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Epilogue: Ethnographies without a nose

Katerina Sergidou, Noemi Gómez Mendoza, Idoia Galan Silvo, Iosune Fernandez-Centeno, Miriam del Pino Molina, Margaret Bullen

Abstract

Having explored how attention to our sense of smell enhances our ethnographies, we conclude this collection by considering what we lose when we overlook, ignore or leave out the senses in general, and smell in particular in our anthropological fieldwork. As this was made especially acute during the Coronavirus pandemic commencing in 2020 when some lost their sense of smell and others were prevented by lockdown from exercising this sense outside of their own homes, here we bring together our experiences of the absence or erasure of smells caused by COVID, face coverings and the cancellation of social activities. Ultimately, we ask how to perfume an odourless life, translating some senses through others, describing smell with words or pictures, how to paint or write smell.

Losing the sense of smell carries a constant, impertinent, brute reminder.

Partly because those of us who can smell always do, with or without desire, with or without warning. We smell because sensation embraces breathing, they merge in feeling.

We smell when we breathe, when we live.

The Coronavirus pandemic commencing in 2020 brought with it the loss of smell for some of those affected by the virus, and the impossibility of smelling for others, shut inside their houses and unable to access the smellscape of everyday life before COVID-19. In this epilogue, we bring together our experiences of suffering the loss of smell caused by COVID, the stifling of odour by having to wear facemasks, and the absence of aroma occasioned by the cancellation of social activities and events.

The temporary erasure of smells during a health crisis brings home the black and white photograph of an existence without smell permanently endured by someone like Aphrodite, a sufferer of anosmia, in Sergidou's text. It alerts us to what we lose when we overlook, ignore

or leave out the senses in our ethnographies. Furthermore, it poses the questions of how to perfume an odourless life, how to translate some senses through others, how to describe smell with words or pictures, how to paint or write smell.

Having gathered together different accounts of what we gain when we incorporate smell into our perception of the worlds we study, we will now reflect briefly on what we lose when we cannot smell or when we do not take this sense into account. We not only lose colour; we lose our sense of connection to the world, to our surroundings, to our society. We are cut off, isolated. Our bodies lose their sense of being and belonging, of belonging to our homes, to our community. Social life is stilled, devoid of meaning.

So, anthropology without a nose loses one route of connection to our environment and one way of exploring the world around us. Without smell, our pores are blocked up, our voices stifled, our taste blunted, our perception dulled, our reactions slower. We are in greater need of translation.

When will we breathe freely?

COVID caused anosmia

Taste and smell are so closely related.

Spending Christmas with COVID has been an ordeal. Time of *polvorones*, *borrachuelos*¹¹ and rich meals with the people you love. Everything falls apart. This year, I've gone from identifying scents that no one smells to not smelling anything at all. How weird is it for me not to smell the green aniseed *matalauva* at Christmas, nor taste the *borrachuelos* that my mother makes every year with the precious recipe inherited from my grandmother.

I no longer care if it smells good or bad. I don't even care to eat. I can only just tell if something is sweet, salty or bitter. Everything smells and tastes the same to me, whether it's a top-notch Iberian serrano ham or a plain anchovy. Sight and touch are so important to those of us who love to eat! You eat with your eyes, my mother used to say when she put food on my plate that I would never finish. Eating with one's eyes and with the memory of flavors has become a new incentive to eat.

And what a texture Huelva prawns have! How soft they are, but how little they smell of the sea.

Nothing gives off a smell, not even your own body leaves a scent.

In the summer of 2021, I started to feel sick quickly and aggressively. When I got the results that showed I was positive for COVID, I had been in bed for two days. A nurse called me daily because I was part of a risk group. She asked me specific questions that pushed me to reflect on my condition and how the disease was developing in my body. One of the questions she asked me was whether I still had my sense of smell and taste.

Sleeping day and night, I would pull up the sheets, close my eyes and smell my feverish body, or lean over the tray of food, eyes closed to better sense the smells. It took several days for the symptom to present itself, but finally, the strangeness came and I found that I did not smell my body or the food, and nothing tasted of anything.

I experienced the fear of losing the smell, but not the loss itself.

I became ill with COVID over Christmas 2021. In my case, the symptom of loss of smell was not present, although I was prepared for it. I had fever, fatigue, a runny nose, drowsiness and a bad cough, but I had not lost my sense of smell. However, to make sure I could still smell, I would often open the refrigerator to smell the cheese or ham, or put my nose in the jar of chamomile. The smell was still there.

Face coverings cover up smell

Even now, when I'm outside, all smells pass through the filter of the mask first. How I long to take it off and smell the street unobstructed.

I don't know if I have had COVID or not, whether I am asymptomatic or just lucky enough not to have caught the virus, but if I am asked about COVID and smell, I feel that one more element is missing: the mask. As of today, February 27, 2022, the use of masks in Colombia is mandatory, becoming a filter that affects my interaction with my environment.

When I go out of the door of my house, mask in hand, I always take a deep breath, ready to feel how the air enters my nostrils and ready for the smell of the day. Then I put on the mask and everything changes. I feel that my face is covered, that the air doesn't reach me in the same way and that, no matter how much I sniff, I can no longer find the smells I smelt just a few seconds ago.

Wearing a mask in 30 degree heat is not easy. You breathe in and the smell of concentrated heat hits you, a heat that makes the air rare. You breathe in harder in an attempt to get more air, but it's hopeless. The fabric of the mask clings to your nostrils and stops any odour getting through. It is an overpowering smell: it dries up the desire to walk, to interact. How many smells must have gone unnoticed? Sometimes, when I am very curious, I lower my mask a little bit to smell a perfume, a food or a flower that I find on the way and, in the few seconds that the action lasts, my nostrils open to connect with the world.

Smelling from the inside, the absence of outside odours, of social smells

In the countryside, spring had sprung, the cherry trees were in blossom, you could hear the birds, but you couldn't smell the flowers. Their bouquet was all for the bees!

The discussion about the loss of smell made me think that, during the pandemic (whether we have lost our sense of smell at some point or not), we have learned to smell only what is going on indoors. This was even more pronounced during the first confinement. You could smell the weather from inside the house, from your window, but not from outside. The smell of asphalt, of bodies standing next to you in the subway. The collective, public smell was deferred for a while.

The Easter of 2020 was silent, motionless, odourless. No processions, no incense. No parties, no crowds, no gatherings big or small. The no-fiesta became all the rage. Digital mimicry of festivities, toasts and bunting on the balconies. Tinned music. No smoky corn *talos* cooking on the griddle with chorizo or cheese, no potato and onion frying for the tortilla competitions. No gun salutes ricocheting in the air and mingling with the gunpowder of the rockets, fired to announce the beginning of the fiesta. No stale sweat, spilled wine, urine in the streets.

The streets are antiseptic. Everywhere you go, there is sanitizing gel on every corner. Clear, odourless, tasteless.

My mauve roses smelled of lemon.

Cutting the threads, closing the channels, retrieving the link

I feel the world through one of my senses that a few years ago I had all but forgotten and that now, as a result of the pandemic, I have begun to value.

Arriving home and not smelling anything. Take a shower with your favourite shower gel and it's as if nothing had happened.

We cannot smell ourselves. We can only smell ourselves. No touching no kissing no hugging.

Channels had been closed to interact with the world, to be part of it, to apprehend it. I plunged into a deeper sense of isolation and disconnection. After the worst moments had passed, little by little, recovery came: the possibility of mobility and energy. And finally, also the ability to smell again.

The collective loss of the collective smell we can breathe in freely, without masks getting in our way, creates a new collective desire to tell each other what we can smell. So, when will we breathe freely?

Notes

^[1] These are both traditional Spanish sweets, originating in the south of Spain. Polvorones are a type of traditional crumbly shortbread with flour, lard, sugar and almonds. Borrachuelos are a kind of sweet fritter made of pastry “drunk” with sweet wine and white wine, flavoured with spices and filled with sweet potato or pumpkin jam.

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