

TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF SMELL, OR, THE FOUL AND THE FRAGRANT IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Despite the intense critical interest in the body, we remain firmly within the aesthetics that we have inherited from the nineteenth century in which only two senses, vision and hearing, are considered. In an attempt to redress the neglect of the sense of smell in criticism, the article examines the olfactory landscapes in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), to show how these novels offer highly intriguing configurations of smell, gender, and ethnicity. The analyses reveal that the three novels engage in re-coding of the conventional olfactory landscapes: foul smells, constructed throughout the Enlightenment as the sense of unreason, madness, savagery, and animality, are reconstructed by the three writers as the sense of love and relationship, while fragrant scents become markers of falsehood and death. Morrison, Kincaid, and Winterson capitalize on the conventional gendering of smell as a female (not to say feminine) sense and expose the conventionality of representing women in terms of "nice" smells both by explicit references to the scents' sexual powers and by making "unpleasant" odors carry the same power of sexual attraction as scents. Finally, the article proposes that smell may offer a distinct epistemological alternative to sight and hearing.

KEY WORDS

The Autobiography of My Mother, *Sula*, *Written on the Body*, aesthetics, body, gender, olfaction / smell.

RESUMEN

A pesar del intenso interés de la crítica por el cuerpo y a pesar de las declaraciones de que "(la) estética nace como un discurso del cuerpo" (Eagle-

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ton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 13), continuamos encontrándonos firmemente fijados en la estética heredada del siglo XIX en la cual solamente se tienen en cuenta dos sentidos: la vista y el oído. En un intento de enmendar la negligencia de la crítica en cuanto al sentido del olor, el artículo examina los paisajes del olfato en *Sula* (1973), de Toni Morrison, *The Autobiography of my Mother* (1996), de Jamaica Kincaid, y *Written on the Body* (1992), de Jeanette Winterson, con el fin de mostrar cómo en estas novelas se ofrecen configuraciones enigmáticas del olor, del género y de la etnicidad. El análisis revela que en las tres novelas se intenta conseguir una nueva codificación de los paisajes convencionales del olor: el olor fétido, construido durante la Ilustración como el sentido de lo irrazonable, de la locura, del salvajismo y de la animalidad, es reconstruido por las tres escritoras y convertido en el sentido del amor y de lo relacional, mientras que los olores fragantes se convierten en marcadores de la falsedad y de la muerte. Morrison, Kincaid y Winterson aprovechan la asociación convencional de género que convierte al olor en un sentido asociado a la mujer (por no decir en algo femenino) y desvelan la convención de presentar a las mujeres en términos de olores “buenos” (o/y “amables”), tanto a través de referencias explícitas al poder sexual de los olores como haciendo que los olores “desagradables” tengan el mismo poder de atracción sexual que los perfumes. Finalmente el artículo sugiere que el olor puede ofrecer una alternativa epistemológica distinta a la de la vista y el oído.

PALABRAS CLAVE

The Autobiography of my Mother, *Sula*, *Written on the Body*, estética, cuerpo, género, olfato, olor.

RÉSUMÉ

Malgré l'intense intérêt que la critique a porté au corps et malgré les déclarations telles que “l'esthétique est née d'un discours du corps” (Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*), nous restons fermement enracinés dans l'esthétique héritée du XIX^e siècle où seuls sont pris en considération deux sens: la vue et l'ouïe. Dans une tentative de corriger cette négligence critique du sens de l'odorat, l'article examine les paysages olfactifs de *Sula* (1973) de Toni Morrison, de *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) de Jamaica Kincaid et de *Written on the Body* (1992) de Jeanette Winterson, afin de montrer comment ces romans présentent des configurations fort étonnantes d'odeur, de genre et d'ethnicité. L'analyse révèle que les trois romans entraînent une recodification des paysages conventionnels de l'odeur: le fétide, construction du Siècle des Lumières, associé à la déraison, la folie, la sauvagerie et l'animalité, est reconstruit par ces trois auteurs en tant que sens de l'amour et du relationnel, alors que les parfums fragants sont des marqueurs de la fausseté et de la mort. Morrison, Kincaid et Winterson exploitent le caractère conventionnel du genre du sens de l'odorat considéré comme un sens femelle (pour ne pas dire féminin) et démasquent les conventions autour des représentations de femmes en termes d'odeurs “bien”, à la fois par des références explicites au pouvoir sexuel

des parfums et en attribuant aux odeurs “désagréables” le même pouvoir d’attraction sexuelle qu’aux parfums. Enfin, l’article suggère que l’odorat peut présenter une alternative épistémologique distincte de la vue et de l’ouïe.

MOTS-CLÉ

The Autobiography of My Mother, Sula, Written on the Body, esthétique, corps, genre, odorat//odeur.

Écrite, le merde ne sent pas.
–Roland Barthes

In the act of seeing one remains oneself, in smelling one dissolves.
–Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno

The multi-million dollar fragrance industry, the growing interest in aromatherapy, and the numerous TV commercials and advertisements presenting a variety of odor-killers powerfully focus our attention on olfaction, scent, and stench in our everyday life. Eradicating foul odors and enhancing scents of attraction, we are daily involved in a manipulation of our olfactory universe—and of the olfactory identities of our bodies.

This public visibility of smell (to mix my metaphors) is a recent phenomenon. For centuries, the olfactory was of marginal interest to the philosophical, religious, and scientific discourses¹. Kant’s dismissal of the sense of smell is a telling example of how smell was “maligned by philosophers” (Le Guérer, p. 194): “To which organic sense do we owe the least and which seems to be the most dispensable? The sense of smell. It does not pay us to cultivate it or to refine it in order to gain enjoyment; this sense can pick up more objects of aversion than of pleasure (especially in crowded places) and, besides, the pleasure coming from the sense of smell cannot be other than fleeting and transitory” (qtd. in Le Guérer, p. 46).

As several critics have pointed out, the marginalization of smell can be linked to the goal of the Enlightenment project to deodorize and standardize the public and the private spheres and to the general tendency to privilege the intellect at the cost of the body (Corbin, Elias,

¹ In her survey of smell in the philosophical discourse Annick le Guérer notices that only three philosophers (Fourier, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche) held positive views on smell. Of the three Nietzsche was the one who most radically reevaluated the sense of smell, linking it to wisdom, mental presentation, and intuitive knowledge (pp. 181-187).

Classen *et al.*). The cleaning up of smells was accompanied by an increased medical concern with light, which by the mid-nineteenth century led to the "great swing in attitudes that was to give uncontested supremacy to the visual" (Corbin, p. 154)². The regression of smell was seen as a necessary part of the civilizing process by both Darwin and Freud. Sigmund Freud, for instance, postulates a direct connection between olfaction and sexuality; he sees the diminution of olfactory stimuli as the result of man's erect position³. The gradual atrophy of smell, he alleges, was accompanied by an increased role of visual stimulation in sexual attraction.

Even today there is relatively little scientific interest in the olfactory, although one can find some signs of change. Less than two decades ago smell was put on the socio-historical map by Alain Corbin's dazzling study, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (originally published in French in 1982, and translated into English in 1986), in which the author traces changes in the perception of odors in the medical, public health, urban studies, and literary discourses in France in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. In his highly acclaimed *Smell: The Secret Seducer* (1994), the Dutch psychologist Piet Vroon demonstrates that the sense of smell is vital to our experience of the world. In *Jacobson's Organ* (2000), Lyall Watson examines the diverse roles of smell in humans, plants, and animals. These and other books signal a growing interest in olfaction among scientists.

In literary criticism smell is undoubtedly one of the most neglected subjects. The only book-length investigation into literary imagination of smell to date seems to be Hans J. Rindisbacher's *The Smell of Books*:

² However, as some studies have shown, the hegemony of vision has its beginning in the culture and philosophy of ancient Greece. It may be argued, though, that ocularcentrism acquires distinctive, and particularly ominous, configurations in modernity. This argument is forwarded in the collection of essays *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, edited by David Michael Levin. Martin Jay explores manifestations of *hostility* to visual primacy in the French philosophical thought of the twentieth-century.

³ See footnote 1 to part IV of *Civilization and its Discontents* (pp. 51-52). For a presentation of recent scientific evidence of the way in which odors affect human sexual lives and relationships see *The Scent of Eros* by Kohl and Francoeur. The authors focus on the production and function of pheromones in erotic attraction and repulsion. The results of new scientific discoveries and theories are promptly popularized through the mass media. The cover of *Time* magazine, February 15, 1993, for instance, was entitled "The Chemistry of Love—Scientists are Discovering that Romance is a Biological Affair".

A Cultural-Historical Study of Olfactory Perception in Literature (1992), which discusses mostly German and French texts with an occasional reference to Russian or Italian literature⁴. The absence of critical investigation into the representation of the sense of smell in literature is particularly surprising in the light of the general attention focused on the representation of the body in Western culture. Written large in recent critical discourse, the body has been gendered, raced, and classed, but it remains a strangely *odorless* body.

And yet one can find plenty of references to smell in literature. Granted, the sense of smell seldom plays an important structural and thematic role in, especially, pre-modernist literary texts⁵. It is in modernism that the olfactory first surfaces as an essential element of the plot in the novel. Rindisbacher goes so far as to seek in the olfactory the defining feature of modernism (p. 146). Indeed, even a casual reader of the modernist novel will remember the powerful function of smell as the hinge on which Proust's monumental *Remembrance of Things Past* turns. The odors in Joyce's *Ulysses* constitute a universe in itself; the stench of the decomposing body in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* seems to emanate from the pages of the novel as if the book contained a scratch-and-sniff patch; odors and fragrances powerfully participate in creating the cross-sexual atmosphere of Barnes's *Nightwood*; in *Brave New World* Huxley shows how manipulation of odors may be used to discipline emotions.

However, the novel which is most centrally concerned with olfaction is Patrick Süskind's bestseller *Perfume*, published in German 1985, and translated into English just a year later, in 1986. Süskind's novel is exceptional in its use of smell as the main theme and structuring device. "Never before Süskind has the olfactory been used to such an extent to carry the plot structure of a narrative", claims Rindisbacher (p. 298). The novel is also exceptional in its dominance of olfactory over visu-

⁴ There are, naturally, many more or less incidental references to smell in books and articles whose primary focus is on other issues. This, for instance, is the case in Stallybrass and White's study on transgression. The first version of my essay was drafted early in 1998; in early 2000 I was surprised to find Alison Booth's article on smell in *Narrative*, the journal that I contacted for publication of my essay. The coincidence of Booth and me sharing an interest in a very similar area may be a sign of olfaction being on the upswing of literary critical discourse.

⁵ In many novels of, say, the nineteenth century, references to smell were employed in the service of characterization. For example, in Balzac's or Dickens' novels, foul smells often signal moral corruption and/or a low social status of a particular character.

al imagery, and in its richness of the vocabulary linked to smell. It is tempting to see *Perfume* as heralding an “olfactory turn” in literature.

In an attempt to usher such a turn and to redress the neglect of the sense of smell in criticism, in what follows I examine the olfactory landscapes in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992) to show how these novels offer highly intriguing configurations of smell, gender, and ethnicity. More importantly, focusing on the three novels’ subversion of the Enlightenment coding of smell, I want to show how attending to the sense of smell helps us better to understand the destabilizing effects of narrative projects of Morrison, Winterson, and Kincaid. Needless to say, in literature smells –just as taste or touch– are not sensorily available; they are always linguistically mediated. Language does not smell, as Barthes emphatically puts it. Thus my investigation into the olfactory in literature entails an examination of what ideas, desires, feelings, and beliefs the textual references to smell set in motion in the three novels.

Let me begin by saying that the olfactory universes of the three novels invite the reader to re-vision the conventional links between excrement and death, and odorlessness and life⁶. Unconventionally, in the novels the odorless and/or the fragrant often signals death, sterility, and oppression while stench tends to be presented as the carrier of love, vitality, and freedom from social conventions. Moreover, the narratives explore and often counter the dominant Enlightenment coding of smell, according to which “foul smelling rubbish appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and the fragrant promises to buttress its stability” (Corbin, p. 5).

Waste, especially bodily waste, since the late eighteenth century recognized as perilous to public health, is in the Western culture of today contained in special places (toilets) which remove the waste from the public eye (and nose) and which create a physical and symbolic barrier between life and death, public and private, clean and dirty, and the civilized and primitive. In *Sula*, many major episodes are linked to a toilet, a bathroom, or an outhouse; waste and dirt, I would risk saying, become a structuring element in the novel. Helene and Nel’s traumatic journey south, Eva’s saving of the baby Plum’s life, Sula’s over-

⁶ In his fascinating study of the emotion of disgust and its political and social consequences William Ian Miller points out that “So low is smell that the best smell is not a good smell but no smell at all” (p. 75).

hearing of her mother's confession of liking but not loving her, Nel's nauseous reaction to her husband's and Sula's betrayal, Ajax's desertion of Sula, all of these incidents are marked by the sign of the outhouse/bodily waste. Yet the meanings that the text weaves together often subvert the cultural coding of bodily effluvium and stench in terms of mortality and decomposition.

In one remarkable scene, for instance, the stench of the outhouse constitutes the olfactory environment of Eva's act of motherly love. Her baby Plum's bowel movements stopped and the child gagging on his own painful cries, Eva takes him to the outhouse:

Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. And now that it was over, Eva squatted there wondering why she had come all the way out there to free his stools, and what was she doing down on her haunches with her beloved baby boy warmed by her body in the almost total darkness, her shins and teeth freezing, her nostrils assailed (p. 34).

What we see here is a textual weaving of a rich web of connections between food, life, love, death, and excrement. The stench of the outhouse marks the territory of the final outpost of life; it constitutes a threshold between life and death. It is in this olfactory zone of decomposition that the squatting Eva "re-births" her son.

Eva's motherly love is linked not only to the stench of the outhouse but also, twice, to another odor, that of "cooked flesh". In the first incident she pours kerosene over her now drug-addicted adult son Plum and ignites fire. But before setting fire to him, she gathers Plum in her arms and rocks him as if he were a baby. Eva's murder is an act of love for her son and, the text suggests, it is also interpreted as such by Plum who finds the smell of kerosene "deeply attractive" and feels "baptized" and "blessed" by it (p. 47). In the second instance the smell of Hannah's burning flesh makes the one-legged Eva throw herself through the window in a heroic attempt to rescue her daughter.

While odors of cooked flesh and excrement pervade the scenes of motherly love, floral scents accompany death and moral corruption in the olfactory universe of *Sula*. The "sweet odor" of gardenias which Helene's prostitute mother smells of accompanies the funeral atmos-

phere of Nel's great-grandmother. With her daughter dead, Eva is found by the forsythia bushes, sweat peas, and clover. Perhaps the most explicit instance of such textual re-marking of smell is the cluster of olfactory images round Sula's love affair with Ajax. Their passionate relationship comes to an end when Sula cleans the bathroom and makes the bed. To Ajax the new cleanliness of the place emanates the "scent of the nest" (p. 133), raising his fears of entrapment in a conventional life style. The climax comes when Ajax sees Sula "lying on fresh white sheets, *wrapped in the deadly odor of freshly applied cologne*" (p. 134; emphasis added) and decides to leave her. The scent of cologne chases Ajax away; it signals Sula's betrayal of all she has stood for so far, most of all of her ability to see through (and disregard) the veneer of "civilized" middle-class behavior. This uncanny faculty of Sula is evoked by a striking combination of the ocular and the olfactory when one of the scared inhabitants of the Bottom claims that when Sula looks at people it is as if she were "smellin' you with her eyes and don't like your soap" (p. 117).

Grieving after Ajax's departure, Sula sings herself to sleep in which she leaves the "chill of alabaster" to return to the "dark, sweet stench of loam" (p. 137). This "dark, sweet stench of loam" is linked to the scene of Sula's and Nel's first shared experience of sexual excitement as they dig a hole in the earth with their twigs (pp. 57-59) shortly before the death of Chicken Little. In much of the criticism on *Sula*, the scene is interpreted as lesbian love-making⁷. What is important in the context of my analysis is the fact that the scene's olfactory aura becomes a marker in Sula's and Nel's relationships. Pained on having discovered the love affair between her husband and Sula, Nel retreats into her bathroom hoping to release her sorrow: "Once inside, she sank to the tile floor next to the toilet. On her knees, her hand on the cold rim of the bathtub, she waited for something to happen ... inside. There was stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves. She thought of the women at Chicken Little's funeral. The women who shrieked over the bier and the lip of the open grave" (p. 107). Unlike the women, though, Nel cannot release her pain in a cry: "She waited. The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl. But it did not come. The odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled. And final-

⁷ For a discussion of the "lesbian issue" in *Sula* see Barbara Johnson's "Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula*, *Passing*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Accused*".

ly there was nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat. She stood up frightened” (p. 108). It is only after Sula’s death that Nel understands that she has been grieving for her girlfriend and not for her husband Jude. At this point, at the very end of the novel, the odor marking Sula and Nel’s friendship returns and is released in a cry of sorrow: “Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things... ‘O Lord, Sula,’ [Nel] cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.’ It was a fine cry –loud and strong– but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (p. 174).

My analysis so far reveals that that foul smell, constructed throughout the Enlightenment as the sense of unreason, madness, savagery, and animality, is reconstructed by Morrison as the sense of love and relationship. Fragrant scents, on the other hand, become the markers of falsehood and death. To say this, though, is to get dangerously close to the binarism of “natural” vs. “civilized” smells, and to see *Sula* as endorsing the universe of the “natural”. The olfactory universe in *Sula* is not so simple; it does not offer just a reversal of the traditional coding of smells. Floral scents belong to the realm of the “natural”, yet in the novel they are linked to death. Morrison also troubles a simple distinction between smells by preserving the conventional signification of the olfactory. For Shadrack, for instance, the “sweetish” smell of blood is terrifying in the way it triggers off the memory of his traumatic encounter with death during the war. Little Chicken’s death is also linked to “a terrible odor” (p. 63).

Constructing in *Sula* a literary smellscape full of tensions and ambiguity, Morrison makes the reader wander in the labyrinth of tabooed desires. A very similar process can be seen in Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother*. Loving the odors of her own body is for Xuella, the novel’s protagonist-narrator, a way of resisting her surroundings’ judgments of her as worthless, unlovable, and repulsive. In the eyes of others, she says, her “human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on “ her. Her way of re-claiming a recognition and appreciation of herself is to repeatedly assert her personal aroma or body odor by saying over and over again: “I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet” (p. 32). Xuella, one could say, claims a place for her ethnically different self by drawing the reader’s attention to her personal body odors; she insists on the validity of her “olfactory passport”, to use Vroon’s term (p. 156). She also claims a place for her sexuality

by affirming the seductive character of her odors: "...the smell of my underarms and between my legs changed, and this change pleased me. In those places the smell became pungent, sharp, as if something was in the process of fermenting, slowly; in private, then as now, my hands almost never left those places, and when I was in public, these same hands were always not far from my nose. I so enjoyed the way I smelled, then and now" (pp. 58-59).

In a similar vein as in *Sula*, in *The Autobiography* scents and "nice" smells are experienced by Xuella as ominous and threatening: "From deep in Lise's underarms I could smell a perfume. It was made from the juice of a flower, this smell would fill up the room, fill up my nostrils, move down into my stomach and out through my mouth in waves of vomiting..." (p. 82). Her father's smell, that of "iodine and gentian violet and carbolic acid", seems "orderly and reasonable" (p. 89), and strengthens her sense of him being a jailer and a policeman rather than father.

In the context of my study the intriguing question is whether such a structurally transgressive narrative as *Written on the Body*, which sonorously announces its engagement with the body through its title, also transgresses the conventions of sensuous representation, specifically as regards the "low" sense of smell⁸. The answer is that, olfactorily, *Written on the Body* is a narrative which for the most part follows the conventions of representing love in terms of floral scents and of repulsion in terms of foul odors, only to undermine and expose these conventions in an unexpected way in the section "The Special Senses", toward the end of the novel. Unlike in *Sula* or in *The Autobiography of my Mother*, in *Written on the Body* the clean, hygienic, and odorless bourgeois environment is only occasionally punctuated by the odors of urinals, excrement, menstrual blood, and sexual effluvia.

⁸ Its subversive force lies primarily in the uncertainty as to the sex/gender of the narrative voice. In *Written on the Body* the sexually unmarked (or, doubly marked) narrator is gendered and regendered through the objects of his/her desire. Following the heterosexual model, the reader is at first encouraged to gender the narrating I as male ("I had a girlfriend once ..."), only to have to regender him as female ("I had a boyfriend once ..."). This forced act of regendering may lead the reader to negotiate the sex/gender of the narrative voice in terms of bisexuality. But even the bisexuality of the narratorial voice does not settle the issue, since the question remains whether it is a bisexual male or female who speaks. For an illuminating discussion of the sexing/gendering of the narrative voice see Susan L. Lanser's article.

For the most part the narrative presents Louise, the perfect (because mysteriously vanished?) lover as smelling of woods, flowers, and the sea. This type of olfactory imagery, which links women to vegetable life rather than to the world of such animal scents as musk, emerges in the nineteenth century to become a staple of Victorian representation of women. The abandonment of animal perfume and the rise of the fashion for floral odors was the result of a new view on the moral implications of smell. When modesty came to be seen as the chief feminine virtue, “floral images supplanted those borrowed from the carnivorous cycle” (p. 186), while “the thick vapors of impregnated flesh, heavy scents, and musky powders were [appropriate] for the courtesan’s boudoir or even the brothel salon”, writes Corbin (p. 185). In Winterson’s love story Louise smells of innocence. Her innocence is symbolically suggested through her cleanliness: a surprising number of times she emerges from her bath smelling of soap and incense oils. Conventional (at least as regards representation of women) is also the textual linking of Louise to the smell of coffee and bread. Nature and home are the two places in which the narrator’s images of smell situate Louise. Deodorized and romanticized, olfaction-wise Louise is the generic Victorian woman whose smell cannot be described beyond the thrice-repeated reference to “Louise’s smell”.

Unlike the clean and sea-smelling Louise, Jacqueline, whom the narrator abandons for the new lover, is marked by animal odors: she stinks of the zoo where she works. When *she* takes a bath, it is to remove the odor, not to perfume her body. The narrator’s representation of Jacqueline in terms of animal rather than floral smells sets in motion the implication that she is impure and base. These implications are explored in one of the novel’s pivotal episodes. I am referring to the scene in which the narrator returns home after a night spent with Louise to find her/his apartment a wreck. Jacqueline has demolished whatever she could, turning the room into a “chicken shed” and the bathroom into a place which seems to have been the “target of a *depraved* and *sadistic* plumber” (p. 70; emphasis added). The narrator’s discovery of the traces of the presence of the now absent Jacqueline culminates in her/his catching sight of the bathroom door with the word “shit” written in (presumably Jacqueline’s) excrement. This allows the narrator to identify the source of the odor that fills the apartment. The odor of excrement becomes the signature of the woman whom the narrative links to the animal world: she is uncivilized, crude, and perverted; she is the Victorian “nice” woman’s Other. When her bodily efflu-

vium fills the place, it encroaches the territory of the "I" and violates it. Thus the excremental odor with which Jacqueline marks her departure is not only the (symbolic) signature of love's death. Invading the world of the budding love between the narrator and Louise, it transgresses the conventional boundaries between life and death, imprints physical decomposition onto sex, and writes violence with the body, or, to be more correct, with bodily waste.

Smells, then, are employed by the narrator (or, perhaps more correctly, by Winterson) to mark her/his lovers along pretty conventional lines. When Elgin, Louise's husband, dumps the peppermint lozenges he has received from his father, he abandons his past and trades the smells of his Jewish childhood for the odorless atmosphere of a Swiss medical laboratory; the odorlessness of Elgin's medical laboratory is textually linked to his general lifelessness and impotence. When the narrator cleans her/his bathroom of Jacqueline's excrement, s/he terminates her/his adventurous love affairs and settles for a conventional and rather sentimental love story⁹. Louise's grandmother aptly though unwittingly identifies the narrator as having "the look of a thing from the Disinfectant Department" (p. 165).

In sum, then, for the most part olfactory images in *Written on the Body* move within the conventional binary oppositions: "bad" smells, be they of excrement or animals, signal repulsion, perversion, poverty, and death (of love); "good" smells (of flowers, sandalwood, and sea) are linked to eroticism and virtue, or, perhaps more correctly, virtuous eroticism, while odorlessness is equated with lifelessness.

It is only toward the end of the narrative that unconventional odors are referred to in order to define Louise's body and to voice the narrator's desire for her. In the section on "Special Senses" (pp. 135-139), the narrator dwells on the sexual scents of Louise (p. 136). S/he mentions the "yeast smell" of Louise's sex and notices how Louise's smells change during her menstruation, when she smells "like a gun". The

⁹ A question that this study leaves untouched is the novel's coding of class in terms of smell. Generally speaking, "bad" smells mark certain characters and environments as low-class. George Orwell famously summarized the olfactory creation of class barriers in his *Road to Wigan Pier* when he wrote that the "real secret of class distinction in the West" can be summed up in "four frightful words ... *The lower classes smell*" (p. 159). For an excellent analysis of Orwell's interest in class and smell issues see Miller, pp. 235-255. In *Written on the Body* foul smell marks the "lower" social standing of Jacqueline, Gail, and Elgin.

narrator presents Louise's olfactory universe as a mixture of excremental and incense odors; she is "a dark compound of sweet cattle straw and Madonna of the Incense. She is frankincense and myrrh, bitter cousin smells of death and faith". In other words Winterson's use of olfactory imagery breaks the conventions by an explicit exploration of the role of smell in sexual attraction¹⁰. The narrator's own potential act of transgression is linked to olfaction as well. Shortly before they become lovers, the narrator feels a temptation to take out Louise's underwear from the laundry basket in order to sniff it. This sexually transgressive desire is arrested before it is acted upon as Louise enters the room smelling of the "rough woody soap" (p. 50). But with Louise's body absent, the narrator becomes the verbal "knicker-sniffer" s/he could not bring him/herself to become when Louise was at his/her side. It is as if only absence could activate the transgressive potential of smell.

One of the questions I have *not* discussed is the gendering of smells in *Written on the Body*, *Autobiography*, and *Sula*. As is known, beginning with the Enlightenment, sight increasingly became associated with men, "who –as explorers, scientists, politicians or industrialists– were perceived as discovering and dominating the world through their keen gaze". Unlike sight, smell was considered "the sense of intuition and sentiment, of home-making and seduction, all of which were associated with women" (Classen, p. 84). Morrison, Kincaid, and Winterson capitalize on this conventional gendering of smell as a female (not to say feminine) sense, but in different ways. In *Sula* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* foul odors are most often linked with the semantic field of love, selfhood, and unity, while "nice" scents accompany death and separation. In *Written on the Body* –and, again, *The Autobiography*– the conventionality of representing women in terms of "nice" smells is exposed both by explicit references to the scents' sexual powers and by making "unpleasant" odors carry the same power of sexual attraction as scents. The three novels engage in a re-coding of the conventional olfactory landscapes. They signal the importance of smell in the literary discourse, although the exact contours of the olfactory map of literature are yet to be drawn.

¹⁰ In literature this attention to smell in sex is widespread in pornographic or semi-pornographic texts. It needs to be said, however, that many of the texts that at some point have been classified as pornographic are now part of the literary canon. This is the case of Baudelaire's poetry, for instance.

It is surprising that despite the intense critical interest in the body and despite the claims that “[a]esthetics is born as a discourse of the body” (Eagleton, p. 13), we remain firmly within the aesthetics that we have inherited from the nineteenth century in which only two senses, vision and hearing, are considered. It is time to revise this aesthetics by including the sense of smell which, according to some critics, is a postmodern sense par excellence. Drawing upon Baudrillard’s notions of hyperreality and simulacra, Classen et al. write: “Today’s synthetic scents ... are evocative of things which are not there, of presences which are absent ... These artificial odours are a sign without a referent, smoke without fire, pure olfactory image” (p. 205). While I have no argument with their view on smell in postmodern everyday reality, to my mind it is the growing visibility of smell (to mix the ocular and the olfactory once again) and a growing critique of its Enlightenment coding (gender, race, and class coding included) that may allow us to think of smell as *the* sense of postmodernism. Smell, this most liminal of senses, carries a great subversive potential in its ability to violate boundaries, assault rationality, and evoke powerful emotions of disgust and attraction. In the novels discussed here, smell assaults hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. It changes the emotional economy, reorganizes the social and moral world, and violates detachment. It is this re-coding of smell as well as an exploration of its subversive powers that I find one of the most interesting phenomena in postmodern literature.

It needs to be stressed that the significance attributed to smell(s) is culture- and time-specific. And since odors are invested with cultural values, their cultural coding suggests models for marking and interpreting others as Others and for writing scripts of interaction between selves and others. Moreover, since the olfactory sense, like other senses, is manipulable and affected by our beliefs, as Miller points out (p. 247), changing the beliefs about smell in our postcolonial world full of “others”, a re-coding of smell may have far-reaching political and social consequences, especially if we accept that in the act of smelling the self undergoes dissolution and merges with the other, as Adorno and Horkheimer assert. There seems to be a distinct epistemological alternative offered by smell, the alternative so well explored in Süskind’s *Perfume*, the narrative that is as tightly tied to smell as the Oedipal narrative is tied to vision and touch. It is time to start exploring the epistemological alternative of smell and the emotional, moral, and cognitive terrain it may draw.

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