2008, 244), remains critical of Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming,” and suggests an alternative, *becoming-with*: “becoming is always becoming with – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake.”

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