

# Senses as Mobile Actants: Sketching Conceptual and Comparative Possibilities

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**Kelvin E.Y. Low<sup>1</sup> and Noorman Abdullah<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The senses and their concomitant practices have historically and contemporaneously traversed borders and boundaries and in effect, acquire different meanings. Sensory modalities and ways of knowing become reconfigured as a result of cross-cultural sensory encounters in everyday life. Drawing from colonial and contemporary ethnographic encounters in Singapore, we make a case to extend sociocultural analyses of the character of the sensory—in particular, sound and smell—to consider its agentic potential to permeate and traverse boundaries. We employ the sensory as a lens to capture intimations of connectedness and disconnectedness; and to more broadly unravel alternative and comparative understandings of mobility and movement through time and space.

## **Keywords**

senses, actants, borders, temporalities, mobility, movement

## **Introduction**

What happens when the sensory moves across borders and temporalities? How do we make sense of sensorial interfaces (Low & Kalekin-Fishman, 2010) which broach the site of two or more dissimilar sociocultural contexts of sensory knowledge and use? The senses and their concomitant practices have historically and contemporaneously traversed borders and boundaries and in effect, acquire different meanings. Sensory modalities and ways of knowing become reconfigured as a result of cross-cultural sensory encounters in different domains of everyday life. Drawing from a range of

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<sup>1</sup>National University of Singapore, Singapore

### **Corresponding Author:**

Kelvin E.Y. Low, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link ASI #03-06, FASS, Singapore 117570, Singapore.

Email: [socleyk@nus.edu.sg](mailto:socleyk@nus.edu.sg)

colonial and contemporary ethnographic encounters in Singapore, we extend sociocultural analyses of the character of the sensory—in particular, sound and smell—to consider its agentic potential to traverse boundaries. We sketch conceptual and comparative possibilities to deliberate on the manner in which the senses as ephemeral, visceral, and immaterial entities may be conceptualized as mobile actants that both act and are acted on. The sensory is therefore employed as a lens to capture intimations of connectedness and disconnectedness; as well as to more broadly outline alternative understandings of mobility and movement through time and space.

Where migration research adopts a particular view of human movement, the mobilities approach considers “all forms of movement from small-scale bodily movements, such as dance or walking, through infrastructural and transport aided movements to global flows of finance or labor” (Cresswell, 2011, p. 552). We problematize migration and mobility in relation to sense experience and engage with the following queries: What is mobility? Why and how do the senses move in historical and contemporary contexts of migratory flows and other types of human-object-practices mobility? How do social actors respond to sensory contexts that are familiar or strange as the senses permeate different spatialities? Would such sensory mobility imply agentic potential? While senses can be fleeting and transient, they may serve as mobile actants in adding some semblance of meaning and order (Le Breton, 2017) in different contexts of sense mobilities. Mobility is about how a variety of things move, including humans, ideas and objects (Cresswell, 2011; Vannini, 2010). Peters et al. (2010) sum it up rightly:

Mobility can be understood as the ordinary and everyday achievement of planning and organising copresence with other people and with material objects such as tables, chairs and occasionally also cake. (p. 349)

We add senses and sense experiences to the inventory of what and who moves. Through the sonic and the olfactive, we analyze how “mobility really happens with its focus on the multi-sensorial and felt characteristics” (Walters & Lüthi, 2016, p. 363), thereby speaking to the embodied and affective dimensions of sensory movement. Our focus on empirical (sensory) mobilities opens possibilities to rethink mobile theorization and mobile methodologies that would avoid privileging boundedness and sedentarism (Cresswell, 2011).

## **Theoretical Parameters**

The provocative nature of sense impressions is analyzed through the lens of mobility and actor–actant assemblages by deploying Latour’s (1996) actor–network theory (ANT). ANT pays careful attention to relations and associations between entities that are disparate or heterogeneous (Baiocchi et al., 2013). The methodological approach leads to a form of relational sociology that binds together discrete or stand-alone entities in both identifying and analyzing networks of relationality. Network stands for “the recorded movement of a thing” and is about “what moves and how this movement is recorded” (Latour, 1996, p. 378). ANT studies emphasize materiality and how the

role of materials and nonhuman elements in conjunction engender processes of ordering (J. Law, 1996). A central aspect of ANT is that “entities matter only in relation to other entities” (Baiocchi et al., 2013, p. 329), and where the world, depicted as a mobile arrangement, is perceived as encompassing a variety of heterogeneous relations and practices through which both humans and nonhumans are regarded as possible actors (Latour, 1996; van der Duim et al., 2013). The senses are postulated as agentic actants (cf. Ren, 2011) and interpreted here as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others”; for an “actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action” (Latour, 1996, p. 373). Through the interaction and connectedness between the senses and the body that we examine, the effects of the sensory are made evident through processes of narrativization.

It is productive to begin from the premises of the sensory and its agentic potential. For Latour (1996), an “actor” is conceived of as what is made to act by many “others,” in potentially infinite sets of associations. The senses, on their varied movements, matter in terms of interpretations of spatial–cultural transgression and thereby incite social actors to respond accordingly. We address how sensory-movement assemblages come about and how they provoke social (re)action that can traverse from mundane everyday practices, to sociolegal structures of policy making and wider public interlocution. When the senses move, they provide possible encounters for provocation, rejection, contestation or acceptance, contingent on clashes or overlaps in sensory expectations. Therefore, senses as mobile actants are relational in that meanings are associated with them through human action and interaction (Le Breton, 2017).

The relationship between mobility and the sensory is twofold. First, the conception of mobility and movement constitutes the very character of a range of sensory modalities, especially pertinent to the qualities of aural and olfactory faculties. The ability for sound and smell to move and permeate borders and boundaries—both physically and metaphorically—provides productive analytical possibilities to theorize their agentic potential as mobile actants that shape concomitant social practices. This is especially salient in what can be perceived of as “sensory transgressions” which broadly refer to a disruption or contestation of sensory scripts and practices that are rendered as acceptable to particular groups, as opposed to others. Second, mobility is also connected to the ways in which individuals and groups move and migrate across different spaces both historically and contemporaneously, bringing with them their own sensory beliefs and practices. These intersections of mobility allow for an examination of how migrants and migration narratives grapple with the moving and mobile character of the sensory in everyday life, and how different groups respond to what is perceived as sensory transgressions.

## **Sonic Mobilities**

Sounds can be “observed” and “described” as expressions of the way we live together and collectively inhabit our common environment. All sounds are interpreted according to the particular social and cultural backgrounds of the hearers (Schafer, 1994). A

sociological and anthropological purview of sounds in urbanity based on individual perception and social interaction will redress the neglect of sound that has lately begun to be addressed (Chandola, 2012; Earl, 2017; Henshaw, 2014). How does sound define urban environments and demarcate different social groups and their practices? How do sounds prompt social actors into action? Soundscapes are cultural systems through which social and cultural ordering is instituted and power structures and hierarchies exercised. Appraising the erection of such boundaries would also lead to further deliberations on the politics of sensorial othering through sonic differentiation. Such othering is connected to particular strategic and categorical hierarchies, which reflect on corresponding social, spatial, cultural, and political positionings (Chandola, 2012).

As sounds permeate urbanity, they compel people to act vis-à-vis notion of rights. Sensory-rights discourses are identified below vis-à-vis how sounds and their transgressive mobility provoke a rationalization of rights and boundary-making. The examples contain “rich descriptions of mundane and situated practices of how things work and of how relations and practices are ordered” using ANT as an approach (van der Duim et al., 2013, p. 6). Specifically, sounds as nonhuman entities modulate into forms of “noise” and “nuisance,” acquiring attributes as disdainful sources of sensory transgression given their relations with other human entities (J. Law, 1999) that include social actors of different ethnic and class backgrounds. Consequently, sounds achieve agentic potential in triggering responses from social actors who invoke various discourses, including the law. Rights-discourses interweave with notions of citizenship, ethnicity, and religion that underline how sounds as mobile actants provoke action. In the following 1897 Singapore press article, the writer makes clear sonic differentiations between “the Oriental” and “the Occidental,” reflecting on sensory othering through auditory transgressions as identified by the latter:

The Oriental is distinguished from the Occidental, among other things, by his love of noise. That may take the form of mere megalophony as in the turgid oratory of the blatant Bengali Babu. But for the most part his affection runs to more elementary forms of sound. Repercussion is his darling delight. It may be the funeral gong or the tom-tom, the Hindu temple bell or the guri that tells the hour outside the police station from Karachi to Singapore. Then there are the fire-crackers and maroons that form the sweetest joy of the Chinese soul. . . . It was simply a question of Oriental tastes . . . the inward gratification of adding to the recurrence of loud noises has thus a distinct ethnic explanation. (Untitled, in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantil Advertiser* (1884-1942), 12 June 1897, page 2)

Sounds that stem from different sources—be it the (Chinese) gong or tom-tom, the Hindu temple bell, or the Chinese crackers—prompt a delineation of ethnic hierarchization between “Orientals (East)” and “Occidentals (West).” Rendering the “Oriental” as a blanket category to negatively appraise the sonic attributes of the various ethnic groups in colonial Singapore, the writer essentializes ethnic proclivity for “noise” that “form the sweetest joy of the Chinese soul” or which stands as the “darling delight” of the Bengali Babu. One might also discern a sonic form of transnational mobility from the writer’s charge on how far the sound (or noise?) of the Hindu temple

bell or the *guri* moves from Karachi in Pakistan to Singapore, contributing to the immense “mobility” of sounds that travel across borders. Arising from the writer’s sense of annoyance at various noises, “commensurable connections” (Latour, 1996) emerge between ethnicity, noise behavior, and “barbarism” out of sonic impressions as a human–nonhuman assemblage of meaning production.

The next passage illustrates how sensory meaning production is engendered by human–nonhuman actant relations. A twofold association is established between Chinamen (and women) and their funeral music, and between an Irish wake and its accompanying “wirru wirru” noises. These associations, similar to the earlier example, indicate a subordination of the former to the latter:

The funeral I am now writing of was gay with banners—could Chinamen live without banners or die without them? No; no more than they could live or die without chopsticks. Then a number of women were moving with the processions, typically and hideously clad; and there was Music as well . . . Tom-toms, cymbals, and a noise-making machine which reminded me of a bag-pipe, but which I am told was a wry-necked fife, and other barbarons row-producers, went to make the most hideous discourse of execrable sound I care to hear. I think that these concerts are designed with an idea of waking the supposed defunct up in case he is only in a trance, or of frightening him back to his senses in case he is foxing. A similar idea no doubt originated a more western institution the wirru, wirru, wirru! The whiskey-dancing, crying, shouting, dancing, and fighting of an Irish wake. (‘Cartouche Sketches in Singapore.’ in *The Straits Times*, 4 April 1874, page 2)

Sounds move both literally and through one’s embodied memory, and in effect assemble transnational connections across Singapore, China, and Ireland in a network of sonic impressions and comparisons. A similar assemblage of transnational sensory (dis)connectivities between residents, migrants, and European colonizing groups follows below:

The European looks to have his sleep at night. . . . The Chinese, no doubt, are only acting up to their lights. The noise made by the instruments played at the wayangs does not disturb them in any way. . . . The auricular nerves of the Chinese are not sensitive; hence he does not appreciate the peculiar views of the European in the matter of noise. . . . Doubtless the Chinaman thinks he has his rights, and so he has, but no one possesses either the right or the power to inflict pain on another, at least not under the British flag . . . until the Chinese appreciate the fact, they will from time to time be liable to be brought to order for nuisance. (‘The Wayang Nuisance.’ in *Mid-day Herald*, 7 February 1896, page 2)

Europeans’ sonic discomfort in responding to noise pollution of the “Chinaman” is emphasized here. The writer asserts sensory autonomy (cf. Atkinson, 2007) in one’s domestic setting that thereby render loud noise as intrusive. Such auditory judgments are oftentimes institutionalized and carried into the domain of legislature and urban policies.

If the threat, under the British flag, is to bring the Chinese “to order for nuisance,” the next passage registers how noises produced in residential neighborhoods incur the

listener's wrath. Establishing broad connections between noises produced by "Malay-speaking people" along with the "music of Chinese Wayang," the law is evoked amid these transgressions:

At present there does not seem to be any means of preventing one's neighbor from creating demoniacal noises within certain hours, but there is a law to prevent an irate person from going to his neighbor's house to stop his loudspeaker by force if necessary. One need not wonder if the lover of tinned music begins to consider himself specially protected by the law of the country. . . . If there is right to make a noise there must be a greater right to peace and tranquility. . . . One neighbor's family seem to be Malay-speaking people, but his wireless set is tuned in for all the languages and music of the civilized world. The babel commences nightly at 6.30 pm and it goes on non-stop at full blast until 9 pm. . . . This neighbor does not seem ever to go out, read the paper or do anything else besides toying with his wireless set to produce deafening noises which compare with the music of Chinese "wayang." ('Living Next Door to a Loudspeaker.' *Straits Times*, May 1, 1935, p. 6.)

Perceived noise pollution emanating from one's neighbor provokes a fractious response based on legal propositions. If one is not, by law, allowed to trespass a neighbor's place of residence to curtail the noise, then one might have to rethink how the law should not allow for sonic extremities but instead to safeguard "peace and tranquility." Such reactions also point to a perceived need to safeguard one's sonic environment as a resident.

Another case of invoking the law in a transnational migratory context shows us how some societies—in this case the United Kingdom—is employed as a benchmark that maintains noise levels. In an article titled "Roaring through the city" (*Straits Times*, August 13, 1949, page 9), traffic laws are deemed exigent to ensure adequate vehicular emissions:

It should be brought to the Traffic Department in Singapore that all motorcycles and other noisy vehicles should NOT be allowed in town without being fitted with silencers. The noise they make is terrific and nerve-racking, and would certainly be prohibited in the United Kingdom.

By invoking either "city fathers" or the United Kingdom, the above ethnographic snippets reflect on the networking (van der Duim et al., 2013) of humans and nonhuman actants—running the gamut from unwanted noises, and which emanate and move (Latour, 1996) from particular ethnic sources, to the mobilization of the law in arresting the situation, and to a comparison of local sound management with those beyond the region in responding to sonic transgressions.

The colonial period in Singapore is a context of migrant-ethnic encounters. Analyzing sonic differentiation through ANT provides different optics to appraise colonial-local power geometries and migrant socialities enacted in the everyday. Mobile actors and actants are plaited in isotopic networks that illustrate how migration and mobility are addressed through the senses as a newer analytical locus in recent

migration scholarship (Thomas, 2010; Warin & Dennis, 2005). Apart from sensory encounters in the colonial period, asymmetrical citizen–migrant politics and aural transgressions are also reflected in contemporary Singapore. If the Asian colonial city “demarcates sensory spaces in urbanity,” such segregation sustains “in the post-colonial context—where a sensory divide, now between locals and foreigners—is still operative” (Low, 2015, p. 301). Similar sets of assemblages comprising local–foreign actors and their sense behavior recur. Usual complaints levelled against migrant groups include excessive overcrowding and the noise that accompany migrant worker gatherings during their days off. These spaces comprise ethnic enclaves such as Little India (for Indian and Bangladeshi workers), Beach Road and Golden Mile Shopping Centre (for Thai workers), the vicinity of Paya Lebar, Boon Keng and Kallang subway stations and its surrounding covered walkways, and the City Plaza vicinity (for Indonesian workers), Peninsula Plaza (for Burmese workers), and Lucky Plaza and the area outside Ion Shopping Centre (for Filipino workers); as well as other open spaces including parks and public housing void decks. Given that these spaces are shared with Singaporeans, media reports contain numerous accounts where migrant workers have been rebuked in these shared spaces and on public transport. A domestic worker and her friends hanging out and singing in a park were told off by an elderly Singaporean couple for “making too much noise” and were therefore told not to gather there as they were a “nuisance” (Tan, 2018).

Several Singaporeans interviewed felt that Singapore has become overpopulated, which inconvenienced local residents into sharing spaces with migrant groups, some of whom “speak rather loudly wherever they are, especially in public buses, MRT trains and public areas” (“Integration in Singapore,” 2017; *Youth.sg*, June 22, 2016). Other local responses include the following:

The loud music from ghetto blasters is also a nuisance. . . . We’re all outside trying to enjoy our time off. If they’d like to listen to music, perhaps they can use headphones instead, or at least play it at a respectable volume. (Richardson, 2018)

In response, volunteer and paid constituents have acted on the congregation of foreign workers with increased patrols aimed at preventing migrants from loitering near housing estates and void decks. Concomitantly, signs, posters, and barricades have been put up at these void decks to deter gatherings, sleeping, and eating. Shopping centers in Singapore such as Orchard Road have similarly erected fences and barricades to prevent migrant groups from hanging around. We next examine two contemporary cases pertaining to migrant groups in Singapore. The texture of the everyday and the “modalities of everyday contact” (Heller, 1984) provide critical analytical sites to further illuminate citizen–migrant politics and its intersection with olfactive mobilities.

## Olfactive Mobilities

As a common point of reference in public discourses about local–migrant everyday politics, the olfactive wields significant power to engage social actors in discourse,

debate and action. The connection between such sensory transgressions and migrant presences constitutes one of the main threads of concern. Singapore as a global city today confronts an intensified migrant influx, alongside engagements with cosmopolitan aspirations. Given Singapore's demographic crisis and ultralow fertility rates, migrant workers—both expatriate and blue-collared—have been incorporated into its workforce. In spite of the importance of and reliance on migrants, and the nation's history as a migrant state, the presence and continued arrival of different migrant groups have increasingly been a source of anxiety and concern for citizens. These issues include everyday sensory practices and behavior engaged by migrant groups which purportedly disrupt what is rendered as normal and acceptable in the local context.

For instance, food and smell—both mundane and taken-for-granted facets of everyday life—can potentially elicit emotive responses (L. Law, 2001). A prominent case directly involving migrant–citizen sensory politics was the “Curry Saga” as the incident came to be known. This was first reported through a Singapore daily *Today* in August 2011 and was subsequently publicized both in local and foreign presses such as *Reuters* and the *Telegraph* (the United Kingdom), as well as in social media. Through smell as a catalyst (Smith, 2019), the dispute fleshed out the increasing anxiety and discontent concerning immigration and integration policies in Singapore. This incident involved a longstanding dispute between a migrant family from China and a Singaporean Indian family over the cooking of curry and the accompanying smell wafting from the fumes into the latter's home. In response to the olfactory dislike expressed by the Chinese family, the Indian family would close their doors and windows whenever they cooked curry. The Chinese family found this compromise to be unacceptable and insisted that their Indian neighbors completely abstain from cooking the dish, which was refused. Both families subsequently approached the Community Mediation Centre, and agreed that the Indian family would cook curry only when their Chinese neighbors were out. In turn, the Chinese family agreed to try curry, following the request from their Singaporean Indian neighbors.

Public reaction over the dispute was vocal. Several members of the public noted that mutual respect needed to be fostered between both locals and migrant groups. Others commented on the perceived intolerance of the Chinese migrant family toward the everyday cultural practices of an ethnic minority group. In this light, the outcome of the mediation was also regarded to be out of line with Singapore's model of multiracialism and cultural difference. Online commenters further expressed their resentment by arguing that migrants who were critical and unaccepting of Singapore culture should leave. As a grassroots response to these comments, some members of the public organized a “Cook and Share a Pot of Curry” event through Facebook to encourage Singaporeans to cook curry at home on August 21, 2011. Simultaneously, foreigners living in Singapore were invited to participate as a way “to celebrate curries as part of our way of life and to share this celebration with those who are new to our shores.” The event attracted more than 60,000 residents in Singapore, including overseas Singaporeans, along with curry-themed music videos and catchphrases about curry. In August 2012, Old Chang Kee, a food chain selling local snacks, partnered with the National Heritage Board to organize a weeklong series of curry-themed events called “Curry, a Celebration of Singapore's Heritage.”



Given the magnitude of collective citizen responses, the state clarified and documented the actual course of events pertaining to the dispute. The government organized a press conference and reiterated that the Community Mediation Centre was a neutral and independent body, and had not suggested, imposed, or mandated the terms of the settlement to the dispute for both families involved in the case. Interestingly, while Singaporeans in the case of the “curry saga” would vociferously defend Singaporean food practices, the cooking of “smelly curry” has often been used as a reason by Singapore home owners for not renting their apartments out to specific migrant groups such as Indians (May 1, 2014, *BBC*, Helier Cheung).

Everyday racism levelled against migrant groups have also been articulated in varying social spaces and through everyday encounters and interaction. Such racism is a “normalized act that reinforces underlying relations of power between dominant and minority racial/ethnic groups” (Velayutham, 2009, p. 262) assimilated in everyday cognitive, embodied and behavioral practices. These include the use of expletives, name-calling, casual racist jokes, differential treatment and discrimination, and avoidance of physical contact, oftentimes impacting racial minorities as well as blue-collared foreign migrant workers.

The sensory forms part of the manner in which the migrant body has been explicitly acted on, marked, read and raced. Through the citizen “gaze,” the body of the migrant is disciplined: physiological references to skin color and olfaction are rendered as socially significant and constitute part of everyday social reality in Singapore. Such migrants have described their work conditions, salary disputes, accommodation as well as interactional encounters with Singaporeans in different settings in newspapers, social media and scholarly work on the issue of race in Singapore, especially among ethnic minority groups and migrants such as those from Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and China. Citizen–migrant sensory politics is manifest on public transportation and in shared public spaces such as parks, shopping centers, open fields, void decks, and beaches. The sharing of crowded spaces in a packed bus, subway, elevator, pathway, or shopping center assembles groups from different backgrounds to come close together involuntarily, rub shoulders, smell, touch, see and sense one another within such stifling confines. In a newspaper article (“Why I don’t sit on the MRT,” *The New Paper*, May 15, 2016), it was reported that an Indian foreign worker was used to observing people avoiding him and his friends while they were taking the subway:

They make a face and move away. Some people—usually old people—get up when we sit beside them. . . . There is nothing I can do about it. I cannot be angry at them, so I just feel sad. It makes me feel small.

As a technician at a sewage cleaning firm, he maintains that he does not reek of foul smells:

I take the train only on my day off, Sunday. I bathe and keep clean before I go out, there is no smell on me. Even when I work, it is not like we go into the sewage. We stand far away and use our equipment (to do the work).” (“Why I don’t sit on the MRT,” May 15, 2016)

He would rather not sit unless the train carriage was mostly empty, and prefers to go to Little India during his day off. The district, to him, was where he felt most comfortable in Singapore with his fellow migrant friends.

In another online video post (“Independent,” 2018), a man was recorded on camera in an elevator making racist remarks to an Indian migrant worker, demanding that he exit because he was “so dirty” and “smelly.” The Singaporean man continued to make derisive references to Indian as “fucking dirty people” while rudely gesturing with his feet and pleading with another man in the lift to make the migrant worker leave. Tweets about migrant workers include the following: “A group of Indian construction workers just started crowding next to me, I cannot breathe! Damn smelly! They don’t know how to shower, is it?” Responses from migrant workers are also recorded, who explained that manual work in Singapore’s humid climate made it difficult for them to manage and control their body odor.

In these encounters, even though the migrant workers did not directly intimidate or offend the local public, the latter had clearly expressed through their responses that migrant workers were olfactorily repulsive and not welcomed in Singapore. Notwithstanding the fact that there were other groups who appreciated the presence of foreign workers, these unfavorable reactions—whether actually articulated or through gestures such as covering noses or showing a look of disgust on their faces—clearly reflected the negative perceptions citizens have about migrant workers in Singapore (Abdullah, 2005). Concurrently, the anxiety that their “smell” and body odor would lead to discomfort and distress among Singaporeans made these migrant groups fear close physical proximity and contact with locals. Most of these workers also expressed their humiliation and distress when recounting their experiences. Often they put up with racist remarks and practices about their smell and bodies, and did not physically retaliate against these racist practices in view of the power asymmetries embedded in such citizen-migrant encounters. In this vein, the reproduction of such racial prejudices pertaining to migrant groups on the basis of perceived olfactory transgression perpetuate racialized and power hierarchies between citizen and migrant.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

As mobile actants, the senses engender human action and reaction given their permeability, cultural sameness, and alterity. Senses provide knowledge of the self and other and thereby mediate and guide action (Maslen, 2015). Such action stems from sensory encounters and contestation in shared spaces brought about by migratory flows in the context of colonial and contemporary Singapore. Social groups of different positionings—sojourners, migrants, colonizers, citizens, and foreigners, all of whom are mobile-migrant actors situated within a variety of manners and motivations—respond to one another’s sensory conduct in shared and crowded spaces covering residential, leisure, civic, work, transport, and other domains in urban living through human–nonhuman sensory relationalities. These various social actors possess different if not antithetical sonic and olfactive sensibilities that eventuate in perceived sensory excess. In effect, mobile bodies and their accompanying sensory behavior in the city form

what Atkinson (2007, p. 1906) terms as “sonic ecology”—a model of repetition and spatial ordering that includes a “patterning and persistence” in appraisals of social order and sensory organization. This idea adds to Schafer’s (1994) “acoustic ecology” which explores the relationship between sounds and social life and its effects on the environment. Such ecological ordering arises from studying how place and space are sensorially demarcated. We employ the term and additionally extend it to our own take on “olfactive ecology” herein. Different sonic and olfactive ecologies are produced when social actors move across borders. Their production has to do with how sensory scripts of behavior among different social groups encounter one another, and thereby lead to assemblages of human–sensory interaction. We deployed ANT to critically appraise the sociocultural significance of these ecologies. In unravelling the manifold, isotopic ways in which social actors react to the senses as actants, our approach reveals the density, depth, and social character of these said ecologies across a variety of ambient soundscapes and smellscapes. These ecologies exist on the basis of human to/and nonhuman sensory contact, through which lines of differentiation and hierarchization are marked out on the basis of citizen–migrant, ethnicity, class, and religious positionings. These positionings are recorded through citizen–migrant networks where local–foreign hierarchy and power differentials are subsequently highlighted. Foreign bodies and their sensory transgressions are systematically calibrated if not constrained through a slew of both official (legislative) and unofficial (stigma) measures in both sonic and olfactive ecologies.

In comparing sonic and olfactive mobilities and their respective ecologies, both are apparently demarcated as a result of dense urban living (be it among citizens, and/or citizens and foreigners) and migratory flows. Both the aural and the olfactive are agentic in the boundary-erection between locals and foreigners, and between foreigners of different backgrounds in contemporary and colonial encounters, respectively. The guarding of one’s sensory rights, be it at the level of ethnic group or class, remains a core feature of everyday living in the current climate of intense migratory flows, not unlike those of the colonial period of mass migratory mobilities. Sounds, however, are better apprehended through different legislature measures given their inherent scientifically calculable density. Laws prohibit sound emanation during certain times of the day and night, determined through the permissible levels of decibel emissions. On the contrary, smells are more elusive. They can escape any attempt at containment, and can at best be diffused or prohibited through preemptive measures. These might include disallowing the burning of incense or any other smoke-inducing objects in urban spaces, or ensuring that such spaces that ought to be marked off from olfactory transgressions means expelling sources of stench—sewage works, rubbish collection centers, and so forth—to the margins of a city (Vigarello, 1988).

In the context of historical and contemporary migration and mobility, studying the senses through ANT and their agentic potentials avail renewed insights into the embodied experiences and nuances of migratory flows and ecological encounters. We hope, through the cases and ecologies delineated in this article, to rethink migratory streams, movements, and mobility through the senses as permeable and potentially transgressive. In making a case for how the senses make people act, and therefore to interpret the

senses as mobile actants, we place the senses at the core of our inquiry and elucidate the agentic possibilities of mobile senses as visceral and immaterial actants.

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**Author Biographies**

**Kelvin E.Y. Low** is an associate professor and Deputy Head of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. His main research interests include sensory studies, migration and transnationalism, social memory, and food and foodways. He is author or editor of 4 books with the most recent being *Senses in Cities: Experiences of Urban Settings* (Routledge, 2017).

**Noorman Abdullah** holds a joint-appointment as Senior Lecturer at the Departments of Sociology and Malay Studies, National University of Singapore. His core research interests and publications focus primarily on religion and society, particularly in relation to spirit possession and everyday religiosity; deviance and social control; and sensory studies, with a strong empirical component grounded on ethnography, everyday life and qualitative fieldwork.