

## A SENSUOUS ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SAN EMIGDIO HILLS

MELONIE SHIER

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL LANCASHIRE

*By looking at the sensuous landscape of the San Emigdio Hills in Kern County (now part of the Wind Wolves Preserve), an understanding of the physical interaction of the laborers of the Kern County Land Company with their landscape is approached. The San Emigdio Hills were full of audio, tactile, visual, and olfactory stimuli, particularly between 1880 and 1930. Such a study falls within my larger scope of uncovering the laborer's sense of Belonging to the San Emigdio Hills. The different sensuous aspects were part of the emotional and instrumental ties to the landscape, as well as the performativity of the laborer.*

As archaeologists, we claim to study people in the past. It often happens in the narratives produced from research that there is an absence of the very people we claim to want to learn more about. Both academic and cultural resource management reports are susceptible to this shortfall. A sensuous archaeology provides one avenue that can help to rectify the situation. By looking at a sensuous archaeology, the bodily engagement of people with their environment is understood.

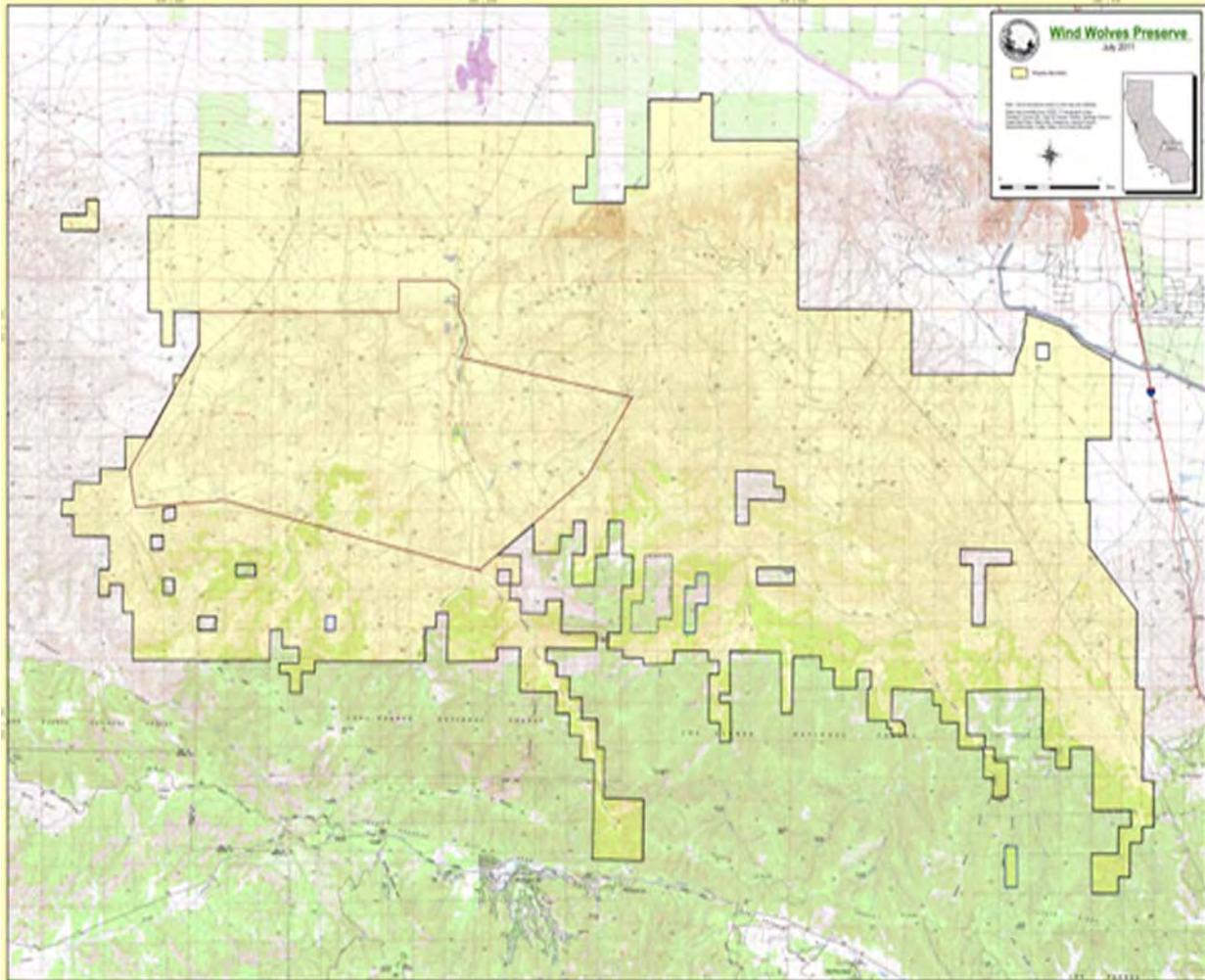
The aim of this article is to explore the sensuous archaeology of the San Emigdio hills, not only through the different bodily enactments but through a filter of Belonging. Belonging is the way in which people form attachments to place and translate those attachments into their identity. This attachment can be to a real or imaginary locale, but for this paper that place is the San Emigdio Hills.

The San Emigdio Hills are located in southern Kern County, California (see Figure 1 for a representational view of the hills). Beginning in 1890, the area was owned and operated by the Kern County Land Company, a corporate agribusiness primarily using the hills for cattle ranching. Today, a large part of the San Emigdio Hills is now a part of the Wind Wolves Preserve, held in conservation by the Wildlands Conservancy.

### BELONGING

I was introduced to the idea of Belonging through the work of architectural theorist Neil Leach (2002). His aim was to develop a framework for the identification of place. He theorized that a sense of belonging and place developed through performance (Leach 2002:2). Other fields associated with the social sciences have worked on the idea of belonging, such as anthropology (Bohlin 2001; Edwards 1998; Lovell 1998), sociology (Jones and Krzyzanowski 2008; Marshall 2002; Strath 2008), political science (Gustafson 2005), and geography (Taylor 2009). It is through further reading in these fields that a variation of the Leach framework is advanced. It is proposed that Belonging is developed and seen through four themes: that of overlapping identities, emotional ties to landscapes, instrumental ties to landscapes, and performativity.

Overlapping identity starts with the premise that no person is one identity, but a conglomeration of aspects such as age, gender, status, physique, class, level of education, and so on (see Voss 2008). Identity is thus a “multiple, overlapping and changing phenomenon and perhaps best seen in practice as an active process: that of identifying with or finding communities with others, and coming together to create a group with them” (Chenoweth 2009:327). Political scientist Per Gustafson (2005) adds by suggesting emotional and instrumental ties to the landscape. Emotional ties to landscapes are the connections to the places where one has been or where one wants to go, the idea of past experiences and future potential, both literally and figuratively (Gustafson 2005:13). Instrumental ties to landscape are the day-to-day routine association with locales, such as the places routinely visited. Performativity is viewed



*Figure 1: The San Emigdio Hills, with area in yellow showing the extent of the Wind Wolves Preserve. The area outlined in red is the extent of the 1842 San Emigdio land grant to José Antonio Domínguez. (Courtesy Wind Wolves Preserve, Bakersfield, California.)*

as the stylized repetition of acts (Fortier 1999:48). Performativity is more than the embodiment of identity and memories, but also the lived experience of identity and belonging (Fortier 1999). A sensuous archaeology provides an avenue for bodily engagement with the themes, as the landscape and environment are perceived and acted upon based on sensory information.

### **A SENSUOUS ARCHAEOLOGY**

Paul Rodaway (1994) introduced the idea of sensuous geographies in his book by the same name. He based his ideas of the sensuous with perception theory, a part of which emphasizes that different cultures perceive different aspects of the environment, which is culturally ingrained (Rodaway 1994:4). Similar ideas can be seen in the phenomenology archaeology of Christopher Tilley (2010). The sensuous geography is divided into four spheres: visual, auditory, olfactory, and haptic.

Some of what follows is based on the sensuous experience of my childhood on a cattle and sheep ranch in the western United States. Although no two people perceive the environment in the same way, the experience of one or a few may shed light on how peoples in the past may have experienced the



*Figure 2: The front porch of Dorothy's House. (Images by author 2013.)*

environment as well (Fleming 2006; Tilley 2010). For this reason, the experience, although egocentric, can also show one possible way people in the San Emigdio Hills experienced the landscape.

### **Visual**

Dorothy's House is located on the periphery of the Kern County Land Company property. Yet when it is compared to the main buildings located at the headquarters in San Emigdio Canyon, they look very similar (see Figures 2 and 3). The structures are painted white with a green trim. Other Kern County Land Company properties in Kern County also shared this coloration (Shier 2011). This creates a visual link between the two places.

Dorothy's House is at the apex of a triangular plain enclosed and protected by low-lying hills. The location was chosen for a specific purpose, instead of other areas within the plain which would have offered benefits such as a better water source or protection from winds. The house is situated in a spot of prominence in the landscape. A single road leads into Santiago Canyon, which places Dorothy's House in a locale of prominent visibility, as you have to drive *up* to the complex. The view down the valley is significant as well, as the front porch provided a clear view of the lower San Joaquin Valley towards the town of Bakersfield and the Sierra Nevada. The people who built Dorothy's House must have been actively aware of this performance of visibility.

Dorothy's House provides an example of three ways in which the visible geography is prominent at the site: the way visual elements in locales connect them to other locales, the visual dominance of a site, and the visual properties from a locale.

### **Auditory**

Because the San Emigdio Hills are located in a sparsely populated section of the state, some people may be quick to assume it is devoid of sound. It only means the area has less human-created sounds and more non-human sounds.



*Figure 3: House at Headquarters in San Emigdio Canyon. (Undated image on file at the Wind Wolves Preserve, Bakersfield, California.)*

The performance of the spring roundup involves the collection, branding, gelding, and medicating of new calves. There are calves crying for their mothers, lost in the confusion, mixed with mothers bellowing for their calves. There is the yapping of the cow dogs, as they cut the young from the herd, given instructions through whistle calls. There is the sizzle of the brand as it marked the flesh. These noises are indicative to the overall performance of the event.

On the range, the agricultural workers would rarely be alone in the landscape, always surrounded by domestic animals. Similar to the sounds of the roundup, the calls of the cattle would interlink performances with instrumental ties.

Other animal noises would trigger specific memories and emotional ties. The distinct rattle of a rattlesnake causes a quick emotional reaction to anyone who has heard it before. There is a pause of second-guessing when a cricket seeks to recreate the noise.

### **Haptic**

The word touch brings to mind the hand performing an action, yet all parts of our skin experience touch; for this reason Rodaway (1994:41) prefers the term haptic. Haptic allows the complete body the ability to experience touch: the touch of the brain, the touch of the body, and the touch of the bodily extensions as seen through technological tools such as the staff (Rodaway 1994:41).

The performance of shearing is a full-body haptic experience as the sheep is hand-shorn (see Figure 4). The 200-lb. sheep is propped against the legs of the shearer, who partially grasps the sheep with his knees. The shearer then moves the scissors through the thick, coarse wool in a routine around the body of the sheep to keep the fleece complete, avoiding thrashing horns and feet. When finished, the animal is released from the barn and herded into a corral out in the hot spring or autumn sun, while the fleece is rolled and collected by the grader. A new woolly sheep is collected by a sweaty worker, and the shearer begins the process again.



*Figure 4: Sheep being sheared at San Emigdio Canyon. (Photograph by Carleton Watkins from 1880, Courtesy Library of Congress.)*

The fleece is flung out onto a table for inspection; second cuts (shorter passes of the clippers) and dirty wool are removed. During inspection, it is through the haptic, not the visual, that the wool is graded and gathered together. The wool from the face and legs will be coarser than the wool from the sides and back. Virgin wool is from a young animal shorn for the first time, and is of a much finer and softer quality than the wool of an older animal, and the older the animal the coarser the hair. In this case, the bodily experience of grading the wool would improve with experience, as the novice grader learns the different textures.

### **Olfactory**

Next is the olfactory geography, which is a combination of the sense of smell and taste as they interact with each other. Rodaway (1994:62) does not like the term smell for its existing negative connotation with foul smells. This is highlighted by the recent newspaper article entitled “Archaeologist make smelly discovery in Odense” in the *Copenhagen Post*. The article is about the ongoing excavation in Odense, in which several latrine barrels were discovered, contents and all (Wenande 2014). Care

should be taken not to associate olfactory with a positive or negative association, because what one person perceives as rank another may find sweet, and vice versa.

There are many different olfactory aspects in the landscape of the Wind Wolves Preserve, from the smell of distant petroleum production to the coming of rain and the smell of the orange groves (Rojas 1991:43). During shearing, the overall olfactory experience is dominated by the smell of wool and lanolin. Lanolin is a waxy secretion that helps to make the wool water-resistant and to protect the skin of the sheep. When it is fresh from the sheep, it has a unique greasy smell and texture. This brings up an interesting property of the olfactory: smell memories are the strongest (Rodaway 1994:70).

Neuroscientists have hypothesized that olfactory memory is strong because it is directly processed by the amygdala-hippocampal complex of the brain. Such a close proximity suggests smell memories are more emotional than mnemonic (Willander and Larsson 2006:240). As well, the more you are around a certain aromatic substance, the less you smell it during sustained time (Rodaway 1994). Yet if you go away and come back to the smell, it has the ability of triggering memory; thus a person's reintroduction to a smell can recall parts of their emotional ties to a landscape.

## DISCUSSION

The seasonal performances of shearing and the cattle roundup would have occurred in specialized locales in the landscape, used year after year, giving archaeologists a way to study these performances. Comparisons of these specialized locales can provide insight into not only the performances enacted there, but the Belonging of the laborers. It is a promising source of future work. The labor requirements of these activities are high, and numerous workers would come together to perform collective work, bringing a plethora of material culture with them.

Artifacts have a leading role in how bodily interactions occur within a landscape or environment. For example, the hat attempts to cancel the haptic interaction with the sun. Bodily interaction between vaquero and horse requires a wide array of artifacts, from the saddlery and bit to the personal adornment of the vaquero. These various artifacts would be used with great frequency and be a part of the vaqueros' instrumental ties.

Sensuous archaeology adds to the research potential of an archaeology of Belonging. Sensuous interactions are related to memory and emotional ties to landscapes, as smells and textures recall previous interactions. Sensuous interactions are an everyday occurrence as people interact with their landscape in instrumental ways. During times of performativity, the sensuous adds to the experience as embodiment becomes memory and skill acquisition.

Identification of potential sensuous components in the landscapes is only the first step. Sensitivity to the ways different stimuli would have been perceived by peoples in the past is also important; once identified they add to the overall image of the past. I have been very historical-centric, but that does not mean other archaeologists studying different periods could not also benefit. For example, the sensory experience of flint knapping involves a particular bodily involvement that requires the person making the tool to be aware of haptic and visual quality of the material as the tool is created. Sensitivity to the sensory experience of the past brings people back into archaeology.

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