

Race, Affect, and the Olfactory

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Of the many nagging worries experienced by a newly migrated family—homesickness, financial concerns, work insecurity, cultural disorientation, language barriers, the relentless toll of daily facing anti-immigrant sentiments from the state, the school, the job, and from the micro gestures and outright declarations demanding that you prove your right to arrive, to stay, to exist — surely worrying about how your dinner smells is at the bottom of the list.

But I remember bringing home a friend soon after my family migrated from the Philippines to Canada. I was in grade school and excited that someone wanted to “come over.” We trudged home from school, backpacks in tow, giggling about a boy, eager for a snack. When we opened the door, the house unleashed its thick aromas of savory spices and hot rice. The garlic at the base of every Filipino meal was also in the fabric of jackets by the door and penetrated the pores of linoleum floors wiped clean of dirt but not of smell. An undecipherable expression crossed my friend’s face. In that flicker I understood my unassailable and visceral difference from the world she occupied and I experienced the strangeness of my immigrant existence not from the eyes of my fair-skinned, blue-eyed, good-natured friend, but from her nose.

Many times since then, odors have struck me as a way to calibrate reactions to, and consider visceral experiences of, cultural exchange. This surprises no one whose travels have exposed her to the immediate and powerful aromas of unknown spaces. Put broadly, I'm interested in smells and their relationship to ecologies of affect and, often, their contribution to forming ideas about racial and ethnic identities. But it is worth clarifying that I'm far from interested in the *what* of the olfactory, but rather seek to investigate the *how*. How does the olfactory participate in the construction, reinforcement, policing, and disciplining of difference? How do raced subjects assimilate into the prevalent sensorium of a dominant culture; or, put another way, who feels the pressure to blend in olfactorily, and who doesn't?

The problem of smell as a feature of public presentation and, to an extent, personal identity, is that the seemingly spontaneous reactions to aromas rarely trouble the affects produced by and through these reactions. Asking "what" risks merely conceding assertions of normativity that underwrite the prevailing olfactory hierarchy. That's the problem with aromas. It goes straight to "what is this I'm smelling" rather than pausing to consider how odors coincide with judgements. How does my olfactory impression operate on those who do not smell as they ought, while leaving such categories of appropriateness unquestioned? How do assumptions about personal identities and social ecologies inform my nose's immediate and ostensibly unproblematic conclusions?

Consider the scene of Caliban's encounter with newly shipwrecked Europeans. Stumbling upon Caliban, Trinculo declares: "What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish — a very ancient and fishlike smell, a kind of not-of-the-newest-poor-John. A strange fish" (2.2.24–27). The insult of having an "ancient and fishlike smell" is frequently glossed over as one of the many insults Caliban endures, for it is hardly as harrowing as the verbal and physical abuses of his beleaguered existence. After all, he is called other terrible things that require both attention and context: poisonous, abhorred, lying slave, hag-seed, monster, villain, devil. These denunciations are accompanied by the pinches and cramps that plague him constantly.

Yet the immediacy of Trinculo's statement on stink, and assumptions about hierarchy, difference, and morality it unleashes, has not been studied precisely because it is unremarkable as a companion to Caliban's dehumanization and, in fact, nose-dives to the foregone conclusion of his lack of humanity and his offensiveness to the senses. The accusation of stench is read as a straightforward cue, as in the 2018 Stratford Theatre Festival performance of *The Tempest*, featuring various aquatic-inspired props like a conk shell codpiece and barnacled arms. Since smell is nearly impossible to stage, the maritime costume must serve as ocular proof of Caliban's sub-human status.



2018 Stratford Theatre Festival performance of

An analysis of smell would perhaps supplement this fishy conclusion, yet it remains unchanged that the burden of difference is performed by Caliban's deformed and pungent body. My point is that a historicist, culturally grounded analysis of Caliban's mal-

odorousness would prove valuable, certainly, but it might also inadvertently duplicate the established assumptions that reinforce the conditions and the justifications for his disparagement.

Rather than ask what smell means, I ask: How does it implicate an affective ecology of bodies in relation to each other?

How does *The Tempest's* racial imaginary afford experiences that dehumanize some characters and not others, in the same way that its preoccupation with smell odorizes some bodies and de-odorizes others?

It is no surprise that Ferdinand and Miranda see, but do not smell, each other. Unlike the lower class characters whose bodies and smells are later compromised by their association with Caliban, Miranda's allure is that Caliban's imagined "stink" does not stick to her. She is the embodiment of obedient femininity's ability to represent, and potential to reproduce, white patriarchy anywhere. Part of the fiction that Miranda and Ferdinand's romance mobilizes is that whiteness has no smell.

The first whiff of fish, therefore, hinges on an odorous distinction that determines something so dissimilar to one's self, so pungent to one's senses, as to constitute a different species altogether. But it is not simply about "smelling different." Trinculo does not say "What have we here, something that smells not like me." The distinction is not a matter of relativism, but an absolute certainty of the Trinculo's authority over the creature whose smell triggers disgust and commodification simultaneously.

Rather than ask what smell means, I ask: how does odor support the operations of the dominant ideology?

Odor normalizes a position of power — the one who smells and assigns the judgement of stink also determines the price. The European exercises an unquestioned advantage over the native: assessing the odor based on his own cultural reference (not of the newest poor john / strange), evaluating the vileness and the value of that smell, and, ultimately, determining who is subject to that evaluation.

The asymmetrical nature of this encounter is both reinforced yet literally made unseen — the easily ignored statement occurs when Caliban's form is hidden. But in that moment, the declaration of stench presumes an olfactory organization that establishes the social inferiority of those emitting scents judged as unpleasant or offensive. But this judgement is exactly what goes unexamined. So entrenched is hierarchy in the normalization of the olfactory that statements about odor hardly register as tools for coercion and discipline.

By deploying smell in the punishment of those who threaten the status quo, *The Tempest* highlights the ways in which the regulation of the sensorium overlaps with the enforcement of power and the construction of identity. The hapless trio follow the basest sensory impressions rather than rely on sovereign reason, according to Ariel's report:

Then I beat my tabor
At which like unbacked colts they pricked their ears,
Advanced their eyelids, lifted up their noses
As they *smelt* music; I charmed their ears
That calf-like they my lowing followed, through
Tooth briars, sharp furzes, pricking gorse and thorns,
Which entered their frail shins. At last I left them
I'th' filthy-mantled pool beyond your cell,
There dancing up th'chins, that the foul lake
O'erstunk their feet" (4.1.175–184)

“Sharp” and “pricking” objects penetrate “frail shins.” Their bodies are vulnerable in precisely the way Caliban has endured under Prospero's reign: skin is marked on and picked through. They suffer physically with fatigue and lacerations while undergoing the humiliation of lowing and dancing in the roughest of landscapes. Ariel deploys the island's resources to punish and mark the schemers, culminating the reprimand with a marination in foulness. Indeed, the most enduring aspect of their penalty is an overabundant stench.

Rather than ask what smell means, I ask: how does its operation reflect and reinforce the interests of those in a position to assign and judge value?

Beyond degradation and discomfort, smell prompts self-disgust. Trinculo complains that “Monster, I do smell all horse piss, at which my nose is in great *indignation*.” (4.1.199–200). This is often performed with the character smelling himself — declaring that *he* is the one who reeks. Trinculo's subject position has shifted from the one who smells Caliban to the one who carries the whiff of piss.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, indignation is a reaction to perceived worth. It is “The action of counting or treating (a person or thing) as unworthy of regard.” In this scene, indignation is the result of a punishment that lowers worth, the outcome of a chastisement deployed by someone else but affecting regard of oneself. Trinculo and Stephano are over-stunk by their association with the racially marked and politically threatening Caliban, and the result is that the rebels acquire an inescapable smell contemptuous even to themselves. All the while, the conspirators' scent reinforces Prospero's moralizing righteousness without fully disclosing the oppressiveness of the patriarch's classist, racist reign.

The olfactory emerges as central to the play's representation of disciplinary force upon and within the body. The accusation of stink is a disparagement experienced as if from inside: as originating from the surface and the depths of the body, on and under the pores. In Caliban's terms, when he recalls the painful pinches of Prospero's goblins, odor "fills the skin."

While smelliness is a social reinforcement of privilege and an accusation of difference from the dominant group, it is frequently articulated as a personal deficiency to be corrected or curtailed. Operated to reinforce hierarchy and dominance from outside yet made to feel as if from inside — this is the operation of the racial imaginary via ecologies of affect. This informs the felt aspects of racial formation. Accusations of stench are external disciplinary methods that *feel* like individual faults, like moral flaws. Put another way, the disagreeableness of the conspirators' smell is an offense articulated as coming from *their* feet, from *their* skin, from *their* bodies. But in fact, odor is a reprimand imposed *to manage* those bodies.

For the immigrant, the burden of discipline and assimilation requires that she manage her own body — how it looks and labours, certainly, but also in a very immediate and visceral way, how it smells.

Take Maritess, a comic character created by California based stand-up comedian Rex Navarrete. She is the domestic help hired by the Superfriends to serve at the Hall of Justice. Her character is positioned precariously and hilariously as both immigrant worker and cultural outsider projecting back an abject gaze that refuses to venerate, indeed looks askance at, the highest ideals of physical prowess and moral superiority embodied by the Superfriends. Wonder Woman's invisible airplane, Batman and Robin's partnership, Superman's x-ray vision — Maritess navigates the signs that "stand in" for superhero, but does so without the cultural capital necessary to decode these signs from under the weight of work and the fatigue of disorientation.

In an episode entitled "Maritess vs The Superfriends," she declares that "this is the last straw, I have to go on record for this." Maritess launches her complaint against forcing a Filipina to eat American food.

Hungry and desperate, she waits till the Superfriends are away, puts on the kitchen blower, and fries herself a fish. The pungently alien whiff of oil and ocean cannot be contained; so, Aquaman finds her and declares "What are you doing! That's a crime!"

As Navarrete comically depicts the racialized foreigner in the midst of white America's idealized fantasy of Superfriends, he makes apparent a central tenet of global exploitation: the impoverished, vulnerable woman from a repeatedly colonized third world nation is mobilized for domestic servitude in a capitalist society that seeks to occlude the impoverished, vulnerable woman upon whom that society depends. This fraught tension explodes when Maritess seeks the comfort of her "stinky" food. Frying her fish represents, all

at once, her island childhood, her low class roots, her gendered oppression, and her momentary agency. In the throes diaspora and defiance, she boldly screeches back, “I’m just cooking fish!”

Many Filipinos will affectionately recognize Maritess’s excruciating yet simple desire for a meal that reminds her of home, albeit such recognition is inevitably tinged with embarrassment about the reductive associations between Filipinos and their fried fish. Like Caliban who is commodified and dehumanized in the play, Maritess is a servant to the demands of a powerful, self-righteous, moralizing ideal. Aquaman’s reprimand renders self-indignation and public humiliation, but the exchange also suspends her complete erasure at the moment she acknowledges her desire and identity, no matter how “pungent” to the prevailing status quo.

In that illicit act of frying her fish, Maritess expresses emotional longing and physical hunger, indignity and rebelliousness and alienation.

This is how race feels.

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