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## **Preface: First Breath: An Autoethnographic Reflection**

In the preface, the author uses carefully selected olfactory vignettes from her own experiences to explain the basic idea and the approach with which she deals with the complex research of smell in culture and society in the following chapters. The illustration of how smells are integrated into our daily routine serves as a guide and gently draws attention to the dimension of the topic.

I possess an intriguing olfactory perception that sets me apart from most people in my circle of acquaintances. In order to truly convey the diverse sensations of a person with a keen sense of smell, which serves as a source of inspiration for my writing and also makes up much of the content of this book, I offer readers this introductory introspective exploration. This introspection is shaped not only by my observations of my olfactory encounters but also by the experiences others have had.

I have a natural tendency to strongly perceive the smell of everything in my vicinity. This behavior is innate to me and not something I have learned over time. Interestingly, no one in my immediate family has the same keen sense of smell as I do, suggesting that I was born with this heightened sensitivity. Consequently, there are times when people find my smelling habits unnecessary or strange.

During my pregnancy, I developed an extraordinary ability to perceive odors. Certain odors that I had not previously found unpleasant suddenly became repulsive. This aversion led me to avoid eating starchy foods such as bread and rice, as the discomfort their smell caused also affected my appetite, which inadvertently led to weight loss. I cannot say exactly when I realized how important it is to control my reactions to smells, considering that they might offend others. As a result, I now make a conscious effort not to make thoughtless comments about the smell of things or people. Even if I come across an odor that disgusts me, I cannot just say that someone smells awful, similar to excrement, rancid grease, musty mold, stale sweat, or even that they have unpleasant breath. Similarly, if I am asked by a hostess about the quality of the food, I cannot hastily respond with a negative comment if I happen to detect an ingredient that I personally find unpleasant. I therefore adhere to the rules of decency and good manners and tolerate different smells without openly showing my dislike. I avoid odors that I find unpleasant in order to maintain social harmony.

As an ethnologist, however, my keen sense of smell is very useful to me. It gives me the ability to recognize the olfactory signatures of people's daily routines. From a person's smell, I can often identify their predominant activities, eating habits, smoking habits, and general hygiene patterns. In addition, I can determine how long someone wears the same clothes, whether they leave freshly washed clothes in the washing machine before drying, whether they hang worn clothes in the closet unwashed, and even identify characteristic aromas in their home. These aromas can be the smell of tobacco smoke, damp mold, fried food, or a broth with a hint of celery. I am also able to detect subtle changes in body odor that may indicate certain illnesses or ailments. In women, my sense of smell can even detect if they are menstruating, even if they try to hide it by washing. I can also determine what type of underwear they are wearing, such as cotton or synthetic; I can infer their food intake from the previous day; and I can even determine if they engaged in intimate acts the night before if I happen to use a restroom right after them in a store or be nearby on a bus. I can also detect the subtleties behind the perfumes that men and women use to cover up different aromas. This includes trying to cover up the smell of the alcohol they have been drinking by eating garlic. In this way, they try to replace one unpleasant smell with another that is considered more socially acceptable. I have the ability to detect a range of culinary smells from neighboring homes. The smell of pancakes, fried eggs and bacon, roasted potatoes and meat, baked nut rolls, boiled sausage, or burnt milk penetrates my sensitive nostrils through air vents or open windows. Even in the shared hallway, I can tell by the smell which neighbor has just opened their front door. A powdery-sweet scent often indicates the presence of a young family with a baby, while the smell of cigarettes can indicate a neighbor airing out their apartment in the hallway. Finally, a woody and musky smell could indicate that a cargo ship captain is leaving his home.

In my semi-conscious state, when the day is just dawning, I can detect the distinct odor of exhaust fumes, indicating that it is about 5:30 in the morning when the city busses begin their service. Even without the audible hum of their engines permeating the air, this smell is enough to alert me. Soon, this scent mingles with other aromas, like the damp, earthy smell wafting from a neighbor's balcony as she diligently waters her flowers in the early morning hours. Also, the aromatic essence of freshly squeezed orange juice fills the air as another neighbor prepares their morning beverage for the day ahead. Occasionally, I am also greeted by the pungent smell of garbage collection. When I am sorting garbage in front of the block, I do not breathe, but when I need to breathe, especially in the summer, I am grateful to whoever had the foresight to plant jasmine next to the garbage island. There are even occasions when the invigorating scent of rain wakes me from my slumber.

Every time I cook, my olfactory senses come alive as I inhale the scents of all the ingredients, including the familiar smells of pepper, salt, and other spices, even though they probably have the same aroma as the day before. However, the smell of grease bothers me and causes me to frequently degrease kitchen surfaces. Even in other people's seemingly spotless kitchens, I have an innate ability to immediately detect the presence of grease stuck to the tiles. When dining out, I smell the oils and

vinegar in the serving bottles to assess their quality and purity. However, I never smell the salt and pepper shakers because the smell of the previous guests' sweaty and greasy fingers repels me.

When I'm up on the hill I inherited, reading, gardening or doing nothing at all and swinging in the hammock, I can smell when it's good to go into the woods and pick porcini mushrooms and when it's enough to stroll through the orchard and pick Sheathed Woodtuft.

I have vivid memories of the scents that permeated my school days. The fusion of liver pâté on freshly baked bread, accompanied by a tangy pickled cucumber, coupled with the delicate scent of sweet rosehip tea mingling with the natural body odors of my classmates during lunch break are the olfactory memories that resonate most strongly from my elementary school days. To this day, the smell of pâté makes me nauseous, and I have only eaten it on rare occasions since. I also remember the equally unpleasant smell wafting through the school corridor at break time in the mid-1980s when I was in the gymnasium, where hot dogs and toast sandwiches were being prepared. To avoid being exposed to the greasy cloud of odors, I purposely avoided that section of the hallway and chose the adjacent stairwell instead. The memory of that disgusting smell is still vivid in my mind. One particular student excursion to Germany sticks in my mind mainly because of one of my female colleagues. She persistently chewed on raw garlic cloves during breakfast, lunch, and dinner, even though we had asked her to limit her consumption. This was particularly worrying as we took long bus and train journeys and visited museums. After carefully considering her unconvincing folk medicine explanations and reflecting on her behavior, I concluded that her intentional body odor served the purpose of deterring others, much like the use of perfume in the opposite direction. Her deep-rooted fear of everything and everyone drove her to emit a scent that deterred rather than attracted people. This unusual behavior has left an indelible impression in my memory.

Recently, someone unintentionally brought up the deeply embarrassing memory of the area's former offensive odor nuisance in a small Styrian town in Slovenia through which I frequently drive. Decades ago, when the side streets were paved, residents insisted that the neighborhood's former informal and colloquial name *šajsgase* or "Shit Street," which is derived from the German *Scheiss Gasse*, be changed to the official name to the more dignified and appropriate name of Flower Street. They simply wanted to erase the unpleasant collective memory and rum-mages associated with stinking animal excrements and other filth flowing from the nearby stables. They wanted to distance themselves from this deplorable past on both a symbolic and nominal level.

In short, these memories capture the essence of my typical day, as it serves as a metaphorical representation of the prevailing atmosphere when I render my experiences through olfactory impressions.

The innate or acquired olfactory preferences we possess have a great influence on our ability to distinguish between pleasant and unpleasant odors and leave a lasting impression on our actions, memories, emotions, and decisions. As a result, my mind is constantly spinning stories in my thoughts as I consciously or unconsciously

focus on the scents around me. Smell is very present in the realms of our mind. Every time my nose is hit by a cloud of molecules in the air, whether they are remnants of people or objects, especially when the olfactory encounter overwhelms my senses with foul, noxious, or overpowering aromas, I effortlessly identify them and weave them into a narrative. The meaning I attach to such sensory experiences is integral to my inner dialog and differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from another person's perception. While these premises apply to those I live with or interact with, they apply even more so to other times and circumstances, as it is difficult to judge the magnitude of a stench or scent when confronted with something unfamiliar.

The smell does not lie, and this dimension is as important in my work as the verbal one. The sense of smell is a powerful tool that cannot be dismissed, and its importance in my work is just as important as verbal communication. The inclusion of sensory perception in my method of participant observation is crucial. However, it should be noted that this perception can be deceptive, subjective, and influenced by one's mood. I am well aware of these limitations. In addition, external factors such as pregnancy can enhance the sense of smell, while conditions such as the COVID-19 epidemic can temporarily impair it. During this time, I experienced disturbing nocturnal olfactory hallucinations that almost convinced me of the existence of certain odors. Fortunately, as the problems subsided, my mood improved, my health was restored, and my sense of smell regained its functionality and usefulness.

An exceptional sense of smell can be both a gift and a source of deep understanding, but it can also be a curse and lead to feelings of isolation. Its true value lies in how well I can use it. I have learned to adapt to my different olfactory abilities without seeing them as a disorder, deficit, or organic defect that hinders me in life. On the contrary, they are an important part of my identity and a sensory added value that helps me a lot in my job. This focus on smell and scents, which I call olfacto-centrism, accompanies me in my everyday life and is not the result of another sensory impairment, as can sometimes be observed in blind people. It deeply influences and shapes my perception of the world and, therefore, played an important role in designing the content of this book.

In 2020, 2021, and 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic caused millions of people to temporarily lose their sense of smell, and almost a third of those who survived COVID-19 had problems with their sense of smell. While this may seem insignificant compared to the many tragic consequences of this disease, it has affected people not only physically but also emotionally, socially, and financially. Personal accounts of anosmia, parosmia, and hyperosmia show that people only truly appreciate the importance of their sense of smell when they lose it or discover their extraordinary olfactory abilities. Although these olfactory issues have become increasingly discussed in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, they are not limited to this specific disease. Hyposmia, or a diminished sense of smell resulting from head injuries or anosmia, was not widely recognized by the general public before the pandemic. Therefore, now is an opportune time to examine the sense of smell from a cultural-historical and anthropological perspective, as cultural ideas and beliefs regarding smell and the nose are incredibly diverse.



This book contains several significant revelations in the field of anthropology of smell and the heritage of smell. It is important to recognize that smell is not an autonomous element but rather closely interwoven with olfactory customs, traditions, beliefs, prejudices, and sensory training. Furthermore, smell is not a universal phenomenon when one considers its socio-cultural or temporal context. The book guides the reader in detail through essential explanations of sensory anthropology and the anthropology of smell, addresses the concept of olfactory heritage, explores notable works in the field, discusses methodological aspects of olfactory research, analyzes the articulation of smell in language, and examines a wide range of olfactory ideas and their role in the fields of medicine, philosophy, and religion. It also presents how social groups are dominated and categorized based on their specific smells, explores the importance of the appearance of the nose and the connotations associated with it, examines the cultivation of the sense of smell in literary works, the importance of corporate scents, the manipulation of smell to influence consumer behavior, and finally looks at the practical applications of olfactory science in museums. In reality, the potential topics that can be explored in the field of anthropology of smell are limitless, as every facet of human activity involves breathing and, consequently, smelling.

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