

Political effluvia. Smells, revelations, and the politicization of daily experience in Naples, Italy

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1. A sense of smell

No matter how much one tries to seal windows and doors, or to close one's eyes and ears, some things always find their way even into the most occluded lives. Naples, Italy, is the kind of city which does not leave you alone; sounds, perfumes, colors, and tastes stitch together the urban fabric as much as its architecture. Although always present in the city, garbage has become a cumbersome problem, especially since the late 1990s and early 2000s. With the streets flooded by garbage and people protesting, it is an issue that is hard to ignore. The stench of waste and the cries of people have even reached the academic world, literally entering through our office windows and awakening our senses. Solicited by this call from the world outside the university's walls, we have attempted to make sensing a fundamental tool in our research. In this contribution, we present research methods that account for the relevance of senses for the politicization of people involved in the socio-environmental conflicts over waste mismanagement and illegal dumping in Naples and its surroundings. In the following pages, we first discuss the challenges of integrating sensorial experiences, and smells in particular, in both academic research and activists' practices – and sometimes at the crossroad of the two. We then delve into the specific methodologies we have devised in our research: (i) walking interviews concerned with sensations, (ii) oral sensorial histories, and (iii) "toxic tours."

Those who have visited a dump or passed through the so-called Land of Fires¹ know that it is an experience involving the whole body, where smells penetrate into the viscera, taking control of one's reactions, and impregnating clothes, hairs, and skin. In Naples, the smell of waste has come to occupy the mind, becoming a daily obsession, which changes everything one sees and consumes. As scholars, we are not trained to follow our senses, even less our emotions. Actually, for many of us the golden rule is "detachment," the further the distance between researcher and researched, the better will be the result. Some academics, maybe of the older generation, may still hear their supervisors list the dreadful consequences of becoming too involved with their object of study. Luckily enough, students do not always follow their supervisors' advice. Clearly, for those who identify as radical scholars, as we do, things are different; radical scholars take stances, and propose engagement instead of detachment. After all, it is not difficult to find inspiration and comfort in prestigious scholars who have followed that path, such as E.P. Thompson, E. Hobsbawm, H. Zinn, and D. Harvey. Today there might even be a return of the political. However, we think that the challenge of the senses goes beyond a political approach to research. The senses involve the body and its relationships with the surroundings and not only the positionality of the researcher within the geographies of political allegiances and social hierarchies.

¹ The term refers to the area between the northern province of Naples and the southern province of Caserta, utilized by a network of criminal organizations and business owners as an open-air dump where hazardous and nonhazardous wastes are put on fire. This definition, coined by local activists, has been picked up by all Italian major newspapers in their reports on the Campania socio-environmental situation (e.g. cfr. *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Mattino* from January to March 2014). The law approved in February 2014 as a government response to the social mobilizations of Campania people (law n.6/2014), has been labeled by politicians and media the "Land of Fires law".

Nonetheless, we do see a continuum between a political stance and sensorial research. We argue that the political is deeply embedded into the sensorial, even within the bodily experience of affected people. This awareness is already present in the work of Marx, whose insights on the political potential of situated sensuous experiences have been unearthed and discussed in recent years by several authors². In particular, Alex Loftus³ has taken the sensorial engagement of humans with the socio-ecological relations making up their environments as the point of departure for thinking through an emancipatory praxis of everyday life. Following urban political ecologists, he contends that the social relations of production and the unequal distribution of power organize the concrete manifestations of the appropriation and transformation of the external nature for societal needs. These processes of metabolic exchange make up the environments where we carry out our lives, and are experienced and mediated through the senses. Therefore, for Loftus, sensorial engagements shape the possibility for a politicized response to unjust metabolic relationships. Every time water does not come out of the tap, waste accumulates in the streets, air becomes unbreathable, food is contaminated, we are hit with thirst, impaired mobility, bad smell, and dangerous eating; but herein also lies the possibility for a politicization of the processes that produce specific assemblages of humans and non-humans. Senses allow for the detection of "metabolic fractures", and this consciousness becomes a precondition for rethinking the urbanization of nature and the making of the person in relation to it. Senses can even detect the penetration of capitalist relations in the body, its subsumption and its transformation into a commodity and a machine. Capitalism controls the very ecologies of the subordinate body, its cells, its cure and esthetics. In the face of the capitalist appropriation of the body, a revolutionary project of emancipation could pass through bodily awareness and sensuous engagement as the basis for engendering a transformative politics. We argue that the sensorial experience is part and parcel of the process of politicization of subaltern communities which, as Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Laurence Cox have stated, provides clues to understand the underlying structures of injustice beyond the particular features of daily oppression.⁴

Especially in environmental justice struggles, the body often becomes the first place of politicization, or we may say of subjectification; it literally becomes the space where people experience the oppression of capitalist relations and the opportunity for building resisting communities. This is the case of indigenous people affected by extractivist capitalism, of workers exposed to industrial hazards, and of all the subaltern communities whose neighbourhoods become the dump sites for the wellbeing of elites. The centrality of the body challenges the alleged separation between economy and ecology, production and health, but it also questions the production and legitimation of knowledge. What happens to the body is a controversial issue; experts and government agencies claim to own the body, or at least to know the language to understand it. It is not up to workers or city dwellers to say if a factory or a neighbourhood is killing them. Our argument is that in challenging the expropriation of bodily knowledge, the senses play a fundamental role. In place-based struggles, people can re-activate the body in relationship to the external nature, choosing to listen to its signals. Unequivocally, the sick body speaks loudly, although not always in an understandable language. However, in this essay we will not focus on the sick body, but rather on the space where the body experiences the surroundings. Sometimes, senses have been consciously mobilized in experiments of countering official monitoring programs, noses and eyes vs. sophisticated technologies, to expose the

² Foster J. B. (2000). *Marx's ecology: materialism and nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

³ Loftus A. (2012). *Everyday environmentalism: creating an urban political ecology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁴ Nilsen A. G., & Cox L. (2013). What would a Marxist theory of social movements look like? In Barker C., Cox L., Krinsky J., & Nilsen A.G.. *Marxism and social movements*. Leiden: Brill, 73.

contamination affecting the community. This is, for instance, the case of the Community Environmental Monitoring in Chennai, India. Here, an NGO has challenged the official truth about the contamination in the area by implementing a grassroots system of monitoring based on the bodily experience of affected people. As Shweta Naryan, the coordinator of the program, explains, the so called bucket brigades have been instrumental in forcing the government and the corporations to address the air pollution in the industrial district of Tamil Nadu.⁵ Before people organized their own independent monitoring, Naryan said, "even if the air smelled like rotten cabbage or eggs, local governments in India wouldn't respond to public protests because protestors were considered liars, not scientists."⁶ In her book, *Noxious New York*, Julie Sze has also illustrated how the bucket brigades have been instrumental in stimulating public intervention in poor neighborhoods quantifying "bad smell" in air samples.⁷ Jason Corburn has similarly described how grassroots organizations in New York have challenged the assessments of the Environmental Protection Agency, broadening dramatically the scale of observation in order to include the direct observations and sensorial perceptions of residents.⁸

In the above cases, the sensorial understanding of the environment has been somewhat systematized, and thereby made accessible for the work of scholars, including environmental historians and political ecologists. However, in most of the cases the sensorial experience is elusive to research, especially in its historical dimension. The paucity of sources, together with an ideological repulsion for the sensorial and emotional way of knowing, has almost impeded any research on the topic. Nonetheless, some scholars have tried to enter into the "smellscape", as Douglas Porteous has defined it.⁹ In 1982 Alain Corbin published what still stays as the basic text for anybody who wants to explore smells in history.¹⁰ Corbin came to smell from a classical social history background, proving once more the possible, though rather underdeveloped, connections linking smell to environmental history. Corbin focused mainly on the perceptions of smells and showed how smell as a field of interest and study has been progressively dismissed by the increasing authoritarianism of modern science. There was almost no room for the nose in the modernistic laboratory. But smell did not submit easily to science for two main reasons: on one hand, smell was too subjective, almost impossible to measure and catalogue. On the other hand, smell belonged to an idea of the world that kept together internal and external ecologies, thinking about the body and the environment as being in a continuous exchange. This was a concept that was difficult for modern scientists to comprehend. For them, smell spoke the language of effluvia, not that of bacteria or viruses.

The agency of smell as a highway placing in communication the body and the environment is central in the work done by the few environmental historians who have tackled that topic. Environmental historians' meager attention to smells has gone hand in hand with the poor understanding of the connections between bodies' ecologies and external nature. As a matter of fact, the environmental

⁵ The Bucket Brigades are self-organized teams of residents who monitor air pollution with low-tech tools, including their own senses. On the bucket brigades see Ottinge G. (2010). "Buckets of Resistance: Standards and the Effectiveness of Citizen Science," *Science, technology & human values*, 35 (2), 244-270.

⁶ Global Community Monitor, India, Chevron and monitoring pollution after toxic disasters, March 25 2013, <http://www.gcmonitor.org/india-chevron-and-monitoring-pollution-after-toxic-disasters/> (accessed on October 21, 2015).

⁷ Sze J. (2007). *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 181.

⁸ Corburn J. (2005). *Street science: Community Knowledge and Environmental Health Justice*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 173-199.

⁹ Porteous J. D. (1985). "Smellscape," *Progress in Human Geography* 9 (3), 356-378.

¹⁰ Corbin A. (1982). *Le miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*. Paris: Aubier Montaigne.

historians who have addressed the issue of smells are generally those who have been more attentive to the metabolic relationships between environments and people. Indeed, also in the empirical case at the basis of this chapter, the awakening of the nose is linked to a context in which health and environment blend in the toxic biographies of the affected people.¹¹

2. *Stories of odors*

Since the early 1990s, Naples, the capital city of the Campania region in Italy, and its surroundings, have become the global icon of the urban ecological disaster: an area of 3.800 square km – the provinces of Naples and Caserta – inhabited by approximately four million people has turned into a huge trashcan. The synergy between government-sponsored urban waste management project and a complex network of mafia groups, industrial managers, corrupt white collar and public officials, has created a system of profiteering from the disposal of waste at the expense of local livelihoods. On the one hand, the authoritarian governance of the urban waste management for the entire region, framed by the government as an “emergency”, has become an attractive business for private investors who enjoy legal derogations and optimal contractual conditions for building waste facilities based on incinerators, landfills and storage sites. On the other hand, the infamous trafficking, haphazard dumping, open-air burning and illegal disposal of hazardous byproducts, mostly from industrial production, has turned every available hole in the region into a sink of toxic scraps. Both processes have shifted the environmental costs of industrial production and waste disposal onto communities and local ecologies. This has translated into a toxic environment for the local population, affected today by threats to health, the reduction of cultivable land and stigmatization. More than 2000 potentially contaminated sites were recorded in 2008 by the Regional Agency for Environmental Protection, and the complex links between those contaminants and the increasing cancer rates among the locals have been documented by several scientific studies. The hazards to public health have been recognized by the central government through the insertion of three wide areas within Campania in the national record of polluted sites in need of remediation, together with 50 other places all around Italy (SIN). Nevertheless, cleaning-up works are still minimal and the authoritarian governance of environmental management and land-use planning still dominates the regional landscape.¹²

Naples is a city that is literally on fire; for journalists looking for sensationalism and dark stories, Naples is the Promised Land. Images work well in the construction of the dark tale of Naples; what is better than photographs and videos to transmit the sense of an apocalypse? But although extremely powerful, images are unable to uncover the subterranean paths at play in the Neapolitan garbage drama. Although continuously evoked in all the analyses, the mafia has stayed invisible in these visual representations. One can guess its presence in the landscape or make a metonymic connection between an object and the entire criminal organization, but it is not self-evident. The mafia is part of an underworld that can become visible only through more complex narratives; undoubtedly, Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorra* contributed dramatically to expose that reality to a wider public. The visual is also almost blind towards the toxic waste buried in many places in the region. By definition, this is

¹¹ Chiang C. Y. (2008). “The Nose Knows: The Sense of Smell in American History”. *The Journal of American History*. 95 (2), 405-416; Nash L. (2006). *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Bolton Valenčius C. (2002). *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land*. New York: Basic Books.

¹² On the waste crisis in Campania see: D’Alisa G. et al. (2010). “Conflict in Campania: Waste Emergency or Crisis of Democracy”. *Ecological Economics* 70 (2), 239-249; Armiero M., & D’Alisa G. (2012). “Rights of Resistance: The Garbage Struggles for Environmental Justice in Campania, Italy”. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 23 (4), 52-68; Armiero M. (2014). “Garbage Under the Volcano. Fighting for Environmental Justice In Naples, Italy, and Beyond,” in *A History of Environmentalism: Local Struggles, Global Histories*, eds. by Armiero M. and Sedrez L.. London – New York: Bloomsbury.

part of the underworld, not visible on the surface. In other words, there are things, and even more processes, which cannot be expressed by the visual. The relationship of local people with waste, especially with toxic waste, is one of those processes which run under the skin of both land and humans.

3. Sensitive methodologies

During our fieldwork in Campania, once it became clear that the senses and physical perceptions are an important motivating factor in some people becoming activists, we began to devise specific research methodologies that could account for the sensorial as political, and that could detect within life trajectories those turning points linked to sensorial experiences of metabolic fractures. The activists had their own methodologies for understanding the radical environmental changes happening around and inside them. One of these methods, enacted by several activist groups within more than fifteen years of social mobilizations in the region, was the mapping of the countryside surrounding the towns and the cities. Armed with simple technological devices, a GPS and a camera, activists crisscrossed rural areas, suburbs and brownfield sites documenting the places where waste was illegally discharged, abandoned, and, in some cases, put on fire. One of the most successful campaigns of this kind was promoted in 2013 by the Coordination Committee against Toxic Fires (CCF): in a single day of denunciation, they collected hundreds of photographs and geographical locations of dumping sites, assembling a map of the state of the countryside and turning it into a collective complaint to the institutions in charge.

Toxic tours have been another crucial tool employed by activists in order to expose the contamination affecting their communities.¹³ The practice of toxic tours is rather common in environmental justice struggles; it empowers local people, recognizing their knowledge, and builds connections and solidarities to support local struggles. It was through a toxic tour in 2007 that activists were able to shift the public attention from the urban trash in the streets of Naples towards toxic contamination in the outskirts of the metropolis. It was a truly Copernican revolution in the understanding of the waste crisis in Campania through which activists revealed both the ecologies and the politics of contamination in subaltern communities. This revelation occurred not through the usual tools of scholarly interventions, the written text, but through an experiential exploration of places that appeals to intellectual, sensorial, and emotional understandings. Our participation in toxic tours has had a twofold meaning for our research; it has implied the need to open up the canon of knowledge production, renouncing any pretense of monopoly, as well as it has challenged a positivist approach to sources. While toxic tours were evidently crucial sources of information for our research, our participation cannot be reduced to a mere extraction of information. We have been instrumental in organizing toxic tours, involving international scholars, therefore, our sources were not just out there waiting to be mined, but we have actually contributed in creating the very sources we wished to use.

¹³ Phaedra Pezzullo defines toxic tours as “noncommercial expeditions organized and facilitated by people who reside in areas that are polluted by toxins, places that Bullard (1993) has named “human sacrifice zones”. Residents of these areas guide outsiders, or tourists, through where they live, work, and play to witness their struggle.” In Pezzullo P. (2004). *Toxic Tours: Communicating the Presence of Chemical Contamination in Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making*, eds. by Depoe S. P., Delicath J. W., Aepli Elsenbeer M. F. New York: SUNY, 236. A wonderful experiment merging activism and scholarship is Pulido L., Barraclough L. R. & Cheng W. (2012). *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

By performing these investigations several times, some of the most engaged activists developed a special sensitivity and were able to recognize the different kinds of waste, inferring their hazardousness from the smell. Our method of research to access the experiences in which perception was intertwined to political motivation and spatial focus, has been to elaborate further the "walking interview" devised by Evans and Jones.¹⁴ In their pilot project with the walking interview, Evans and Jones utilized a GPS and a voice recorder to produce geo-referenced descriptions, or spatial transcripts, of local people's connections to place during their walks with interviewees that were familiar with the area. They show how mobile interviews and rigorous design generate more place-specific data than sedentary interviews and produce "a decidedly spatial and locational discourse of place, which is structured geographically rather than historically" (p. 858). In five interviews with Campania's activists, in which respondents were leading us on a route decided by them, we complemented the method of walking interview with sensorial data, by recording the detections of, and the reactions to, specific smells in the course of explorations in the countryside of two towns. In this way, we could highlight in the landscape zones of relevant sensuous engagement, often not recorded in official maps of contaminated sites. Andrea, a farmer in the town of Acerra, guided us in the no man's lands between old factories and cultivated fields in the middle of the countryside, and just by following his nose he uncovered a location where waste was habitually burned illegally. Mimmo, in his walk with us in the outskirts of a small town, Maddaloni, was continuously superimposing the memories of the past beauty of the land over the current disorder that surrounded us, offering an insight into the tension felt by the locals between a past of spring waters and woods, and a present of chemical puddles and unknown materials. For him, the memory of past smells, buried today under disturbing scents, was a constant encouragement to struggle for the reclamation of "his" land. The value of this method is not only to offer a spatialized account of people's relation to place and sensorial reactions, but it could also act as a base for institutions to localize in the landscape areas in which to conduct deeper analysis and assessments of environmental monitoring.

While complementing the walking interview with sensorial detections helped us to deepen the geographical dimension of people's reactions to perceived environmental threats, an attention to smells when collecting oral histories, or rather to memories of smells, informed our research to get insights in the ways experiences of environmental changes were symbolized into shared memories and acted as political triggers. In collecting oral histories, we gave particular importance to the relations linking sensuous experiences of specific places to the emotional attachment felt by the interviewees in different moments of their life. In this way, we were able to reconstruct the links between physical environmental change (when and how the environment was changing), sensuous perceptions (the moment in time when bad smells arose), emotional reactions (the shift from happiness to anger when going to specific places), and the emergence of the political will (when and why the interviewee decided to "do something"). These oral "sensorial" histories allow for a specific focus on the space where people and their surroundings meet and are symbolized. Our role has been to create the stage for the interviewees to produce a narrative of their body's sensitivity within specific environments, aiming to uncover the experiential base that feeds the activists' motivation.

In order to undermine the dichotomy researcher/researched, we have also experimented with a laboratory of guerrilla narratives in which we have invited a group of women to write their own biographies of contamination and politicization.¹⁵ Borrowing from the collective of Italian radical novelists, Wu Ming, we have argued that "stories are axes of war to be unearthed." In almost all the

¹⁴ Evans J. & Jones P. (2011). "The Walking Interview: Methodology, Mobility and Place," *Applied Geography* 31, 849-858.

¹⁵ Armiero M. eds. (2015). *Teresa e le altre. Storie di donne nella terra dei Fuochi*. Milano: Jacabook.

biographies we have collected - several also used in this chapter - the sensorial, bodily experience is crucial in mobilizing people, transforming victims into political subjects.

Our oral history project is packed with stories of people discovering the mysterious ways through which waste continuously cross boundaries and spills into personal lives. Lucia, for instance, recollected for us the episode that transformed her from a "normal housewife", borrowing the beautiful self-definition of Lois Gibbs,¹⁶ into a *pasionaria*.¹⁷ Lucia tells that while studying English in a public education program, a terrible smell erupted in the classroom coming from the nearby dumps, making it almost impossible to carry on with the class. Probably, the public-sponsored English program was part of some kind of plan to pursue equal opportunity in education, but the stench coming from the dump was a reminder that environmental inequalities will always find a way to reach everybody, maybe entering through the window. However, that odor did not stop Lucia and her friends from studying; maybe it stopped the English course, but they started studying life cycle energy, the effects of toxic waste on health, and the recycling and disposal of garbage. In Lucia's story, the smell performed a function of revelation; symbolically and materially, it broke through the barriers we always build to protect our lives from the "external". Smell proves that no barrier is thick enough to keep the flux of toxicity outside our bodies. As Alain Corbin has written, "The nose, as the vanguard of the sense of taste, warns us against poisonous substances. Even more important, the sense of smell locates hidden dangers in the atmosphere. Its capacity to test the properties of air is unmatched".¹⁸

We are tempted to argue that the nose makes visible what stays often invisible. Of course, we do not mean to say that the piles of garbage are invisible to the people living on the edge of dumps; however, we believe that smell is an immaterial bridge able to connect the space of normality and that of the extreme otherness, acting as a political trigger that unsettles everyday life, suggesting the possibility that waste can actually enter in the human body. In her autobiographical notes, Dorigana explains how the blowing of the wind changed forever the secluded paradise she and her friends believed to have built for themselves just a few kilometers from downtown Naples.¹⁹ The wind sweeping the beautiful house Dorigana and her friends had bought on the slopes of the Astroni hill, brought the sickening smell of the Pianura landfill, the oldest dump in the region, active from the 1950s, to her doorsteps. The smell uncovered the illusion of seclusion and at the same time the radical ignorance of the city elites; apparently, Dorigana and friends did not know that they bought their little corner of paradise in the neighborhood which had swallowed their garbage for decades. Overwhelmed by the stench of the landfill, Dorigana began her own politicization, which would bring her to become one of the leaders of the Pianura movement.²⁰ Sometimes the stench does not stay in the air; it does not stop at the nose of people. Nunzia recollects the sense of dirtiness soaking her entire body when she used to patrol the lands around Naples, deeply affected by the illegal disposal of toxics:

¹⁶ The interview to Lois Gibbs is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrzqFPego4A> (accessed on November 1, 2015).

¹⁷ Interview in possession of the authors.

¹⁸ Corbin A. (1986). *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 7.

¹⁹ Sarli D. (2015). "Posillipo Pianura, solo andata," in Armiero M., *Teresa e le altre*, 102-103.

²⁰ Pianura is a working class neighborhood in Naples that was the theatre of a strong anti-dump movement between December 2008 and January 2009. On the Pianura case see the EJOLT Atlas at <http://ejolt.cdca.it/conflitto/discarica-di-pianura> (accessed on November 1, 2015).

As I was getting nearer to the fence, my throat was burning more and more, but not only the throat, also the eyes, the face, I felt pervaded by the stench, it was not anymore only an olfactory sensation. The smell was becoming more intense, the air more thick and cloudy, suffocating. It seemed as if I was not only smelling with the nose and the mouth, but also with my skin which was soaked with that stench, with those substances. I came back home and jumped in the shower, the smell was following me everywhere, I was soaked in that stench to the bones. I was scratching my skin with the sponge, trying to erase that smell which was pervading me, but it did not go away. I looked devastated, with my face red and eyes swollen with tears and then again that smell, still with me.²¹

In the case of Nunzia, the sickness that penetrated her body seems to confirm the permeability of the human ecosystem to external agents.

In the so-called Land of fires, odors and images figure in the making of an ecological hell. While the black smoke of the toxic fires colors the skies, the stench emanating from combustion is a familiar presence for the inhabitants. Father Maurizio Patriciello, the energetic priest who has become an environmentalist leader, described the night when the stench transformed his life:

It was deep night. I woke up suddenly trying to breath. A disgusting stench had broke in through the window. It had invaded the room and stole all the air. Drowned in that smell, I reached the window (...) but there was no difference between the outside and the inside. (...) The stench changes your life. It is not Cogito ergo sum. Rather it is Olfacio ergo cogito. Sniff and get angry.²²

Similarly, a life changing sensuous experience was the one that occurred to Chiara: to prepare food for her family was not the same anymore after she got involved in her town's grassroots movement against illegal waste disposal. When they started mapping the countryside, looking for the dumping places utilized for the criminal discharging of toxic byproducts, she saw the disorder of plastics, barrels, sludge and scraps popping up amidst cultivated fields, and she smelled the revolting odor of chemicals mixed with the fresh scent of leaves and earth. Knowing that many of the vegetables she could buy in her town came directly from those fields, made her suspicious of the food she was giving to her children. This fear could have become a source of despair and immobility, but luckily, it gave her the motivation to better understand the metabolism of contaminants within soil, plants and organisms, and the determination to fight back those processes turning "her" food into dangerous source of unknown threats.²³

4. Conclusions

In this essay, we provide three methodological approaches that specifically address sensuous experiences and that make them an object of analysis for enriching the understanding of the links between environmental changes and social mobilizations. In the interviews we have thus collected, smell plays two basic functions. It performs the function of the revelation in hagiography; smell is an olfactory apparition which asks for conversion almost in a literal sense. In their stories, our informants explain how the smell changed their lives, pushing them to dedicate energies and time to the cause.

²¹ Lombardi N. (2015). "Il mio nome è Nunzia," in *Teresa e le altre*, 31.

²² Demarco M. and Patriciello M. (2014). *Non aspettiamo l'apocalisse. La mia battaglia nella Terra dei fuochi*. Milano: Rizzoli, 51-54.

²³ Interview in possession of the authors.

The smell makes the miracle to transform a passive consumer into a rebellious subject. We argue that the power of stench lays in its "ability" to establish a bodily connection between the toxic landscape and the potential toxic body. The toxicity is not anymore only in front of the observer, as, for instance, in the piles of garbage spread everywhere in the landscape, but it enters into the body through the nose, reaches the viscera making people sick, sticks on the clothes, skins, and hairs. Smell is the *pas-partout* which opens the door of the body, revealing that the landscape is never only out there. Of course, as in every account of dramatic conversions, also this narrative might stress too much the apparition, the ethereal event which breaks into the normality and changes it forever. Many times it is not only the smell but a more articulated set of events, relations, books, meetings and much more. In addition, the stories we have included in this chapter offer a richer explanation of the political subjectification, which can never be explained only with an olfactory epiphany. Nevertheless, we claim that the smell is more than a rhetorical tool in the making of a rebellious self-narrative. Recognizing the centrality of the nose implies a bodily understanding of politics; the space of the political is not restricted to the mind or the mouth. The nose breaks with the usual way of acting the political, reminding us that the materiality of the body is not only the terrain for governmentalizing projects but also the very agent of resistance. The nose also blends the political and the personal overcoming a masculine practice of politicization which strongly separates feelings and sensations from political acts. By attending to smells and to other sensorial engagements with environments, researchers can integrate in their accounts and explanations a fundamental dimension of human experience often overlooked. We are aware that smells are rather intractable objects of analysis, and that they can open up complexities that are difficult to fit into a neat research design. However, we do believe that critical researchers should start taking seriously the ways ordinary people experience their surroundings and motivate their political activation. Nobody can really do science, or anything else properly for that matter, if surrounded by sickening smells. So, instead of trying to eliminate or ignore the smell, would it not be more "scientific" to start taking smell seriously and follow it? Indeed, as Arundhaty Roy has written, in order to understand history we need to "smell the smells."²⁴

²⁴ Roy A. (2009). *The god of small things*. London: HarperCollins, 52.