Scents and Scent-sibilities

Scents and Scent-sibilities:
Smell and Everyday Life Experiences

By

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Kelvin Low
2008

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Smelle alone amongst the senses can
Either destroye or quite remake a man
—Jerome Cardan, *De subtilitate rurum,* 1550

A Prolegomenon

My uncle stinks. When I was a child, he would love to tease me by grabbing me around the waist and planting sloppy kisses on my cheeks, inevitably making me inhale his bodily odour which was, to say the least, a never failing source of near asphyxiation. It does not help that he remains less than pleasing to the eye, and that his way of being is almost constantly called into question, even among his siblings. I made up my mind not to like him that very much, and I am rather certain that this propensity to perceive him as such stems from, initially, his fetid constitution. Looking back at this odourous slice of my childhood, I am curious as to how one can possess such prominent recollections and perceptions of another person triggered largely by (malodourous) olfactory properties. Today, things have not changed. I often overhear my aunties and other uncles comment that their "foul-smelling", thereby flagrant sibling somehow did not seem to be able to wash his clothes clean enough, wearing apparels that emanate a somewhat muddy and odouriferous scent which did not seem to get enough of the sun after wash. That smell could shape my perception and judgment of a person, in this case an obvious admission of dislike, provokes me into asking – what is the role of smell in everyday life experiences? How far is smell employed as a social intermediary where social actors attempt to reconstruct their experiences in locating themselves and others in social life?

Such sensorial/olfactory inquiries stem not from a personal agenda to understand one's past (or to maintain olfactory salubriousness), but instead, take the lead from Simmel's proposition for a sociology of the senses, where he argues that social science, by focusing on large and visible structures in order to account for and analyse social life, remains as

an insufficient trajectory, for sensorial impressions are equally pertinent in social interaction. He contends in his article, *Sociology of the Senses*:

> The fact that we perceive our fellow human beings at all through our senses itself develops in two directions, whose cooperation is of fundamental sociological importance. Impinging on the human subject, the sensory impression of a person provokes feelings of like and dislike in us, of our own exaltation or degradation, of excitement or composure, from his or her look or the tone of his or her voice, from his or her mere physical presence in the same room. (quoted in Frisby and Featherstone 1997, 110-111)

Simmel suggests that sense impression forms a "means of knowledge of the other", using the example of how someone's voice may have either "attractive or repulsive effect" on us regardless of what the person says (ibid.). This, Simmel maintains, may be true of all our sensorial evaluation of social others. Paralleling Simmel, Howes contends that sensory encounters are not merely personal experiences or physiological responses. Instead, sensation is the "most fundamental domain of cultural expression" comprising enactments of practices and values of society. He proposes:

> Every domain of sensory experience is also an arena for structuring social roles and interactions. *We learn social divisions, distinctions of gender, class and race, through our senses*…[In essence], *sensual relations are also social relations.* (2003, xi, emphases mine)

Hence, this study attempts to move beyond "absolutely supra-individual total structures" towards individual and group lived experiences where smell may be utilised as a social medium in the reconstruction of social realities (Simmel, quoted in Frisby and Featherstone 1997, 110-111). To make a claim for smell as a social intermediary is to say that smell possesses "social meanings because of the meanings brought to it by persons in the interaction process". These meanings are negotiated constantly by "meaning-attributing, interpreting beings who interact through time" (Benson and Hughes 1983, 46-7). As Synnott also proclaims:

> Odour is many things: a boundary-marker, a status symbol, a distance-maintainer, an impression management technique, a schoolboy's joke or protest, and a danger-signal - but it is above all *a statement of who one is*. Odours define the individual and the group, as do sight, sound and the

> other senses; and smell, like them, *mediates social interaction*. (1991a, 438, emphases mine)

This book therefore locates smell in everyday life experiences by analysing the various ways by which social actors employ smell in their understanding, perception and judgment of social others and social spaces. Within these analyses, I draw attention to heterogeneous perceptions and reconstructions of personhood, race, class and gender categories as put forward by my respondents through their own socio-olfactive adjudications. Additionally, regulation and manipulation of smells in modernity and postmodernity are also deliberated upon, where I present intersections of olfaction with notions of progress, civilisation and cleanliness.

Locating Smell through Classificatory and Hierarchical Dimensions

(1) Classifying Smells – Difficulties and Inconsistencies

Smell is a sociocultural phenomenon, endowed with variegated meanings, symbolic associations and values by different cultures (Classen *et al*. 1994). Whether we like it or not, we remain as odouriferous beings despite all our cleaning regimes, and these odours play important roles in virtually every realm of our everyday life social experiences, running the gamut from gustatory consumption, personal hygiene, the home, the city, to class, gender and racial dimensions of social life (Synnott 1991a). Perhaps smell is the only sense we cannot turn off. We can shut our eyes, cover our ears, or eschew touching or tasting. But we smell constantly and with every breath[1] (McKenzie 1923; Watson 2000). Smell, however, is a highly elusive phenomenon (Classen *et al*. 1994), regarded as the mute

[1] Perhaps a somewhat chilling illustration of how one can choose to shut off the use of one's senses, yet remain incapable of blocking out the sense of smell, can be found in one of Hyett's (1986, 8) poem which she wrote based on her interview accounts of soldiers who were present at the liberation camps of Auschwitz:

> The ovens,/the stench,/I couldn't repeat/the stench. You/have to breathe./You can wipe out/what you don't want/to see. Close your/eyes. You don't want/to hear, don't want/to taste. You can/block out all senses/except smell.

Such perceptive comments provided by the liberators in their accounts of Auschwitz point to the indelible mark that smells leave on the horror of the Holocaust (see also, Rindisbacher 2006).

sense (Ackerman 1990; Howes 1991; Watson 2000), the one *sans* words. Smells envelope us, enter our bodies, and emanate from us. Yet when we try to describe smells, olfactory epithets do not quite provide accurate descriptions (Ackerman 1990; Brant 2004; Dann 2003; Dorland 1993; Finnegan 2002; Gibbons 1986; Glaser 2002; McKenzie 1923; Miller 1997; Sperber 1974; Wyburn *et al*. 1964). For instance, Miller points out: "The lexicon of smell is very limited and usually must work by making an adjective of the thing that smells. Excrement smells like excrement, roses like roses…What is missing is a specially dedicated qualitative diction of odour that matches the richness of distinctions we make with the tactile [such] as squishy, oozy, gooey…[to] dank and damp" (1997, 67). As Simmel opines similarly: "Smell does not form an object on its own, as do sight and hearing, but remains, as it were, captive in the human subject, which is symbolised in the fact that there exist no independent, objectively characterising expressions for fine distinctions. If we say 'it smells sour', then this only means that it smells the way something smells which tastes sour" (quoted in Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 118). In other words, smells are more often than not described based on cause or effect (Sperber 1974), or flavours (Aristotle, quoted in Johansen 1998, 227).

Furthermore, there is not even a scientific classification system for the sense of smell as there is for the other senses (Synnott 1991a, 439). Our sense of taste is governed by four paradigms of sweet, sour, salty and bitter.[2] Light and wavelength variations ascertain sight. Sound is determined by assorted vibrations, and touch is determined by pressure, pain thresholds and other varying factors. There is, however, no agreement about olfaction (ibid.). In 1752, Linnaeus, known as history's most compulsive and accomplished classifier, came up with his schematic of seven odour classes–"fragrant", "aromatic", "ambrosial" (or "musky"), "alliaceous" (or "garlicky"), "hircine" (or "goaty"), "repulsive", and "nauseous" (Smith 1989, 107). Dutch physiologist, Hendrik Zwaardemaker, attempted an update of Linnaeus' scheme to include nine classes of odours with subclasses including "ethereal" (such as fruits, resins, ethers) and "floral and balsamic" (such as flowers, violet, vanilla) (ibid.). In 1916, Hans Henning proposed six classes running the range from "fragrant", "ethereal", "resinous" and "spicy", to "putrid" and "burned" (ibid.).

[2] Interestingly, Howes points out that the four taste sensations of "sweet", "sour", "bitter" and "salty" constitute the four flavour categories of the English. He cautions that other cultures or societies depart from this quadratic taste model. For instance, he notes that the Japanese has five taste categories, while the Weyéwa of Sumba counts seven taste sensations based on their language. Also, the Sereer Ndut of Senegal employs a three-category taste model (2003, 9).

Similarly, other scientists have estimated between four to nine classes or types of smell, (for instance, "fruity", "ethereal", "burnt", "waxy" and "minty" [see Amoore 1982, 52-55]), excluding sub-categories; and there is no consensus on the number of odour classes (ibid.).[3] In terms of labeling an absence of the sense of smell, we also lack an equitable term for smell as compared to the other senses. As Ackerman points out: "Those without hearing are labeled 'deaf', those without sight 'blind', [those without speech 'mute'], but what is the word for someone without smell?" (1990, 41). She lets on that *anosmia* is what scientists label one without smell; a simple Latin/Greek combination comprising "without" and "smell" (see also, Glaser 2002, 135; Smith 1989, 123-125). But how many of us are familiar with this term?

Inasmuch as smell has been an elusive yet distinct component in our everyday life experiences, sociologists have seldom researched the senses or olfaction in particular (Synnott 1991a), with the exception of Largey and Watson's *The Sociology of Odours* (1972). Perhaps such negligence is due to the low status of smell in the sensory hierarchy, as Synnott (1991a) and Miller (1997) contend. Synnott, for example, argues that an indication of the low status of smell is the lack of a specialised vocabulary of olfaction. As discussed previously, odours are often defined in terms of other senses through different sensorial gradations of sweet or sour (taste), or strong or weak (touch). Without an independent vocabulary, Synnott acknowledges, it is hard to broach the topic. A related point associated with producing an odour-inventory lies in the observation that instead of being independent entities, odours are "highly contextualised concepts" (Almagor 1990b) where their meanings are to be understood through a "culturally inscribed context" (Borthwick 2000, 133). Almagor explains:

> [S]mells are usually not known in isolation but as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' accompaniments to human activities in certain cultural, social and physical settings. This combination of values and norms is internalised by members of society, and thus people can expect to find in

[3] The classes or categories of smell are certainly not standardised across cultures, as Howes observes. He points out that while the Sereer Ndut of Senegal recognise five odour categories, the Japanese identify merely two, and the Weyéwa of Sumba employ three (2003, 9). More pertinently, we should, according to Howes, be more cognisant of how cultures differ in terms of their sensorial classification and employment, arising from differences in linguistic discrimination of their sensory models. Hence, instead of attempting to produce a standardised olfactory classification model, one should consider how different olfactive classificatory schematics arise across cultures and societies using a more relational rather than a culturally or sensorially isolated approach.

> various situations, places and encounters, some recognised odours. (1990b, 185)

In this manner, Almagor suggests, scents function as symbolic representations where they are linked to "cultural mode[s] of perceived meaning" (1990b, 186). He raises the example of how particular smells act as triggers for memory recollection (see also, Shulman 2006), adding that such odours bring forth specific events or periods in one's life, and that the association between a specific scent and an episode is void of other similar odours. In other words, the "way we learn about odours and memorise their association has to do with the mode of perceiving odours" (1990b, 187). When we encounter a particular scent that is linked to a past event, and in spite of the passing of time, our vivid memories of objects and events which are textured with olfactory remembrances, produces the association between an unchanged odour to an object. It follows that despite a change in context and time, we continue to ascribe meanings to particular objects and episodes to specific smell/s, tied in with our subjective scope of personal experiences and memories (1990b, 187).[4] When distinct odours are denoted with specific meanings (owing to the links to one's past experiences), such odour-denotation hence denies attempts at olfactory classification. Even if classification implies a meaning-making system, sociocultural experiences cannot be predicated simply on mere classification (ibid.). Instead, Almagor contends, "meaning is the application of the image of an odour to a context with which that odour is associated" (1990b, 189). In the absence of a context with which one ought to consider and incorporate in perceiving smells, such olfactive reductionism can only serve to dilute complexities of social experiences realised and framed through smells (Almagor 1990b). This stance also resonates in Borthwick's work where she points out that specific effects of odours, contingent upon particular contexts, hence offer the possibility of appraising different socialities (2000, 133). Departing from classificatory quandaries, I now turn to a discussion on locating smell in the hierarchy of the sensorium which reveals an imperialism of sight, thereby prompting a re-consideration of how the other senses play equally important roles in everyday life experiences.

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[4] I discuss the links between smell and memories in a separate paper (see Low 2007), where I offer a sensual-olfactive approach towards analysing biographical narration and memory recollection, on top of calling for re-embodying qualitative inquiry.

(2) Smell – A Hierarchised Sense

The low status of smell, apart from classificatory difficulties and inconsistencies, is reflected in both Plato's (1961) and Aristotle's (1959) hierarchy of the sensorium. Plato, despite prioritising reason over the senses, did attempt to explain the origins of the latter (Synnott 1991b). According to Synnott, Plato assigned the sense of sight as the "foundation of philosophy" which would lead to "God and Truth" (1991b, 63). In his discussion, however, Plato did not provide further deliberations on the other senses. Aristotle, as Synnott highlights, adopted a clear sensorial hierarchy: "At the top were the senses of sight and hearing, whose special contributions to humanity were beauty and music;…at the bottom were the animal senses of taste and touch, which alone could be abused, by gluttony and lust respectively…in between was smell: it could not be abused" (1991a, 439-40). For Aristotle, sight was the privileged sense while the other senses such as touch and taste were deemed as "animal" senses (Synnott 1991b, 63). On Aristotelian terms then, sight, hearing, taste and tactility constituted the basic four, while smell fell in the middle, linking sight and hearing with taste and touch (Classen 1993). Where Aristotle classified smell as the lowest sense, Kant[5] did not even discuss the sense of smell in his aesthetics (Corbin 1986; Le Guérer 1992; Rindisbacher 1995; Stoller 1989; Synnott 1991a), deeming it a "coarse sense" (Le Guérer 2002). Consonant with Plato's treatment of the visual, Rorty notes that Western social thought and culture have been characterised by what he calls a "hegemony of vision" (1980), brought about by various developments across Europe such as ecclesiastical architectural styles of the medieval period comprising colourful stained-glassed windows which facilitated the filtering of copious amounts of light, fuelling the medieval fascination with colour and light (Urry 2000).

Correspondingly, Classen (1993) and Howes (2003) posit that olfactory decline would seem to have been accompanied by a rise in the importance of sight (see also, Jonas 1953), justifying this proposition by noting that the increasing value accorded to sight and visual imagery from the time of the Enlightenment has been discussed at length in the works of, *inter alia*, Michel Foucault (1970), Walter Ong (1977) and Donald Lowe (1982). The devaluation of smell in the contemporary West is also directly linked to the revaluation of the senses which took place during the

[5] According to Le Guérer, Kant viewed smell as a nuisance due to its ambiguous position of being "most unproductive" among the senses, yet "most necessary" simultaneously (1992, 174). As a result, Kant relegated smell to the "level of brute as opposed to aesthetic sensation" (Stoller 1989, 8).

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Classen *et al*. 1994). The authors highlight that philosophers and scientists of that period appraised sight as the "pre-eminent sense of reason and civilisation, [while] smell was the sense of madness and savagery" (1994, 4; see also, Vroon 1994, 4-11). Similar observations have also been put forward earlier by Starbuck who rationalises that sight and hearing avail themselves to "readier introspection" as they, by virtue of being "describable", are hence more "convenient as…mechanism[s] of discourse" (1921, 130). In tandem, Howes observes that the senses of sight and hearing have always been traditionally associated with "civilised behaviour" and "intellectual activity" in European culture, while the three remaining senses of taste, touch and smell are often comprehended vis-à-vis "animality" (2003, 4-5). Similarly, Marx[6] ranked touch, taste and smell as "primitive" senses in comparison to the more "civilised" senses of hearing and sight (Howes 2003, 230).[7]

[6] Inspired by the materialist philosopher Ludwid Feuerbach who proposes that "Man, too, is given to himself only through the senses" (1966, 58), Marx proclaims similarly that "Man is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with *all* his senses" (1959, 108, emphasis in original). This stance is a pronounced departure from the Western tradition ranging from Plato to Hegel (Synnott 1991b). Where Hegel ranked the senses as survival mechanisms and as means of communication, Marx frames the senses in relation to the animalisation of the proletariat, arguing that the proletariat worker is stripped of all of his senses in the capitalist system (Howes 2003; Synnott 1991b). The worker, Marx remarks, constantly has his senses negated through a sensorially injurious working environment filled with "artificial elevation of temperature", a "dust-laden atmosphere", "deafening noise", and the threat of limbic accidents in the face of "the thickly crowded machinery" (1954, 401-402). See Howes (2003, 229-234) for a further discussion on the absence of sensory concerns in Marx's later works.

[7] In his interpretation of the prominence of sight in sensory history, Smith points out that the great divide theory-which posits that vision dominated Western thinking while the other senses of taste, touch and smell were sidelined-does not necessarily mean a uniform emphasis placed on sight across society. Instead, the importance placed upon sight was, during the Renaissance, more applicable to that of the elite class (see also, Classen 1993). In lieu of this, Smith is cautious about sensory scholarship which merely point towards the imperialism of sight without paying further attention to how such prominence might have been compromised by sight employed alongside the other senses, or whether indeed, sight has been appraised uniformly (see Smith 2007, 32-34).

Additionally, not only smell has been diminished in modern Western culture, but also, in olfactory symbolism[8] (Classen 1993). It is pertinent to note, however, that despite the hierarchy of the senses (where smell stood ambivalent or less important than some of the other senses), everyday life encounters do not adhere to any fixed sensory hierarchy (Jenner 2000). Jenner takes issue with the postulation of olfactory decline as inversely proportional to the importance placed on the other senses such as our visual abilities. He argues that such a way of reasoning may be problematic, as it is not logical that placing attention on one faculty engenders a decline in another (2000, 143). Jenner contends that "framing research in terms of whether there was a fundamental sensory transformation…seems an unhelpfully crude way of approaching the cultural history of the senses and of scents" (2000, 138). Instead of getting too carried away with "grand evolutionary narratives" (where sight assumes its hegemonic position), or attempting to understand smell as a low ranking and unimportant sense, Jenner suggests we should channel our attention towards exploring the cultural meanings of particular odours in specific locations or within particular discourses and contexts. By doing so, we will come to understand the ways in which smells are ordered by and shape cultures, thereby gaining an awareness of the extent to which sensory modalities affect and influence our everyday life experiences.

Jenner's proposal proves fruitful in sensory scholarship of different societies such as the Ongee of the Andaman island (Pandya 1993),[9] the Tuareg of Niger, West Africa (Rasmussen 1999),[10] the Dassanetch of

[8] For example, previously pertinent religious concepts such as the odour of sanctity or the stench of sin are now merely regarded as "quaint expressions of a more credulous age" (Classen 1993, 15).

[9] Among the Ongee who live on the Andaman island in the Bay of Bengal, smell is a central faculty which determines personal identity, communal life, and the Ongee cosmos (Pandya 1993). The Ongee cosmology incorporates movement, wind, humans and spirits with smell as a crucial intermediary. Within the Ongee world-view, power relations are symbolised and articulated through *kwayabe* ("smell"). Symbolic actions of gaining power through *talabuka* ("conjunction") or *malabuka* ("coincidence") are mediated by smell as a central medium (Pandya 1993, xiii). In addition, Pandya posits that smell and winds are interconnective, bringing about changing situations for Ongee hunters and gatherers. In this respect, he argues that "the concern to affect smell and the winds forms the basis for determining the outcome of the interaction between the spirits and the Ongees" (1993, xxi).

[10] Similar to Pandya's ethnographic study of the Ongees (1993), Rasmussen's research on the Tuareg of Niger, West Africa, shows how the Tuareg "aromascape" indicates scent as a central ingredient in Tuareg culture and sociability (1999). She highlights that scents play evocative roles in both human-

Southwest Ethiopia (Almagor 1987),[11] and the Anlo-Ewe of West Africa

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to-human and human-to-spirit communication. For instance, aroma is employed as a medium of communication concerning moral uprightness, where perfumes are utilised strategically towards enforcing shame and restraint. At the same time, perfumes are also important means of dispelling disease and malevolent spirits. At Tuareg weddings and name-days for example, incense is used to protect individuals from jealous spirits which are thought to manifest during important rituals of transition such as healing rites and rites of passage (Rasmussen 1999, 64). Throughout the eight-day wedding ritual, female relatives of the bride burn incense in a bid to keep evil spirits at bay. Wedding attendees are also offered the same type of incense in order to protect themselves from supernatural harm during this transitory period. In all, Rasmussen proposes that ethnographic attention ought to include emphases on sensorial experiences, where an "olfactory-minded anthropology" (having moved away from visual bias) exemplified in the case of the Tuareg demonstrates how aroma sheds light on boundary definition, re-definition and indeterminacy.

[11] Almagor asserts that among the Dassanetch, "smells have meaning on economic, social, and cosmological levels" where they serve as modes of "classifying the natural and social universe" (1987, 107). He analyses interaction between fishermen and pastoralists in Dassanetch society, and claims that hierarchical relationships between these two groups can be deduced from analysing olfaction. He elaborates on this contention by discussing notions of inclusion and exclusion in the exchange relations between the two groups as a central theme of his work, contending that smell is a fundamental element which serves many functions, understood in the following ways: (1) as a device for stereotyping people; (2) representing oppositions through "positive" and "negative" pole-categorisation; (3) meaning attribution associated with particular smells based on specific contexts; (4) demarcating processes and divisions in society and nature; and (5) as symbols of cyclic processes in culture and nature (1987, 108-109). A Dassanetch's personal identity, Almagor suggests, is expressed through two intrinsic elements of bodily smells and bodily decorations. Pastoralists decorate themselves with cattle hides and bones, and hence smell like cattle. They would also come in touch with livestock bodily wastes, such as washing their hands in cattle urine, or smearing manure on men's bodies. In all, smells associated with cattle are regarded as good, for cattle is perceived as a divine gift, embodying three important spheres of subsistence, values in rituals, and social relations through transactions (1987, 110). Where cattle smells possess positive connotations, the pastoralists believe that fish are antithetical to cattle (as they are regarded as a threat to cattle, such as endangering the fertility of one's herd), hence fishermen are referred to as *den fedudukha* ("stinking")(ibid.). The fishermen, according to Almagor, are aware of the unpleasantness of fish smells to pastoralists. However, fishermen would not admit that they stink, especially when smell stands as an expression of one's identity – be it as an individual, or as a group (1987, 115). The fishermen are also cognisant that fish smells emanating from their bodies and clothes may indeed

(Geurts 2005)[12]. These societies regard and use the senses in various ways, thereby availing a critique of the imperialism of vision. In other words, sensorial practices and beliefs of these societies elucidate the notion that the senses do not always work within Western models in such a way where the senses of sight and hearing tend to be regarded as the dominant and rational faculties (Classen 2005).[13] These studies, by illustrating the

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pose a threat to cattle fertility (ibid.). Overall, Almagor proposes that the polluting smells of fish and fishermen relegate them to a position of "inferiors" while the pastoralists assume a "superior" position (1987, 118).

[12] Geurts criticises Western academic psychologists for neglecting studies of psychologies, or "ethno-psychologies" (2005, 165) other than their own. She found that the sensory framework of the Anlo-Ewe could not be sufficiently comprehended using the typical five-senses model. Instead, Geurts describes how Anlo people locate their own bodies and those around them through a combination of both internal and external senses, known as *seselelame* ("perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside", or comprising both emotion and sense perception)(ibid.). In a bid to evaluate the lack of cross-cultural research or comparative studies in the field of psychology, Geurts takes the case of *seselelame* in Anlo society and compares it with Antonio Damasio's theories on consciousness and the self. She argues that where Damasio's theory of consciousness centers on the individual as subject, *seselelame* is "intersubjective, phenomenological and processual" in itself (2005, 166). Additionally, an interplay of the senses for the Anlo is seen in Geurts's example concerning the link between hearing and smelling. She observes that hearing ("*nusese*") and smelling ("*nuvevese*") are intimately linked, as Anlo people are accustomed to saying things like *Mese detsi la fe veve*, loosely translated as "I hear the soup's aroma" (2005, 169). In this manner, hearing and smelling are not merely located as experiences of the ear or nose. Rather, they represent "affairs of the whole body" and point towards *seselelame*, an interplay of the senses (ibid.). *Seselelame*, as Geurts suggests, is better understood vis-à-vis what Csordas terms "somatic modes of attention", referring to the ways by which one attends to his or her own body, while at the same time, incorporates the "embodied presence of others" (see Csordas 1993).

[13] Classen argues through the examples of the Tzotzil of Mexico, the Desana of the Amazonian rainforest, and the Ongee of the Bay of Bengal, that visual or auditory models proffered by western scholarship cannot fully encompass the starkly different sensorial cosmologies of each of these societies (2005). In Tzotzil cosmology, for instance, thermal symbolism is omnipresent. Apart from heat which is emphasised in Tzotzil rituals, the other senses of smell, sight and hearing are also incorporated (2005, 150). Therefore, thermal symbolism operates in relation to a multi-sensory symbolic system. Among the Ongee, on the other hand, olfaction underlies all sensory processes. The sense of smell and touch are unified in the Ongee sensory model, where sites of tactility–hardness, coldness, and heaviness–are intertwined with odour retention. Additionally, the senses are also demarcated into two spheres of spirits and humans, and humans alone. Sight and

central role of scents (and other senses apart from sight and hearing) in day-to-day experiences, draw forth two important vectors. First, an imperative departure from Western sensorial models–where sight triumphs–shows up the equally if not more important yet neglected roles of the other senses such as smell in people's comprehension and negotiation of everyday life encounters ranging from healing practices, rites of passages, to sociability, economic engagement and character assessment. Examples raised here demonstrate that societies are not always sight-oriented. Second, Geurts' piece on the sensory arrangement of the Anlo also indicates that sensorial logic and behaviour cannot be framed nor understood using the typical five-senses model. Instead, we should be reminded that the senses do operate in manifold ways, depending on contrasting temporal, spatial and cultural contexts. Hence, a reconfiguration of sensorial epistemologies avails more informed nuances of how sociocultural research on the senses bear the responsibility of locating sensory practices within the context of which they are carried out–what Almagor terms "sense of reference" (1987, 109)–thereby placing pertinent emphases on embodied experiences of different individuals and groups within the cultural contexts of which they form a part.

'Doing' Smell in Singapore – Research Trajectory and Research Questions

In order to exemplify how social actors employ smell as a social medium in their everyday life experiences (in particular, their perceptions of various groups of people, as well as presentation of self), I present primary empirical data collected in Singapore, alongside analyses of secondary data comprising variegated "social texts" such as scholarly studies, newspaper articles, and ministerial reports. When I first mooted the idea of researching on smell, some colleagues teased me by asking:

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hearing are associated with humans, while smell, taste and touch are believed to be shared by both spirits and humans (Pandya, quoted in Classen 2005, 156). Finally, colour symbolism dominates Desana society, where individual colours connote different values – for instance, red signifies female fertility, while green denotes growth (Classen 2005, 157; see also, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978). Essentially, Classen advocates that conventional Western perceptual models are not relevant towards comprehending different sensory symbolism adopted in societies such as these three examples indicate. More importantly, sensory diversity and symbolism should be studied in the universe and cosmology of which they originate, than for one to revert to standard Western models as default frameworks for sensorial interpretation and analysis.

"So are you gonna go around smelling people?" Smell as a focal point for social science research typically ends up being treated as a derisory or frivolous topic unworthy of investigation, deemed as either "non-conventional", not "mainstream", or, in Howes' words, "antithetical to intellectual investigation" (2003, xii; see also, Rasmussen 1999, 57). In response to the whimsical question, however, I highlight that it is not my intention to (physically) stick my nose around people. Instead of merely investigating how people would react to smells that they pick up physically (or in this case, what smells I was presumably going to pick up), I explore further the various symbolic associations and meanings that people impute as they perceive or imagine smells emanating from other groups of people who do not come from the same ethnic or racial, class and gender backgrounds. The present study is guided by the perspective of "sociological miniaturism" (Stolte *et al*. 2001), where I propose that by examining the role and significance of smell in everyday life experiences, we are then able to locate the "reverberations of the micro-features of everyday life on social structure" (ibid.), providing an insight on how the taken-for-granted aspects of lived experiences fit into the larger social order.

The process of using smell as a social intermediary in which one makes sense of and casts "judgments" upon other people is in line with Rodaway's (1994) highlighting of the dual use of the term "sense". He offers that "sense" contains a crucial duality which could be interpreted firstly as "making sense…[as referring] to order and understanding", and secondly, as "sense, or the senses, [referring] to the specific sense modes [of] touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing and the sense of balance" (1994, 5). He furthers this duality by contending:

> These two aspects are closely related and often implied by each other. The sense(s) is (are) both a reaching out to the world as a source of information and an understanding of that world so gathered. This sensuous experience and understanding is grounded in previous experience and expectation, each dependent on sensual and sensory capacities and educational training and cultural conditioning. (ibid.)

In this respect, the notion of "perception" runs in tandem, where it serves both as a process of the "reception of information through the sense organs", as well as a provision of a "mental insight, or a sense of a range of sensory information, with *memories and expectations*" (Rodaway 1994, 10, emphasis mine). A similar proposition is also raised by Howes who notes that the word *sense* connotes both perception and meaning. In other

words, "to sense and to make sense may be one and the same" (2003, 51; see also, Tuan 1974).

Following these interpretations of *sense* in both physiological and sociocultural terms, I argue that smell functions as a social medium employed by social actors towards formulating constructions and judgments of race-d, class-ed and gender-ed others, operating on polemic categories (and also, other nuances between polarities) which may involve a moral process of *othering*. By othering, I mean that in smelling and perceiving the other's odour, an individual defines the self through a difference in smell, and also negates the other as the not-I (Borthwick 2000, 134). *Videlicet*, the differentiation of smell involves not only an identification of "us" versus "them" or "you" versus "me", but also includes processes of judgment and ranking of social others. By the process of moralising, I contend that social actors incorporate smell as a pertinent component in moral reproductions of social realities. These reproductions constitute judgments that may be prejudicially projected, based on one's past experiences and expectations where smell could be utilised as a mechanism in stereotyping social *others* based on race, class and gender categories. In this manner, the processes of smell employed towards one's understanding and reading of social others run in tandem with Rodaway's notion of perception, involving both memories and expectations. In lieu of that, it would be imperative to explore how smell (apart from the other senses or other factors for that matter) could function as a social tool by means of which we formulate ideas of, and presume to understand people around us.

I also explore how smell can be used to demonstrate the dialectical link between the body as "self" and the body as "social" (Shilling 1993), by looking at how social actors stress the constant need to smell "nice" and therefore be rendered "acceptable" before social interaction can take place. Here, I cull from Goffman's concepts of behaviour in social interactions (1956, 1963a, 1963b, 1971) to exemplify the idea that bodies "are the property of individuals, yet are defined as significant and meaningful by society" (Shilling 1993, 82). In sum, the present study therefore asks: (1) What are the ways by which social actors would react to smells that they pick up and/or imagine from other people and places? (2) What social meanings are then associated with such perceived and emanated odours, found within specific sociocultural contexts? (3) What social functions and/or dysfunctions do such meanings fulfill? (4) How is smell important for the individual and social groups? How does smell bring about attitudes and practices of inclusion and exclusion by way of socially demarcating "us" versus "them"? (5) How are smells regulated and controlled in

modernity and postmodernity, and what would these forms of control and management imply about smell and civilisation?[14] In exploring these olfactive problematics, I hope to demonstrate that smells do possess a significant bearing upon human interaction, leading us towards more incorporative social science research by paying much needed attention on sensorial-bodily experiences.

Having laid out the premises of this study, I suspect, one may argue that by focusing merely on smell to a possible exclusion of the other senses, I would have been culpable of sensory bias, and that the roles of smells in everyday life experiences can only be (more sufficiently) understood within the context of multi-sensorial social realities. To allay this probable concern, I draw inspiration from Classen *et al* (1994, 9-10) who assert:

> [H]istorians, anthropologists and sociologists have long excluded odour from their accounts and concentrated on the visual and the auditory, without being accused of any sensory biases. The argument, must, therefore, be turned around…By demonstrating the importance of odour and olfactory codes…[one can then] bring smell out of the Western scholarly and cultural unconscious into the open air of social and intellectual discourse, [for] it is only when a form of sensory equilibrium has been recovered, that we may begin to understand how the senses interact with each other as models of perception and paradigms of culture.

The selection of the olfactory as an entry point in this study, therefore, is necessitated as analyses of all senses cannot be fully addressed in its entirety within the scope of this project. This book thereby places a moratorium on the role of the other senses, unless otherwise relevant, as will be demonstrated. While I agree with Rodaway that the senses in reality "operate together in many possible combinations" (1994, 36), I discuss smell as an analytically distinct sense, allying myself with scholars such as Drobnick who chooses to operate on the notion of "olfactocentrism"[15] (2006a). By focusing on the sense of smell and concurrently considering the simultaneous workings of the other senses (to be addressed in a later chapter) briefly, I thereby delimit the boundaries of empirical concern to consider how research on smell have emerged and developed through the dimensions of, *inter alia*, history, science,

[14] These questions are inspired by and expanded from those raised by Largey and Watson (1972).

[15] Drobnick coins the term "olfactocentrism" as a response to the predominance of visuality, arguing that isolating the olfactive sense does contain strategic value, gleaned from his edited anthology on smells (2006a).

sociology and anthropology. Though smell may be the focal point of this study (for heuristic reasons of contextual analyses and to tease out theoretical implications), I offer a "sensorial intersection" at the end of the study to consider the importance of sociocultural analyses of the senses. Essentially, the principal focus of this book lies in *both* odours themselves, and how people *think* about odours, i.e. the metaphorical and symbolic associations and meanings of smells that people impute. Through the examination of the routine, the unexamined, and the commonplace, I hope to gain some insight into how the quotidian fits into the larger social order.

Olfactive Trajectories

While the present chapter has laid out various scent-sual deliberations– the ubiquity of smell in everyday life experiences in both historical and contemporary milieus, olfactive-classificatory problematics, smell in the hierarchy of the sensorium, as well as having spelt out reasons (in brief) for embarking on this study–the succeeding chapter provides an insight into how smell functions in different societies by situating olfactory inquiries beyond physiological and biopsychological paradigms in order to further understand the role of smell in our day-to-day realities. This is accomplished by traversing the various select fields in which smell is explored and discussed (*viz.* history, anthropology, geography, religion, gender studies, sociospatial analyses, among others). The purpose of the next chapter is threefold–first, to deliberate upon the olfactory and/as the social by locating the variegated ways in which smells play different roles and meanings in social life; second, to interrogate structuralist approaches employed in these studies, where I argue that polemic constructions premised upon smells and odours (for example, "clean" versus "dirty", "good" and "evil", or "self" versus "other") remain insufficient in the treatment and analyses of olfaction, as this mode of conceptualising smells harbours the assumption that polarities are necessarily self-contained with no range nor nuances in between them. Besides, the formation of bi-polarities, as I shall argue, are more often than not infused with moral judgements placed upon others, intertwined with stereotypical notions and hierarchising of social others. There is thus a need to delve more critically into how such dichotomies are formed, the manifold processes involved, as well as the attendant results of both social inclusion and exclusion. Third, chapter 2 also illustrates a lacuna in extant studies on olfaction. I contend that existing works on smells–comprising sociohistories, social meanings and associations linked to olfaction–have often predicated their

analyses either on "Western"[16] societies or non-industrial societies exemplified through anthropological endeavours in places such as Brazil (Seeger 1981), Ethiopia (Almagor 1987), Nigeria (van Beek 1992), the Andaman islands (Pandya 1993), and elsewhere. With a few exceptions, the "smell cultures" of Southeast Asia have received scant attention from scholars in the past few decades.[17] Additionally, current studies on smell seem to demonstrate that smell stands either historically relevant in the case of the "West", or as an interesting medium for social science research in non-industrial communities as iterated. Contrarily, I propose that smell is equally, if not more germane in the context of Singapore – a modern, industrialised, multiracial society in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 3 provides an account of the methods that were employed throughout the course of research, as well as a rethinking and critique of extant theoretical trajectories and their implications in order to deliberate upon the research questions posed above. The study is framed under a sociology of the everyday life, where components of this field comprise that of Schutzian phenomenological sociology (1970), Goffmanian interaction order (1956, 1963a, 1963b etc), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), and social constructionism, executed with various *modus operandi* such as narrative interviews, breaching experiments, and participant observation. In addition, this brief chapter is meant to illustrate possibilities where social science research on smells (and the other senses) can be carried out through the use of similar approaches by referring to other works on the senses. I find this important as most studies often rely on secondary data where there appears a lack of methodological discussions as to how one can conduct research on the senses. I include discussions on the methods employed by other scholars (for example, Gillies *et al*. 2004; Pink 2004, 2006; Stoller 1989, 1997, 2004) working on the senses in order to highlight the importance of re-embodying qualitative research by paying attention to embodied ways of knowing and of collecting sensory data. I also address in cursorily, debates concerning linguistic representation of sensory experiences.

Chapter 4 looks at the role of smell in relation to individuals and personhood, arguing that individuals manage their bodies before, during and after social interaction where smell figures prominently in presenting one's "social self". Analyses framed within corporeal sociology will allude

[16] I use the term "Western" not in a divisive, perojative sense, but rather, in a descriptive and nominative manner.

[17] Beyond the region of Southeast Asia, Geaney's work ruminates upon sensory epistemology in early Chinese thought based on her analyses of Chinese philosophical classics dating between the fifth and the third century B.C.E. (2002).

to Goffman's concept of the presentation of the self (1956), bringing in notions of impression (mis)management, spoiled identities and stigma (1963b). To elaborate upon different dimensions of olfaction and personhood, I include a section on the experiences of anosmic individuals. I discuss the ways in which one's lack of the sense of smell affects everyday life routines, as well as how some social actors perceive anosmia to be a form of handicap. In this respect, the role of smell in social life undergoes a different assessment, where I demonstrate how olfactorily-impaired people go about their day-to-day living, how they cope without smelling, as well as analyse their perceptions of self, and how they are regarded by others. I also expound upon the various ways by which anosmia is constructed as a "disorder" or "condition" by analysing both biomedical discourse as well as respondents' olfactive narrations.

Chapter 5 offers further olfactive deliberations by analysing the associations between smells and different groupings of social actors running along dimensions of race, class and gender. The link between the olfactory and social memberships arising from these three categories will be invoked not only in terms of physical bodies, but will also involve a consideration of "smellscapes" in Singapore, otherwise known as "racial enclaves". The racial constructs of "Chinese", "Malay", "Indian" and "Others" will be deliberated upon to demonstrate how social actors inherit this racial paradigm set out by the multi-racial society of Singapore in perceiving and judging social others through the sense of smell, and also, how the dichotomies of "us" versus "them", "citizens" versus "foreigners" are illuminated with smell as a social conduit.

Chapter 6 provides an interpretation of olfaction at a macro-socio level vis-à-vis historical and contemporary contexts, drawing forth the links between smell, modernity and postmodernity, smell and the rise of civilisation, as well as smell in tandem with categories of "infection", "dirt" and "disgust", to explain how repression of smell arose, and how far we have progressed from thereon. This involves an appraisal of both historical and modern-day accounts such as those by Corbin (1986), Elias [1978](2000), George (2000), and Rae and Low (2003). The concluding chapter offers a summation of the main findings of the study and reiterates the importance of smell and thereby the senses in our everyday life experiences. The book concludes by addressing the issue of sensorial intersection in order to reflect upon how our senses can and do combine in furthering our understanding of social life and of varied cultures and social realities as constructed and perpetuated by social actors.

CHAPTER TWO

WORLDS OF SMELLS

> …people could close their eyes to greatness, to horrors, to beauty, and their ears to melodies or deceiving words. But they could not escape scent. For scent was a brother to breath. Together with breath it entered human beings, who could not defend themselves against it, not if they wanted to live. And scent enters into their very core, went directly to their hearts, and decided for good and all between affection and contempt, disgust and lust, love and hate.
> —Patrick Süskind (1986)

Most scholarly research on smell, understandably, has been of a physical scientific nature. Significant advances have been made in the understanding of the biological and chemical nature of olfaction such as Wright's (1982) *The Sense of Smell*, Bell and Watson's (1999) *Tastes and Aromas: The Chemical Senses in Science and Industry*, and Martin and Laffort's (1994) *Odours and Deodorisation in the Environment*, among others. Psychology has also addressed olfaction. Various experiments have been carried out in an attempt to find out the effects of odours on the performance of tasks, on mood, on dieting, and so on (Classen *et al*. 1994; see also, Toller and Dodd 1992).

Moving beyond scientific boundaries, scholarship on the sense of smell have developed and broadened over the past few decades (Smith 1989). Studied historically, smell has been documented in such works as Ackerman's (1990) *A Natural History of the Senses*, Classen *et al*.'s (1994) *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, and Corbin's (1986) *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination*, to name a few. Ackerman, for instance, offers a vivid typology of the five senses, arguing that our senses span not only distance, space or cultures, but time[1] as well.

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[1] Ackerman contends that our senses aid in connecting us to the past, citing examples such as reading ancient Roman poet Propertius' works. Propertius often penned details about the sexual response of his ladyfriend Hostia. These works, according to Ackerman, help us realise how "little dalliance has changed since 20

She concludes by considering an amalgamation of the five senses into what is termed as *synaesthesia*, an intermingling of the senses. Corbin, on the other hand, puts smell on the historical map by situating his work in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century France[2], integrating a wide range of disciplines that includes the histories of science and of medicine, psychohistory, urban studies and public health. He demonstrates how olfactory interest and vigilance in the public arenas and larger environment arose in a specific milieu, championed by doctors, chemists and reformist campaigners. In short, Corbin is interested in the various evaluative schemas and symbolic systems concerning olfaction.

One notable work on the role of olfaction in diverse cultures is Howes' (1991) *Olfaction and Transition*, where he posits a connection between smell and transition, involving "category change". This postulation is exemplified by Howes' ethnographic illustration of rituals practiced among groups such as the Malagasy of the Isle of Mayotte, and the Dakota of the Western Plains of North America. Before Malagasy virgin girls consummate their marriages, and before Malagasy boys undergo circumcision, both are compelled to inhale smoke rising from a pot of burning seaweed, lemon and kapok seeds, coconut oil, and other substances, remaining under a blanket throughout the entire process. This fumigation procedure (cf. Aubaile-Sallenave 2006) may be comprehended as effecting a transition from boyhood to manhood and girlhood to womanhood.[3]

As a corollary to the connection between olfaction and "category" as discussed above, Synnott (1991a) and Classen (1993) both address the issue of how olfactory symbolism is used to express concepts of "oneness" and "otherness", where smell contributes towards the production of bipolarities such as the evil odours of evil spirits versus the good odours of good spirits, or how men smell stronger, while women "should" smell sweet and gentle. Additionally, the "ascription of different olfactory characteristics to different races and different social groups is a universal trait, one that contains certain empirical basis, for body odours can differ among racial groups, due partly to the different foods consumed and partly

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B.C.", and that Hostia's "delicate and quaint little 'places' are as attractive and responsive as a modern woman's" (1990, xvi).

[2] Gray (2006) suggests that Patrick Süskind's *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (1986) was inspired by Corbin's study of smell and the French social imagination, and contends that *Perfume* forms a "critical *histoire des mentalités* of Enlightenment culture" (2006, 236).

[3] The fumigation is also carried out by the Malagasy in order to protect the initiates from epileptic attacks (Howes 1991).

to genetic factors" (Classen 1993, 79). Furthermore, dichotomous polarities of different groups of people based on smell only serve to stir up certain antipathies towards the "other". For "the good is fragrant and the fragrant is good…[whereas] what smells bad is bad, and what is bad smells bad" (Synnott 1991a, 445).

Such polemic constructions premised upon smells and odours are also found in other social fields such as religious and supernatural discourses (Classen 2006; see also, Hume 2007; Tokarska-Bakir 2000). Historically, in Turkey, foul smells emitting from the body or the mouth were deemed sinful or shameful, especially on Fridays when one goes to the mosque. In order to conceal the odours of smelly feet and shoes, herbs or flowers were used (Tansuğ *et al*. 2005: 252). In Christianity[4], there exists what is commonly referred to as the "odour of sanctity" (Classen *et al*. 1994, 52; see also, Harvey 2006). This concept is linked to the idea that classical deities frequently made their presence known through fragrance, and that the presence of the Holy Spirit was thought by Christians to be signaled through the means of a mystical fragrance[5] as well (ibid.). [6] Simultaneously, the "odour of sanctity stood antithetical to the stench of moral corruption". Furthermore, fourteenth century theologian John Wycliffe asserted that "some men are good smelling while others are stinking to God" (ibid.). Nielsen (1986) notes that in Egypt, incense was an important item used to purify a dead king against odours escaping from his corpse, as well as to shield him from evil. Similar to the "odour of sanctity", Nielsen writes that incense was also employed to establish contact with the gods, where the belief was that gods would be present in the smoke of the incense. In all, Hume puts it rightly:

> Divinity was characterised by sweet scents, and fragrances of extraordinary beauty revealed divine presence. God was understood to pour forth the powerful aroma of divinity, the rich perfume signifying holy presence and blessing upon the faithful. (2007, 107).

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[4] Rindisbacher notes that in Christian olfactory symbolism, "a simple binary division exists with good smells…associated with goodness, if not saintless, [and] bad smells with moral corruption and the devil" (1995, 132-33).

[5] This scent is similar to fragrant ambrosia, where it was believed that apart from making their presence known through fragrance, deities also conferred aspects of their divinity onto mortals through the gift of fragrant ambrosia (Classen *et al*. 1994, 52).

[6] There is, however, evidence to suggest that incense and perfume were rejected in early Christianity given their associations with pleasure and indolence (see Classen 1993; Smith 2007). It is therefore important to note that the meanings placed upon smells in Christianity underwent reconstitution over time (see also, Caseau 1999).

In supernatural discourses, evil spirits are believed to emit "evil" smells across many cultures, while good spirits emit "good" smells (Classen 1993). To illustrate this good/evil divide, Classen cites the example of the Bororo of Brazil. She notes that odour is used as a classificatory medium for two basic types of spirits by the Bororo. The *bope*, a spirit perceived negatively, is believed to give off a strong stench. Conversely, the *aroe*, a spirit regarded positively, is said to possess a sweet smell (1993, 94). Polar opposites of "good" versus "evil" have also been observed in some legends and myths. Dorland cites a legend originating from the aborigines of Hyderabad, India:

> A legend related by the aborigines of Hyderabad, India concerned the Corn Queen who, under dire circumstances, transformed herself into a variety of fragrant plants. When she was drowned by a conniving maid-servant who attempted to assume her identity, the Corn Queen's spirit changed into a rose, saturating the surroundings with a beautiful aroma. [Subsequently], a whole garden of sweet smelling flowers [emerged]. When the [maid-servant's] evil deed was discovered her punishment was to be buried alive, and ugly weeds and pungent smelling chilli plants grew where her body was buried. (1993, 161)

As a corollary to the notion of negativity and foul smells, Hume notes the Christian idea of pits of hell, where the smell of sulphur typically signals the presence of the devil. The suggestion here, with regard to sulphuric smells similar to that of rotten eggs, frames the association of bad odours with "rotting flesh, disease and death" (2007, 110). Similar notions relating foulness to harmfulness can be discerned in Classen *et al*.'s example of how Muslims from the United Arab Emirates possess the belief that a dirty and smelly body is susceptible to evil. Conversely, then, a scented person would be surrounded by angels (1994, 130).

Bifurcatory constructs of odours can also be found in the domain of gender. "Men are supposed to smell of sweat, whisky and tobacco… [while] women, presumably, are supposed to smell 'good': clean, pure, and attractive" (Synnott 1991a, 449). Gender differentiation of this nature appears to be perpetuated by the names and typography of perfumes and colognes (Bigelow 1992). In general, the names seem to express not only different but almost opposite polarities of self-concepts for the opposite