



## Hurtling Towards Acceptance

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I have always hated winter as an adult. An avid hiker and kayaker, I never took to the more obvious winter sports of skating or skiing. My disdain for the cold is compounded by Raynaud's disease, an inconvenience that causes one's extremities to experience discomfort to the point of pain. So, in the winter months, I avoided spending much time outside if the temperature dips too far below zero. When spring arrived, I emerged from my self-imposed cocoon, sloughing away the layers of clothes to reveal a reinvigorated, and honestly happier version of myself.

Then I had children: rambunctious, adventurous offspring who love the outdoors. Through them, I have (re)discovered the most beautiful winter activity imaginable – tobogganing. By hurtling my middle-aged body down a hill atop a thin piece of plastic, I've recaptured a love for winter I must have lost many years ago.

I had forgotten what snow smells like. What it tastes like on the tip of my tongue as I lollygag at the bottom of the hill, face-first in a bed of crystals sparkling under a winter's sun. At ground level, snow is immersive.

For me, these "intimate encounters... are not just about seeing, but about *experiencing* with all the senses" (Bender, 2002, p. 136, emphasis in original). But it's the smell of my Canadian snowscape that gets me the most. Arctic environmental historian Julia Feuer-Cotter (2017) describes the meaning-making power of our olfactory senses: "through the connections formed between smell, memory, emotion and place... smellscapes are concerned with an immediate

localized and immersed experience that involves emotions” (p. 60). In a similar vein, anthropologist Kara C. Hoover (2009) characterizes odours as being, “just as provocative as visual stimuli in creating and inducing memories” (p. 238). However, in the closing paragraph of her guest editorial for *Cartographica* on The Geography of Smell, Hoover also writes: “By the time this issue goes to print, the air will be too cold to carry a scent outdoors” (p. 239). The patchwork of odours I experience at the bottom of a toboggan hill include whiffs of plastic and sweat, scents of a nearby river and coniferous trees, heat warmers in my gloves and the pungent smell of dirt below a pristine surface. Together, they do, indeed, carry evocative scents.

This snapshot of a wintertime smellscape aligns rather uncomfortably with the pandemic. I watch the thrill of the descent on my children’s faces as they careen down a hill, my hands clenched with worry. They’re wearing helmets, I’ve chosen safe gradients, and I (selfishly?) test-drive runs to assess the danger-to-excitement ratio. But danger lurks in the form of wayward toboggans, hidden rocks, and immovable trees. I hold my breath with a deep, perhaps irrational, concern that I have unwittingly sent them into harm’s way. Both children are also vaccinated, wear masks, and (usually) social distance. But it feels like unforeseen danger could pop up at any moment with the virus lurking, like methane released from permafrost, just below the surface at every turn. Like countless others, I have become tired of constantly assessing danger-to-wellbeing ratios. Jokes in our household about losing our sense of smell – “uh-oh, I can’t smell that; must be COVID” – have worn thin, as has the feeling of being continually on guard against the unknown.

Although I desperately try to lean into the excitement/wellbeing side of the equation during this seemingly never-ending pandemic, I admit that it’s not easy. Feuer-Cotter’s (2017) words remind me that, “smells can tell stories and stories can be told through smells” (p. 57). The motley mix of tobogganing odours are, for me, a twofold story of desire. First, I want to use this newfound love of being horizontal in the snow to serve as a reminder to be *present* when nothing around me seems solid. Second, I want my children to remember this smellscape and associate it with their mom embracing bottom-of-the-hill moments with joy. In thinking about my own childhood, I remember with vivid clarity my obsession with the Choose Your Own Adventure series. Now, I want my children to fly down a hill and move freely through a pandemic-stained world; if something doesn’t work out, we’ll have the luxury of turning back the pages to start afresh with

hopes of alternate outcomes. Yet, we all know that some outcomes are unpredictable like rocks beneath the smooth surface of fresh snow, and I struggle to accept this reality. My story must be one of navigating terrains through parameters I create, but within wild environments over which I have little control.

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Bender, B. (2020). Landscape and politics. In *The Material Culture Reader* (pp. 135-174). Routledge.

Feuer-Cotter, J. (2017). Smellscape Narratives: Designing Olfactory Spaces as Infrastructure for Embodied Storytelling. In *Designing with Smell* (pp. 57-66). Routledge.

Hoover, K. C. (2009). The geography of smell. *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization*, 44(4), 237-239.

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