Introduction

Pecunia non Olet

Although understood during previous centuries through popular and folk traditions that allocated the plagues of the Early Modern Era to possible pestilence from vapors, the foremost English academic treatment of what came to be called miasma theory appeared within Robert Boyle’s *Suspicions about the Hidden Realities of the Air* (1674).\(^1\) Although centrally about overturning the idea that air was benign within chemical reactions, Boyle’s Royal Society text described how objects that decayed into “effluvium” caused diseases that penetrated the defenses of the human body through the nasal passages. For Boyle and his cohort of early modern scientists, miasma often meant odor, and the detection of pungency signified the existence of disease within the environment. Deriving from humoral traditions of medical diagnosis that linked the nose directly to vulnerable parts of the brain, miasma theory articulated that objects created pungent smells that denoted the menace of infection.\(^2\)

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2 For the general application of miasma theory to early modern religious conceptions that “all things that smell evil, are evil,” see Piero Camporesi, *The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
To control overpowering scented objects that caused sickness within early modern bodies, Boyle and the Royal Society consequently engaged the sense of sight to analyze substances of decay at more minute spaces for bodily governance.³ Following fresh understandings of cleanliness, miasma theory, and godliness related to concerns over the invasions of poor airs, the English polymath Thomas Tryon presented extended discourses on the philosophy of the five senses for early modern readers that portrayed the senses as similarly engaged within philosophical combat.⁴ In his Letters upon Several Occasions (1700), Tryon submitted various dialogues about the traits of individual senses and their particular roles for protecting English bodies from the increasing threats of the outside world, implicitly affording standards of worth and proper comportment for each individual sense.⁵ To become a proper Englishperson, sensory routinization and

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the education of particular sensory skills became necessary as protections from both the invasion of bad airs and the increasingly probing nature of fresh worldly encounters arriving to English ports. For smelling, as within the works of botanist and physician John Floyer during coterminous decades, Tryon taught Englishpersons to cultivate “greater talents” of the sense to avoid the “penetrating” and “stinking Foggs, Scents, and Vapours” that are “extreamly hurtful to the Mind and Body.” Tryon spent more space on smelling than upon the other senses throughout his celebrated letters because, like many early moderns, he understood that the nasal passages remained consistently open to the threats of contaminated, malignant, and lingering airs that affected both the comportment of the body and the functions of the susceptible mind.6

Because of these intense fears of invasion from psychological melancholy and physiological disease caused by zymotic miasmas, night airs, and bad vapors, Europeans consistently understood water as corruptive throughout much of the Early Modern Era. This consistent fear provided even greater impetus for a burgeoning perfume industry due to the unswerving fears of bathing that commonly informed various European discourses.7 Similarly applying the idea of perfumed cleanliness and miasma theory, Richard Mead, Royal Society member and physician to King George II during the early eighteenth century, believed that the use of positive smells would cure the diseased effects of negative odors, through a battle between supposed contagions, perfumes, and curatives.8 The longstanding and persistent eighteenth-


The century understanding of disease and pestilential invasion often focused on these concepts of pungent contamination and deodorization through counteractive and antiseptic smells. Within these considerations, odors essentially indicated disease, usually emanating from rotting animal carcasses and vegetal materials that were deemed to create invasive vapors from decaying objects. These beliefs continued for much of the general population within Europe and North America well into the nineteenth century.

During the Early Modern Era, the senses went to war. Within various discourses, as with the sensory contests fundamental to Thomas Tomkis’s *Lingua, or the Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority* (1607), each of the senses was granted a narrative strength for battling to earn a greater part of the future English and broader Western sensory consciousness. Numerous other plays and prose chronicles allocated support for individual senses regarding the importance of each sense for goals of Christian morality, childhood education, and for gaining social prominence in


the sycophantic salons and courts of high society. The affective power of these narratives led to later bodily alterations in the function of the five-sense hierarchy, which moved smell to a much lower space of importance within Western culture, in part because miasma theory defined that nearly all odors were inherently a threatening signifier of malady, emanating smell signified a lack of morality, and overpowering scents presented a deficiency of social graces.

Numerous scholars have traced this important decline of smell as a marker of a modernity that applied smelling to partly justify ideas of the progressive centralized state, concepts of shame, and social ordering. Within this debate about the need of Western states to remove nearly all smells as a marker of disease to the singular body and the wider body politic, The Smell of Slavery argues that ideas of race became important to define both a lack of civilization within black populations and for more aggressively coding African bodies as the very cause of infection, as

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specifically commodified objects that produced the very miasmas that brought contagion upon creation.\(^\text{15}\)

**DISENCHANTING AROMA**

For the Western racist, historically and structurally, the mental understanding regarding the material reality of the racially marginalized matters little when the body can be educated to feel and sense racial disgust through forms of false sensory consciousness inscribed upon the organs of perception.\(^\text{16}\) The Smell of Slavery explores articulations of the African


body through the changing functions of the European nose, as part of a nasal social construction that was both informally contoured and an important part of formal community developments during the Atlantic Slave Trade. The civilizing process that led to a significant decline of olfactory sensations with the rise of Western modernity emerged through changes within fields of racial embodiment. The foundational reason that the eye became the arbiter of truth within scientific study was because subjective odors threatened many burgeoning English and Western concepts of race, identity, and cultural superiority.  

At its broadest, The Smell of Slavery therefore adds to a growing field of study that focuses on the importance of discourse for the construction of embodied historical experience. Scholars of historical bodies frequently argue that the perceptions of the five senses are culturally constructed. The other, through this understanding of embodiment, enculturation, and


education, is commonly assembled within an ontological space rather than experienced as an objective material reality. Within discourse, these sensory experiences of the body are frequently constructed through language that alters the biological function of the five senses. As well, as a part of certain forms of social conditioning, the odors, tastes, and sounds of the other are perceived not only through the linguistic episteme through which they take meaning but also in traces imprinted upon the body before language articulated those perceptions into words.20

Out of these historiographical fields of body knowledge and discursive analysis emerged the history of the senses, which asserts as a primary marker of the field’s historiography that the ontological breaches caused by the discovery of the New World, the invention of the printing press, changes in religious practice during the Reformation, and the taxonomic desires of the Enlightenment produced an increased separation, streamlining, and reordering of the senses during the Early Modern Era.21 This monograph accesses these discourses on the making of modernity to

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Introduction

discover significant differences between premodern and modern sensory consciousness through proclaiming that odor was decreasingly perceived within European metropoles from the era of Johannes Gutenberg until the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{22} As Western Europe deodorized conceptually and materially, the Atlantic World afforded a space for European consciousness to emplace odors upon new bodies in an ostentatious game of sensory imperialism that combined ecological scents with new forms of literary, medical, and scientific race-making.\textsuperscript{23}

Premodern European sensory worlds are best exemplified through the Catholic mass, which combined sensations to elicit reverence for the material representations of the trinity. In these sensory engagements, the tones of choirs mixed with the aroma of incense to create an immersive sensory experience whereby sounds, smells, tastes, sights, and tactile experiences frequently combined to create a common sensory wonderment that inherently trusted olfaction for greater social application.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{23} Holly Dugan exposed that those in power during the Early Modern Era often used aroma to display olfactory spectacles to amuse the subdued masses. Dugan’s work also embodies a significant aspect of Atlantic history that focuses on material culture and the experience of encountering and expanding new mercantile commodities through the senses. Holly Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). See also Sally Barnes, “Olfactory Performances,” *TDR* 45, 1 (Spring 2001): 68–76.

Because of the propensity of incense and sulfuric hell to understandings of both religion and medicine within premodern worlds, the sense of smell was often seen above the ground as clouds of aroma that portended fragrant spiritual experience and possible malevolent contamination. Consequently, premodern European sensory worlds prized the sense of smell for various medical, environmental, and spiritual procedures, ranging from the use of scented herbs in medicine to the ideal of the odor of sanctity that arose from specifically religious persons.

Indulgent olfactory life was common prior to the Early Modern Era, and the mixing of spiritual worlds with the material environment often came through the beauty of collaborating ecological fragrances with otherworldly admiration. For example, the poetry of botanist Nicholas Breton’s *Smale Handfull of Fragrant Flowers* (1575) proclaimed: “Whom we may see in hande to haue/ this litle branche of Flowres greene./ Which sents and sauours passing well,/ the redyest way to heauen to smell.”

European doctors prior to the Enlightenment, who generally followed the olfactory traditions of Galen that the nose was directly connected to the brain through a hollow tube and thus more...