

The sensuous city: Sensory methodologies in urban ethnographic research

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Ethnography

2015, Vol. 16(3) 295–312

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DOI: 10.1177/1466138114552938

eth.sagepub.com



Abstract

While urban dimensions of landscapes and the physical environment are often regarded as built structures that relate to functionality in modern life, cities are also sites of human experience that comprise social relationships, memories, emotions, and how they are negotiated on an everyday basis. Embedded within these processes of sociality is how the senses mediate one's engagement with urban life, hence rendering insights into the multi-sensory character of urbanity. This article surveys a range of sensory methodologies that may be harnessed towards articulating the social life of the senses in urbanity such as smellscape walkabouts in order to explicate the doing of sensory ethnography in urban contexts. The aim is to elucidate how place, social actors, and sensory experiences come together in the production and analysis of urban ethnographic research, including the embodied constitutions of researchers in the process of data generation.

Keywords

senses, urban sensory experiences, sensory methodologies, city, embodiment, Singapore

Introduction

City life, comprising the everyday rhythms, humdrum of activities, events, routines, and other un/expected urban encounters, comes with a range of 'multi-sensory bombardment' (Butler, 2006) emanating from both human and non-human sources. Motor vehicles, horns, voices, music, nature, and tactility are but some of a wide range of possible examples that together form the sensuous character of cities. In essence, there is a superabundance of sensory affordances that are situated within the city. These varied sensory experiences are not without

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social meaning or utility, as how spaces acquire meaning has to do with one's 'sensory experiencing of built environments' (Degen and Rose, 2012: 3271). While urban dimensions of landscapes and the physical environment are often thought of in the fore as built structures that relate to functionality in modern life, cities are also sites of human experience that comprise social relationships, memories, emotions, and how they are negotiated on an everyday basis. Embedded within these processes of sociality is how the senses mediate one's engagement with urban growth and development, hence rendering insights into the multi-sensory character of urbanity.

Processes of urban regeneration change the sensory qualities of places (Degen, 2010). In turn, such changes also impact upon how particular cultural expressions and practices are thereby included or excluded in city life. What roles do the senses play in urban built-up spaces across different societies and cultures? How are urban spaces of habitation built, designed or re-generated sensorially? In order to engage with these queries, this paper surveys a range of sensory methodologies that may be harnessed towards articulating the social life of the senses in urbanity such as smellscape walkabouts in order to explicate the doing of sensory ethnography in urban contexts. The aim is to elucidate how place, social actors, and sensory experiences in urbanity come together in the production and analysis of urban ethnographic research, including the embodied constitutions of researchers in the process of data generation. What are the everyday sensory realities of city life (DeFazio, 2011; Kalekin-Fishman, 2010), and how are such experiences studied and analyzed? In other words, what are the necessary methodological approaches that aid towards the production and examination of sensory ethnographies? Furthermore, how can language be harnessed as a medium to both articulate and analyze the sensuous city?

Theoretical engagements: Phenomenology, sensuous cities, and everyday life

Scholarly works that feature sensory methodologies have appeared in recent years. Before documenting some of these methodological directions that have been undertaken in addition to my own suggestions, I wish to situate them alongside a range of theoretical trajectories (see also Low, 2012) which would then contextualize these sensory methodologies within ontological anteriorities. In doing so, the discussion will demonstrate how the senses form an avenue of 'knowing' (Pink, 2009; Vannini et al., 2012) that both organizes social life and contributes toward how social actors relate to urbanity through sensory interpretations. Examining the sensuous city is therefore an endeavor in illustrating the social significance of sensations in space and place.

While social science scholarship on the senses has proliferated in the past few decades, one could already trace the genesis of how the senses are deliberated through the works of sociological figures such as Durkheim, Marx, and Simmel.

Durkheim's philosophical lectures which he delivered in 1883–4 (see Gross and Jones, 2004) reflect upon his development of sociology as a newly emerging discipline that was considered a philosophy project (Joas, 2004: xi–xii). In his discussions on the philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and metaphysics, Durkheim's lectures also pay attention to the senses. He is cognizant of the idea that the five-senses model is not absolute. Instead of identifying senses using the usual five – which many scholars have critiqued (see, among others, Classen, 1993; Geurts, 2003; Vannini et al., 2012) – Durkheim proposes both 'muscular sense' and 'vital sense' to refer to the 'state, position, and fatigue of our muscles' and the 'general condition of our bodies' in terms of its 'well-being or malaise' respectively, and which are 'regardless of specific location' (Gross and Jones, 2004: 74). Similar to others such as Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel who have ranked the senses (see Low, 2012), Durkheim embarks on his hierarchization as follows (in reverse order): smell and taste (given that these are 'meager . . . and give us virtually nothing to appreciate'), the vital sense, sight and hearing (as 'aesthetic senses, which gives them their superiority'), touch (which 'can replace sight and sometimes even hearing'), and the muscular sense (which together with touch 'gives us knowledge of extension') at the top of this list (Gross and Jones, 2004: 74). Calling this list a 'natural classification of the senses' (p. 74), Durkheim's treatment revolves around biological/perceptive qualities rather than situating them vis-à-vis sociocultural associations.

In comparison to Durkheim, Marx might have been slightly more explicit in his discussion on the senses vis-à-vis capitalist conditions and labor relations. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx proclaims that the 'forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present' (1959 [1844]: 109). As I have also discussed elsewhere (Low, 2012), the senses of the worker are negated as a result of operating within a sensorially injurious environment that is accompanied by such transgressions of noise and temperature, among other sensory challenges (Marx, 1954). Apart from contextualizing the senses and sensuousness as both socially and historically contingent (DeFazio, 2011), Marx has also ranked the senses in a manner which departs from Durkheim's. Smell, taste, and touch are assigned lower statuses given the link to animality, while hearing and sight are accorded higher positions in the hierarchy as a result of the connection to civility (see Howes, 2003). In essence, both Durkheim's and Marx's hierarchy of the senses may be perceived as an initial glimpse into the sociocultural workings of the senses and how they are contextualized within cognate debates drawn from philosophy, science, and economics. Another important theoretical framework in discussing sensation is phenomenology, which I next address.

Baldwin (2004: 12) suggests that how the senses organize our experience, and how they constitute the physical world, are not noticeable unless we adopt a 'detached' manner to analyze ordinary experience, in following Merleau-Ponty's arguments on perception and lived experiences. Such detachment, according to Merleau-Ponty (2004: 39), has to be executed on the basis of rediscovering the 'world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget'. For him, the

quality of an object is necessarily contingent on a dialogic relationship between the individual as an embodied subject and the 'external object which bears this quality' (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 61). Using the stickiness of honey and one's tactile encounter with it as an example to illustrate this relationship, Merleau-Ponty notes that things are not merely objects which are neutral. Instead, the ways in which people relate to the world have to do with how objects provoke certain reactions that may be favorable or otherwise. In other words, Merleau-Ponty draws attention to sensation, which for him occupies the center of human perception (Pink, 2009). Furthermore, including the body of the researcher and of the researched as part of the process of ethnographic inquiry and data collection would thereby facilitate 'greater phenomenological sensibility to ethnography' (Kusenbach, 2003: 455; see also, Gandhi and Hoek, 2012; Mears, 2013; Wacquant, 2004). Theorizing the senses in social life through urban ethnographic research therefore requires reflexive attention on how corporeal practices are central to the generation of ethnography. Such reflexivity is in line with the 'writing culture' debate in anthropology that emphasizes cognizance of how ethnographic knowledge is constructed, including the importance that is placed upon embodiment in social experiences (see, among others, Geertz, 1988; Howes, 2003; Marcus, 1998; Stoller, 1997).

City life and the senses: Simmel and others

It is by now evident that the senses have been debated within a range of disciplines and on the basis of various theoretical positions. Moreover, the hegemony of vision seems to cloak the importance of the other senses in appraisals of city life and in the employment of ethnographic fieldwork in general (Atkinson et al., 2008; Bendix, 2011; DeFazio, 2011; Sparkes, 2009). In order to trace the analytical link between the city and the senses and to move beyond ocularcentrism, it is to Simmel that we should turn as a point of departure. Simmel's 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (2002 [1903]) locates how urban stimuli affect actors who inhabit city spaces, and demonstrates the alienation that such city dwellers experience. This is a consequence of having to manage both external and internal stimuli that create the 'sensory foundations of mental life' which differs markedly from the 'slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence' (Simmel, 2002 [1903]: 11–12). Consequently, the urban actor develops what Simmel (2002 [1903]: 12) calls a 'protective organ' which engenders a rational disposition as reaction. In addition to his critique of the metropolis and sensory disarray, Simmel's classic essay on 'Sociology of the Senses' (1997 [1907]) is also a proposal that departs from macro-structural accounts of sociality to suggest that sensory impressions are likewise important in the mediation of social interaction. By maintaining that sensory impressions engender either 'feelings of like and dislike in us' in evaluating social others, Simmel (1997 [1907]: 111) encourages sociologists to take heed of sensory analyses of social life.

Kaufmann (2011: 15–20) suggests three theoretical principles towards studying the city and urbanity, namely (1) to reconcile abstract and sensory approaches;

(2) to open up the static conception of space; and (3) to consider mobility as change and not as movement. With respect to the first principle, Kaufmann (2011) notes that scholarly approaches towards studying the urban are limited as they tend to neglect how cities are felt, seen, or perceived, and instead study them in terms of their functions in abstraction. By arguing that cities also have morphologies, Kaufmann contends that the sensory fabric of cities and places should therefore be examined more closely. Although Kaufmann begins with a point that lobbies for attention on sensory experiences in the city, he does not offer suggestions on how such experiences may be methodologically studied. The only indication of a possible sensory approach, as Kaufmann (2011: 16) puts it, requires 'going beyond an abstract, disembodied approach to the city and urbanness', where there is a need to resist the 'temptation of reducing human action to strategies that can more or less be interpreted based on sophisticated ideations of rational choice'.

The significance of the city and the senses may also be contextualized vis-à-vis theories of place that have held the attention of geographers and other social science and humanities scholars (Pink, 2008; Porteous, 1994). Such significance is suggested by Adams, who notes that '[t]o walk through a place is to become involved in that place with sight, hearing, touch, smell... proprioception, and even taste' (2001: 188). In tandem, DeFazio (2011) contends that everyday urban experiences are inevitably imbued with sensory perception, reception, and production. These varied processes are also linked to sociality. Howes (2005: 7) proposes that if embodiment suggests an interconnection between body and mind, it follows that the paradigm of emplacement would then point to a 'sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment'. The interest arising from these theoretical underpinnings therefore lies in conducting 'phenomenological investigations into the sensory constructions of space' (Rawes, 2008: 62) in the city.

The importance of engaging with sensuous scholarship, following from the above theoretical angles, is addressed by Paterson (2009: 772), who suggests that insights into both etic and emic meanings, as well as the sensory scripts that both researcher and researched subscribe to could be achieved. Paterson also adds that creative ways of evoking and attending to 'unproblematized realms of everyday, embodied sensory experience' should be developed. Paterson's proposition draws from anthropologist Paul Stoller's work on sensuous scholarship (1997, 2004), where Stoller argues that it is important to exercise scholarly examination on both the sensory orders of those whom we study as well as the need for being reflexive when it comes to one's body as a researcher. By placing importance on sensuous practices and descriptions, Stoller (2004: 820) contends, sensuous scholarship would then 'improve not only the clarity and force of ethnographic representations but also the social analysis of power relations-in-the-world'. It is this spirit of exercising reflexivity on the researcher's body that informs one of the sensory methodologies which I discuss later on. This brings us back to phenomenological principles where the body as a research tool (Longhurst et al., 2008; Mears, 2013) therefore emplaces the researcher in ethnographic contexts (Pink, 2008) in the Merleau-Pontian sense of 'being-in-the-world'. The notion of sensory

emplacement (see Pink, 2009) is therefore paramount as a component of framing what sensory methodologies of urbanity entail.

In connection with bodily emplacement and the senses, Pink (2009) proposes that given the body as an agent of experience and knowledge, it is thus integral to the production of a sensory ethnography. Such ethnographic endeavors would therefore involve poly-sensory encounters with others as well as how they experience their own social environments. Additionally, she calls for further reflexivity in how these varied sensory meanings are to be conceptualized and conveyed to others in intellectual terms. To come back to Merleau-Ponty, and departing from Pink's characterization of what a sensory ethnography comprises, paying attention to the senses is a phenomenological method in comprehending how a particular phenomenon is experienced, and how meanings constructed out of these experiences frame cultural or group meanings (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009). The intimate link between cities and bodies is captured in Grosz's (1998: 47) viewpoint that the 'form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality and/as subjectivity'. Acknowledging this stance would mean that researchers of urban life need to 'get into the experience of the participants and see it as they see it'. The researcher and research participants are therefore co-researchers where the researcher is regarded as 'a sort of medium or facilitator in this process' (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009: 207). This is also where Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'corporeal intentionality' comes into play.

In sum, sensory methodologies, informed by phenomenological principles, are to be harnessed in analyses of the city. Furthermore, one needs to be reminded, in the words of Casey, that instead of regarding sensation and movement as precultural, the 'primacy of perception is ultimately a primacy of the lived body' (Casey, 1996: 18–19) which is entwined with sociocultural processes. A similar caveat is tabled by Atkinson et al. (2008), who opine that given the cultural significance of the senses in relation to collective social life, the interest in sensory methodology is not so much to account for the ethnographer's own responses to smells and tastes and his/her other senses, but rather to situate their meaningfulness vis-à-vis a given social group or individual social actors. In tandem, Pink (2009: 37) notes that in order to comprehend how 'sensory experiences, categories and meanings in people's lives' are relevant, these relevances need to be researched, through embodied methodologies, in relation to 'contexts of specific socialities and materialities' (p. 37). Analyzed as modes of sociation in the Simmelian manner, the senses therefore structure urban spaces where practices in everyday urban life and how different groups inhabit such spaces are accorded social meanings.

Sensory methodologies

I begin with non-textual sensory methodologies first so as to develop from the notion of bodily emplacement and sensory experience. This is followed by a discussion on textual means of sensory analysis, which would be connected to a

recurring point on the limits and on the issues of representation of social life through linguistic recourse. I argue that language, instead of forming an obstacle towards capturing and conveying the varied meanings of social life, is a useful tool when utilized suitably to reflect on sensory experiences and encounters (Howes, 2005; Low, 2012). The examples to follow illustrate sensory productions of sociality. In particular, they offer insights pertaining to race relations, as well as how the past is sensorially produced and consumed. The crux lies in how identity-formation vis-à-vis social relations and social groups takes place in historical and contemporary Singapore. If race is a key mode of reference in the colonial city (Yeoh, 2003), it follows that white sensory racialism, as discussed below, in effect creates an Asian colonial city that thereby demarcates sensory spaces in urbanity. The Asian city in colonial contexts is therefore a segregated city produced in the mental maps of colonial masters, given that urban spatialities are differentiated sensorially and racially. And if such sensory duality may be discerned in the colonial period, I have suggested elsewhere (Low, 2013) that the continuity of such a mindset in the post-colonial context – where a sensory divide, now between locals and foreigners – is still operative.

My first example is based on earlier research that I have conducted in Singapore (Low, 2009), where I employed smellscape walkabouts with informants so as to examine the sociocultural meanings associated with olfaction in ethnic enclaves which formed my fieldsites. The next two examples involve preliminary analyses of sensory discourses that are procured from secondary sources – brochures featuring heritage trails in Singapore, and letters written to the local press in the early 1800 and 1900s which express sensory sentiments of Singapore as a colonial city. The two methodologies of walkabouts and heritage trail production/consumption are related to what Degen and Rose (2012: 3273) term as the ‘*in situ* corporeal experience’ of urban dwellers on a daily basis, thereby forming an important component of addressing sensory urban experiences.

Walking the city is a method that seems to be favored by most scholars who write about the city and how city life is experienced. Barthes (1982: 36), for instance, contends that in order to know the city, one has to engage with ‘an activity of an ethnographic kind’. It is necessary to orientate oneself through bodily experiences including walking and seeing. In Barthes’ view, however, he seems to privilege the sense of sight over the other sensory modalities, which to my mind are equally important towards experiencing and comprehending the character of urban life. As Barthes (1982: 35–6) puts it, ‘the visual experience [is] a decisive element’ in one’s orientation of the city. This is a point that Bendix (2011) has also picked up in her evaluation of how ethnographic fieldwork tends to rest mainly on visibility (read: participant observation, visual methods of research). Following Atkinson et al. (2008: 179), sensory impressions and data beyond the ocular are likewise important resources in the conduct of ethnography, alongside the embodiment and physical presence of the ethnographer. Nevertheless, Barthes’ proposition is one of many important works which highlight the pertinence of the (visual) sense/s towards experiencing urbanity.

Recent scholarship on sensory methodologies of walking the city may be found in such works that attend to soundwalks (Butler, 2006), smellwalks (Low, 2009), or walks that survey the different webs of sensory impressions (Degen and Rose, 2012; Duruz, 2011; Imai, 2010), among others. Studies such as these adopt different research configurations, where either the researcher does the walk alone, with their research participants/locals, or with their families and friends. These distinctions are important, given that (1) researchers and their informants may be regarded as co-researchers or as ‘copresent interlocutor[s]’ (Crang, 2003: 499) as iterated above; and (2) the researcher needs to be mindful of his/her own body that is likewise emplaced in space apart from their respondents. Both points relate to Pink’s (2009) discussion on the reflexivity of the sensory ethnographer where sensory experiences that combine those of the researcher and the researched culminate in how academic knowledge is produced.

In Imai’s (2010) research, for example, she employs what she calls ‘participant walkthroughs’ in the urban back alleys of Tokyo. She examines whether rapidly changing urban environments such as those in Tokyo would affect how these alleys are regarded in terms of their contemporary relevance that is pitted against new skyscrapers and the gentrification of certain city spaces. What Imai found was that everyday activities in such alleys reflect upon how the senses in combination add to the sustenance of neighborly ties. In addition, sharing ‘some intense sensual moments’ (Imai, 2010: 81) through gastronomic commensality also engenders a nostalgic desire and experience for a traditional way of life in these neighborhoods. The mix of the past and the present, as well as of encounters between long-time residents and newcomers, thereby fill these spaces with different sensory moments that engage the everyday actor who is emplaced in such locales. Conducting these sensory walks with her respondents therefore allows a closer ‘look’ at how social ties, everyday activities, and meanings of place transpire through sensuous lenses of experience and analysis.

While it is certainly not easy to separate the use of one’s varied senses as urban spaces are experienced, my own work on sociocultural meanings of smell in relation to race, class, and gender dynamics in historical and contemporary Singapore (Low, 2009) was an attempt to engage critically with the manifold meanings that are associated with olfaction in an industrialized nation. Reasons for focusing primarily on smell comprise (1) the need to maneuver beyond the imperialism of sight; (2) the need to devote attention to smell which has been neglected and hierarchized into a low status in the wider literature both in classical and contemporary periods across the various disciplines including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and history; and (3) the need to focus on one sense but not at the expense of neglecting the others, where I also attend adumbratively to how smell works alongside its counterparts (including attention that is paid to the lack of the sense of smell, otherwise known as anosmia).

Apart from conducting narrative interviews with respondents so as to engage with their olfactory formulations of selfhood and social others, other methods which I have employed include breaching experiments, analyses of archival data,

as well as participant observation that comprised walking around ethnic enclaves (viz. smellscape of 'Little India', 'Little Thailand', and 'Little Myanmar') together with individual respondents. The rationale for the method rests on the intent in comprehending how smells are assigned to different race groups, which would then explain why social proximity or distancing occurs. To uncover these olfactive assignments, one way was to ask respondents to narrate their sensory experiences while walking around these ethnic enclaves with me.

In addition to the above reason, another motivation to conduct smellscape walkabouts was to explicate how 'racial constructs may be extended to notions of *place*, where there exists a divide between the locals and the foreigners, brought about through olfactive and other corresponding assessments' (Low, 2009: 101). The election and execution of this method was therefore useful in addressing intersections of the visual and the olfactory towards informants' constructions of racial others in urbanity. The term 'smellscape' is borrowed from Porteous (1985), who posits that olfaction, similar to sight, may be place-related. Operating in tandem with the other senses, Porteous argues, smells offer further comprehensions of space. In order to address the sociocultural connections between smell and place, Porteous suggests three methods to study smellscape, namely (1) employing surveys; (2) carrying out 'smellwalks' or walking around the block; and (3) conducting content analysis through literature that deals with how smell is depicted.

My method, developed from Porteous's, included walking around these enclaves *together* with respondents. This was undertaken so that we could move from discussing imagined smells that were raised in the narrative interviews, to actual *in situ* smells that respondents would have discerned, contextualized in time and space. The incorporation of respondents into these walkabouts therefore connects to Degen's and Rose's (2012) suggestion of *in situ* corporeal experience discussed earlier. Overall, the method of smellscape walkabouts would contribute towards analyzing how '[r]acial communities become more pronounced when the olfactory enters the process of judging and likening one either to a "relevant" (we-group) or a "non-relevant" (they-group) racial grouping' (Low, 2009: 102). Such olfactory differentiation thus adds to interpretations of how urban spaces are perceived with smell and the other senses as media of appraisal.

I walked around Little India with Caitlin on a hot Saturday afternoon. This ethnic enclave is a residential and commercial arena that is filled with both shophouses and high-rise government flats. Having been described as 'hot, bustling, and laden with exotic smells', Little India is also perceived by some as 'one of the less antiseptic areas' in Singapore (Hill and Keenan, 2003). I asked Caitlin to meet me at Tekka Centre, a double-storey building that comprises a wet market, a food center, and shops that mainly sell traditional Indian wear and other inexpensive casual clothes. The moment she saw me at our designated meeting place, she could not hold herself back, exclaiming – with apparent discomfort – the smell that she discerned upon getting off a taxi: 'I caught a whiff of . . . oh my god! Can die! I don't understand why places must have different groups . . . like here a lot of Indians'

(Low, 2009: 105). As we proceeded from Tekka Centre towards a foodcourt across the road, Caitlin immediately pointed out the 'Indian food smell' which for her, 'it's very hard... to... differentiate between the smell of Indian food and smell of Indians, because... they are both moving into one' (p. 105). She further explained that as Indians consume a lot of curry, they therefore smelled like what they ate. Caitlin remarked: 'To put it brutally, they are very smelly, the place stinks! I don't like. And the people here stare. It unnerves me' (p. 105).

In another walkabout around Little India that I went on with Annette, her impression of the place culminated from a combination of both visual and olfactory appraisal. We visited a goldsmith shop in the area, where Annette noticed two groups of Indians whom she differentiated as Indian laborers from South Asia and as Singaporeans. She confirmed her assumption through these two senses by saying that the former, clad in faded shirts and creased pants, did smell, while the latter, dressed in polo tee-shirts, bermudas and with a female wearing a Punjabi outfit, did not give off any offensive odors. Annette's experience is similarly reflected in the judgment of Caitlin, who claimed that those who dressed smartly – 'shades on him, a short-sleeved shirt, like a very cool Singaporean' (Low, 2009: 108) – would not smell. Conversely, she maintained that for 'the laborers right... they really dress up to the nines, shirt and pants... It's always mismatched... but that's not the point. But you know they are different' (p. 108). Caitlin stated: 'when you look at them, you know they are laborers. When you know that they are laborers, you expect a certain kind of smell' (p. 108).

Golden Mile Shopping Complex, otherwise known as 'Little Thailand', is a multi-storey complex that houses more than 400 shops, 68 residential units, and 226 offices (Teo, 2006). First built in the 1970s, it has since become a favorite haunt of the Thai community in Singapore – mainly construction workers who gather at the complex to chat, drink and eat over the weekends. An 'acrid, numbing smell of the bamboo shoots and fermented fish paste sold in the fresh food stalls' (Wee, 2001) greets visitors to the building, where it provides a sensorial experience of 'sights, sounds and smells that rival those of bustling Bangkok' (Kong, 1992). Rows of shops that skirt around the outer and inner perimeters of the 41-year-old building sell a combination of prepacked foodstuffs as well as raw meats and innards, fresh vegetables, spices, *sriracha* (hot sauce) and many more Thai products and produce, which all add to a peculiar whiff of pungent, stale, and somewhat overpowering (fish sauce) smells. These culminate in a sensory kaleidoscope which, to say the least, is a weighted affront to one's (uninitiated) sensibilities. If otherwise, one might also be enticed into shimmying along with the luring beats of Thai music that formed an audio backdrop to the entire Thai sensescape.

Such sensory 'assaults' are further compounded by the many travel agencies that operate bus tours to Malaysia, such as Johor and Kuala Lumpur, or the Singapore-Haadyai route, which account for the chattering crowds that gather here to begin their travels. Golden Mile is known to some as a seedy place, where many bars, nightclubs and discotheques occupy the basements that provide hedonistic outlets for pleasures others would frown at. Having walked around the shops in the

complex for about 40 minutes or so, I saw a security guard on the second floor and approached him to find out more about his experience. He had been working for about two months at that time, and when I asked him what it was like to be in charge of security, he shared that the Thai workers would usually get drunk, turn aggressive, and eventually end up fighting. Calling them ‘crooks, thieves and drunks’ (Low, 2009: 109), the guard cautioned me to be careful since they might steal my wallet and also give me a beating. His final words for me were these: ‘This whole place stinks – alcohol, the food they eat, the building also [sic] very old and dirty. As dirty as Bangkok’ (p. 109).

It is clear from the above examples that walkabouts in such ethnic enclaves provide a sensory way of identifying and appraising foreign bodies in the city. How urban spaces such as ethnic enclaves are experienced have been deliberated through one’s sensory, embodied experiences. Such identification is intertwined with processes of polarization, inclusion and exclusion as can be discerned from the experiences of Caitlin, Annette and the security guard – which reflect upon both the ‘phenomenology of place’ and the ‘politics of space’ (Pink, 2009: 23). The city is therefore to be sensorily studied through a rehabilitation of one’s sensory perception (Meyer, 2008). Similar to Merleau-Ponty’s viewpoint that lived experiences may be examined through the body, Lefebvre’s (2004) notion of the ‘rhythmanalyst’ is likewise built on the premise that social space is primarily experienced through the body first and foremost (Degen, 2010). Degen articulates a few important points that reflect upon Lefebvre’s idea of rhythmanalysis. First, by undertaking rhythmanalysis, the ‘embeddedness of social relations in the sensory makeup of space’ may thus be empirically realized (2010: 24). Second, the rhythmanalyst is not only making observations through visual perception, but ‘listens out, experiences movements in everyday life, the cyclical comings and goings of people, [and] the subtle transformations of space’ (p. 24). And third, power relations form an important element of how urban rhythms are produced (cf. Guy, 2007). In other words, the rhythmanalyst needs to ‘not only hear words, speeches, noises and sounds for he is able to listen to a house, a street, a city as he listens to a symphony or an opera’. Instead, ‘he seeks to find out how this music is composed, who plays it and for whom’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 229). The issue of power and sensory experiences will be raised below when I discuss the construction of heritage by state institutions, and race relations in colonial contexts. The discussion is framed using content analysis which I address next.

The senses in text

Where the above section dealt with how sensory ethnographies may be produced, this section examines select ethnographic excerpts of urban experiences. Scholars have predicated their sensory research on excerpts drawn from a wide-ranging spectrum of texts including journals, newspaper accounts, films, letters, poems, religious texts, travel diaries and novels, among others. Analyses of these texts that shed light on broader sensory experiences and society have appeared in such works as Smith’s

(2006) investigation of race relations and slavery in the US between the 18th and 19th centuries, Jung's (2011) ethnographic study on perfumery arts in Yemen, Thompson's (2005) work on the cultural meanings of sound and technology in the film industry, and the cultural and aesthetic values of tactility as explored by Tuan (2005), to name a few examples. In concert, sensory scholarship is concerned with theorizing the symbolic underpinnings of the different senses that are employed in varying socio-cultural contexts, where the senses have been interrogated in relation to politics, modernization, and identity formation across a range of time periods and societies. My discussion to follow deliberates on identity issues and power, where I develop Kaufmann's (2011) point on studying social actors and their relation to urban environments as iterated earlier. I explore how heritage trails in Singapore convey particular sensory ways of understanding history, as well as race relations and different city spaces in the context of colonial Singapore.

In relation to Lefebvre's reminder that power relations are pertinent towards comprehending how urbanity is both produced and consumed, the case of walking heritage trails marked out by the National Heritage Board, Singapore, is one that exemplifies such dynamics, as these trails come with a menu of suggested bodily performances and attention that is recommended to the urban walker or *Wandersmänner* (de Certeau, 1984). That is to say, heritage trails may be perceived as supervised walking (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008), although it is equally true that walkers may or may not elect to follow what has been recommended in the experience of such (programmatically) trails. In any case, the suggested menu is an approach through which the transmission of knowledge of history as heritage is sensorily conveyed (cf. Low, 2010), where walkers are invited to take in senses of the past, reminded through these trails that therefore emplace experience. The consumption of heritage trails operates on two levels. Discursive consumption takes place when would-be walkers look through trail brochures that are intended as guides, pointing out various parts of a trail that become infused with selected nostalgic memories and experiences of the past that are vivified by sensory impressions. The other means of consuming such trails would be to 'do the walk' so as to physically realize state orchestrated history and heritage as embodied consumers.

In the first instance, descriptions of various parts of the trails are complemented by sensory vivification. At the Singapore River Trail, for example, schoolchildren are enticed to 'feel, see, smell and hear' the varied experiences of pioneering figures in Singapore through a range of exhibits that are both interactive and presented through the use of media technologies.¹ Similar sensory encouragement is also found in another trail, named the Jalan Besar Trail. Consumers are cajoled to try local delicacies including roti prata and the Chinese buns that are 'filled with minced pork, a piece of chicken, and half a shitake mushroom'.² These everyday acts of sensory consumption are not without social meanings. Consumers are encouraged to partake in sensory delights of the past that therefore bring to life episodes of everyday life that have taken place in the city in days gone by. At the same time, if heritage is to be emplaced in various parts of the city such as in heritage trails, then such emplacement may be experienced in sensory ways that

therefore make the past relevant in embodied ways. Sensory consumption in going through these trails is thus also sociohistorical consumption of historical experiences that characterize the meaningfulness of place in Singapore's history. Following Kusenbach's (2003) suggestion of the 'go-along' as an ethnographic tool, going on these trails together with informants would therefore contribute towards participant observation that goes beyond visual ethnographic awareness and documentation.

Even if such go-alongs may not be effectively realized, the various sensory descriptions of different trail spots would also serve as an avenue through which the experience of place in the city come with sensory residues that reflect in embodied ways, the presence of social relations and group dynamics occurring in urbanity. This is where my third example of textual sensory awareness of the city proves relevant. Sensory methodologies, while placing emphasis on bodily experiences of urbanity, can likewise be analytically located in texts – both scholarly and otherwise – that similarly reflect upon sensory experiences of the city. Building upon an ongoing research project where I am working on documenting and analyzing the meanings of the senses in historical contexts of Asian societies, I wish to highlight one source of archival data that forms part of this study – namely local media reports published in *The Straits Times* – dating from the colonial periods of British governance of Singapore (1800s to mid-1900s). These textual accounts of how Singapore smelled, looked, and felt in earlier times lend fruitful avenues for which sensory analyses of urban life may be undertaken. At the same time, situating scholarly examinations of such texts also demonstrate that instead of being held captive by language which for some, does not effectively convey sensory sentiments, one should look to language in converse as a credible and important source through which representation in urban ethnographic research may be accomplished across a range of texts.

Such representation through language is also the stance adopted by Csordas (1999), who makes a connection between language and experience and phenomenologically suggests that language calls forth our 'being-in-the-world' where attention needs to be placed upon 'bodiliness' in different data forms. More pertinently, I emphasize, the *sociality* of the senses in urban contexts is analyzed accordingly in texts such as newspaper articles. In a letter written to the *Straits Times* dated 8 October 1915, titled 'Scents of Singapore', one is able to discern the sensorial-racial dynamics of place, indicated through olfactory discourses. The writer, who took a 'sojourn in the East', observes that Singapore as a city is filled with scents that are both pleasant and otherwise. Such demarcations are also racially differentiated, as the following examples indicate (*Straits Times*, 8 October 1915):

Right across the road one inhales the nauseous odors of dried copra pressed by machinery into liquid oil, and the refuse converted into cake for fattening cattle. Coconut oil is well-known by our soldiers at the Front as a favorite adjunct in the cookery of our gallant Indians. Again that smell is reminiscent of the Chitty Festivals when rich and poor alike anoint their bodies copiously with the oil substance.

A pretty custom amongst some of the Chinese ladies in Singapore is when paying morning calls to present their hostess with a tiny packet of white tissue paper containing fragrant blossoms, freshly gathered and still wet with morning dew, this placed in saucer with a little water which give forth a refreshing scent for hours. This is a scent unlike the heavy frangipani which sheds its blossom round the many burial grounds outside the mosques in delicate profusion of soft yellows.

While the above sensory details demarcate not only different city spaces that are drenched with contrasting smells, these scents are also connected to racial groups that thereby distinguish these varied smells in terms of racial associations and habits among the locals. In another article, odors have been identified as being transgressive; this time, foregrounding unwelcomed pungent smells emanating from hawkers, judged by 'bankers who dislike culinary odors' (*Straits Times*, 11 June 1931).

There was an amusing passage in a discussion by the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board today of the objections voiced by the members of the Chartered Bank mess to the nuisance caused by hawkers who congregate in a corner of the Padang overlooked by the bank . . . members complained of fumes from cooking and noise up to 11.30pm.

In response to the above complaint, a certain 'Mr Lai Tet Loke' had this to say:

I think the charge relating to smell is a frivolous complaint. I have had experience of certain Europeans who drink and smoke that their sense of smell is not very sensitive . . . I remember about 15 years ago that a dead cat located itself – before it was dead – in a drain in European business premises and the European tenants went in and out for a week without noticing it. [Laughter] I noticed it myself, and when I called the attention of a European gentleman to it he could not locate it, although it was only 10 feet away. [Renewed laughter]

The verdict arising from the sensory complaint was that hawkers were to be 'observed by departmental officers in order to see whether the nuisance was serious enough to call for action'. Ostensibly, examples from both newspaper articles relate to the emplacement of the senses, racial habits, and racial distinctions when it comes to sensory appraisals of Singapore in colonial times. Furthermore, content analysis of articles such as these provide the necessary insights into how places are sensorially animated and experienced, throwing ethnographic light upon colonial-local relations transpiring in the city. The urban is therefore experienced through the senses. By adopting methodologies that produce sensory ethnographies, an articulation of sensory experiences in urbanity reveal how the city is regarded in terms of racialism and other social encounters where colonial othering takes place through judgments of sensory affront, and where heritage and national identity take on embodied relevance.

Concluding remarks

In order to better apprehend the intersections between sensory epistemology, methodology and the pursuit of urban ethnographic scholarship, this paper has presented discussions on the development of sensory scholarship along with a range of methodologies. Embodied research that is geared towards appraising urban life need a combination of both textual and non-textual methodologies that in synchrony elucidate the importance of the senses in terms of their social meanings and values, and how they imbue places with meanings. By attending to both sensory experience and analysis, this intersection would then serve as a crucial bridge that connects the physical world as well as a textual world (Highmore, 2005) which requires close sensory analyses as outlined in the above discussion on ethnographic excerpts.

Sensory methodologies and ethnography are not merely about generating and disseminating richer ethnographic materials (Atkinson et al., 2008). Sensory modalities are, in fact, 'modes of order' and 'means of cultural representation' (Atkinson et al., 2008) that therefore need to be analyzed through ethnographic portrayal and examination within broader frames of how social life is organized and maintained. In other words, these methodologies afford socio-experiential ways of knowing and of generating knowledge. In these processes, the body of the researcher/ethnographer is also a crucial ingredient towards realizing such methodological and analytical endeavors, together with those whom s/he studies.

By surveying the gamut of urban sensory methodologies in this paper, what may be achieved, it is hoped, is that they lend further insights into, first, urban racial dynamics and how they play out in both colonial and post-colonial milieus, and second, urban historicities and how space and place assume heritage relevance through sensory animation of the past. An Asian city such as Singapore therefore comes with a sense of duality (cf. Watson, 2011), where the Singapore urban space is laced with sensorial-racial segregation and with sensorial-temporalities of the past in the present.

Notes

1. *Singapore River Trail brochure*, n.d. This trail introduces monuments and important historical sites dotting the banks of the Singapore River. The 6 km river is regarded as an important waterway that is apposite with the growth and development of Singapore.
2. *Jalan Besar Trail brochure*, n.d. Jalan Besar was one of the first roads to be built in Singapore. The area was formerly a swampland.

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