

# Perfume

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Transgender studies has ignored perfume—that simulation of “essence,” that cheap man-musk that occupies busy-subway-space, that elixir that vaults old lovers and dead grandmothers into the present—perhaps because of an occasionally “ocularcentric” approach (Prosser 1998: 43). To better sense that which eludes vision, can we follow our noses with three pungent imperatives? First: reclaim bodily decadence as a transing art of gender. Consider T. S. Eliot’s forceful association of perfume with wasteful confusion (2011: 86–89):

In vials of ivory and coloured glass  
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,  
Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused  
And drowned the sense in odours

This admonishment of decadent artifice is located in an open—“unstoppered”—vial of perfume, which Eliot describes disapprovingly as a genderqueer aesthetic object: it revels in synthetics, décor, and flash, while its contents “trouble,” confuse, and drown the habits of others. By reclaiming rather than refuting Eliot’s judgments, we can acknowledge the artifice of olfactory norms and try to change them. For instance, we can reject the sense of wealth that Eliot attributes to perfume by revaluing the many perfumes of labour. We can eschew middle-class norms of bodily control and hyper-hygiene in order to waft ourselves in uncontrollable trajectories toward the other.

Second: critique the centrality of pheromones to gender and desire. “Super-Primal Human Female Pheromones” is a pheromone perfume marketed to MTF (male-to-female) women. The website states: “Pheromones define us to the opposite sex. . . . Instinct tells another person that though everything looks fine, there is ‘something’ odd. It may be the male pheromone message the TG/CD is radiating” (“Female Pheromones”). Here, smell is the sense that cannot be “fooled.” Even though research on human pheromones is preliminary at best, this advertisement asserts that MTF women smell “like men.” The resultant binary economy of smell implies that heterosexuality is hardwired, as if the role of perfume is to solicit more heterosexual interaction through the sneaky manipulation of instinct.

Finally, use fragrance to build a new praxis of connection and memory. Against the binary economy described above, queer perfumer Christopher Brosius has offered scents such as “Faggot” and “Lipstick” as well as a series called “Metamorphosis.” Brosius describes these scents as distilled motion that can be reanimated by bodies: one scent, for instance, replicates “the moment when one simple beautiful gesture can transform an entire life” (Brosius). To Brosius, the perfumed body can activate memories that belong to others or are yet to happen to us. The perfumative gesture can trigger such transformations of olfactory expectation by turning time into vapor. Smells can even cloud and combine above and around us, creating a smelled version of what Susan Stryker calls the non-sovereign “transsubjective ensemble” (2008: 41). This is the transing potential of perfume: it disrupts our sense that we live only in the present; it uses the body as an archive that moves people; it clouds our separations; it communicates to those who would never think of talking to us; it is gender in motion, midair and inhaled.

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