Tullett on Kettler, 'The Smell of Slavery: Olfactory Racism and the Atlantic World'

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Reviewed by William Tullett (Anglia Ruskin University) Published on H-Early-America (March, 2022) Commissioned by Troy Bickham (Texas A&M University)

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Those familiar with Andrew Kettler’s earlier publications on the olfactory worlds of missionaries, botanists, and Victorian perfumers will have eagerly awaited the publication of his first book.[1] The Smell of Slavery does not disappoint. Kettler’s book is a timely volume. It has emerged in the same year as another major interdisciplinary publication on the relationship between racism, colonialism, and olfaction, Hsuan Hsu’s The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics (2020). But it has also appeared at a moment when protests against racism and the global spread of COVID-19 have refocused attention on the relationship between air, breath, and inequality. Kettler’s book, when read together with the concluding words of Melanie Kiechle’s Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America (2017), signals a new and welcome turn within sensory history toward greater engagement with the contemporary politics of inequality.

In short, Kettler’s book takes us on a journey through the smells of the Atlantic slave trade. Along the way we move from London theater audiences and readers, onto ships across the Middle Passage, through the olfactory cultures of African communities, and into the smellscapes of plantations. A preface gives us a taste of the chronological and thematic range—quoting from sources that range from William Shakespeare to mid-nineteenth-century racist pseudoscience—and sets up one of the central arguments of the book: that racialized olfactory discourses offered up a tool for making African bodies amenable to commodification and governance.

Kettler’s methodological approach, which is outlined in the following introduction, is explicitly interdisciplinary, engaging “more with structures of philosophy than the rigors of disciplinary history” (p. 36). Here Kettler also offers a summary of the wider developments that ostensibly allowed smell to further its function as a marker of racial otherness: fear of miasmatic smells; the rise of deodorized cleanliness; the combined assault of the Reformation, printing press, and Scientific Revolution on the epistemological value of smell; and the civilizing of manners. While they usefully underscore the transformations Kettler identifies, it would have been good to recognize that these narratives are certainly not uniformly accepted by early modern scholars.[2] Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the introduction is to support Kettler’s identification of the early modern period as a significant moment for thinking about smell and racialization. The breadth of reading and generosity of citation on show in the introduction will be a useful resource for scholars who seek to pursue further research in the area.
In the first two chapters, Kettler sets out the role of smell in racialization: from metropolitan renderings of African bodies in theater and travel literature in chapter 1 to the role of colonial climatology, medicine, and natural history in chapter 2. In the first chapter, Kettler charts the evolution of the olfactory stereotypes attached to African bodies, from earlier “cultural” ideas about smells caused by cosmetic traditions or sanitary practices found in travel narratives to the rise of “biological” ideas about the “foulness,” visual and olfactory, of black skin found in theater and verse (pp. 54, 60-61). The latter was supplemented by the adoption and recycling of Aesop’s fable concerning the impossibility of washing the “Blackamoore” white and representations of African bodies as at once dangerously sensual and disgusting (pp. 70-71). The circulation of these stereotypes, Kettler convincingly argues, primed the English nose with an olfactory prejudice that was then acted on in the context of the slave trade. In chapter 2, these noses, primed by metropolitan culture, linked ideas about odorous African bodies to the olfactory environments of Africa and the Americas. Medical writers and natural historians yoked African bodies and African climates together: both were pungent, miasmatic, and putrid. The jump from stagnant African airs to the bodies that inhabited them was then reversed on plantations where writers warned about situating slave quarters so that their odors would not incommode white plantation owners. By the late eighteenth century, ideas about the innately foul odor of African bodies had been biologized as a form of leprosy. Christianity and the European “civilizing” mission were set up as the cures for the newly naturalized stink ostensibly emanating from African spaces and bodies (p. 121).

However, this is not simply a story of racialization, othering, and stereotyping through stench. Having set out the development of a “false sensory consciousness” by elites and slaveholders that equated a racialized African body with foul odor, the second half of the book moves on to more contested terrain (p. 30). Chapters 3 and 4 track modes of African olfactory consciousness and attempts by slaves to use smell as a tool of resistance against ship captains and slaveholders. In chapter 3, Kettler traces some of the olfactory cultures of western, central, and southern Africa. The cosmetic use of soaps, herbs, and oils was noted in travel writing on Africa across the early modern period, while they also recorded olfactory practices that involved the use of noses and perfumes in religious rituals, royal celebrations, and healing the sick. While Europeans implicitly claimed that African noses were not bothered by the stench of slave ships, it is clear from writings by freed slaves that they were. In fact, Kettler suggests, slaves may have deliberately used the creation of stink through defecation as a form of resistance: to encourage the more regular airing and cleaning of the ships in which they were kept. In chapter 4, Kettler continues the previous focus on olfactory resistance by examining the spiritual uses of smell among slave communities. African slaves used herbs, roots, burnt rags, and other scents for a variety of purposes that included spiritual practice, disguises against slavers’ use of tracking dogs, and warnings to slave owners of potential resistance. Colonists were clearly frightened by the use of herbs, roots, and smokes deployed by slave communities, as the attempt to stamp out Obeah suggested. A short conclusion takes the ideas discussed in the other chapters into the later nineteenth century, makes the argument that the deodorization of English culture involved the displacement of smell onto other ostensibly odorous African bodies, and finally calls for greater attention to the role of the senses in creating subconscious forms of racialization.

The book shifts throughout between deft synthesis of an impressive range of scholarship, close readings of a wide variety of print and archival sources, and a passionate, sometimes polemic, denunciation of racist sensory tropes. The originality and breadth of reference on show should ensure a wide readership among historical scholars: it will be crucial reading for those researching sensory,
Atlantic, early modern, and olfactory histories. From a pedagogical perspective, the book will be particularly useful for those who want to give students a standout example of how to inventively extract the olfactory past from source material by reading through the lens of period-specific sensory languages (as in the discussion of “foul” in chapter 1) or by reading later material for the inherited olfactory cultures of earlier periods (the use of the Federal Writer’s Project material in chapter 4).

However, Kettler’s book should also have a much wider influence beyond the bounds of history. Scholars in sensory studies, a highly interdisciplinary field, will find this work a rewarding read. The first half of the book provides an instructive case study in how the senses can be used to socialize and naturalize forms of difference, thereby reinforcing hierarchies or inequalities of power, which will chime with work by legal and communications scholars.[3] The second half of the book also speaks to an emerging scholarship that centers on the relationship between olfaction, resistance, and contemporary politics.[4] One small criticism that might be laid at the door of the press rather than the author: given the intellectually generous footnotes on offer, a bibliography would have been a very helpful navigational aid for the reader. Nonetheless, this is an important book and one that, even without the generous pricing by Cambridge University Press, should find a place on many a historian’s and sensory scholar’s (physical or virtual) bookshelf.

Notes


[2]. For example, Mark Jenner has queried how useful these combined narratives about smell and modernity are. See Mark Jenner, “Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011): 335-51. Stuart Clark has also put pressure on the idea that the seventeenth century, per Michel Foucault and others, marked the moment when the eye rose to its modern prominence. See Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).


