The explosion of sensory history

Mark M. Smith on when 'looking' back makes less sense

Can we really understand how people in the past perceived their world in sensory terms? Can we ever reach an understanding of what, say, 18th-century Australia *sounded* like? What *smells* meant to 18th-century Parisians? How *touch* functioned in 19th-century America? Or can we ever uncover the meanings of *taste* in a pre-refrigerator age? A growing number of historians, myself included, believe they can. And their arguments are indebted, in no small part, to some of their historically minded colleagues in psychology.

Albeit in tongue-in-cheek fashion, I'd like to take issue with the very title of this section of *The Psychologist*. Put simply: I wonder whether just looking back – that is, trying to understand the past through the eyes – is really enough to uncover the full sensory texture of history. Is it even up to the task of explaining why certain things happened and when? Many historians – and, I might add, psychologists – would answer that no, 'looking back' is not sufficient to explain either the past or behaviour in the present. Just looking – without touching, tasting, smelling and hearing – impoverishes our understanding of the past generally and denies us access to all sorts of culturally and historically specific understandings of what the past meant to particular people and constituencies at specific points in time

'Sensory history', as it is increasingly called, has exploded in recent years, although that rapid burgeoning should not obscure its relatively deep genealogy. Building on early and sometimes tentative insights by a handful of French historians in particular, historians of all persuasions and periods have started to write some remarkable work on the senses. We now have, for example, histories of smell in classical antiquity (Harvey, 2006) and modern France (Corbin,1986), of touch in early modern Europe (Gowing, 2003) and 18th-century America (Smith, 2008), of sound in 20th-century Britain (Picker, 1999/2000) and colonial Australia (Carter, 1992: see p.862), of taste in medieval England (Woolgar, 2007) and the 18th-century transatlantic world (Gabbacia, 2005); and, of course, there are lots of histories of seeing, visuality, and sight for many regions and time periods (e.g. Howes, 2003). Most recently, historians have begun to tackle the history of intersensoriality – how the senses worked together and in concert, not in isolation. This and numerous other works on the history of the senses are surveyed in my *Sensory History* (Smith, 2007, and see 'Colonising sounds', p.862).

> "Just looking is not enough to uncover the full sensory texture of history"

A couple of things unite this often disparate work. The first is that these sensory histories, written by a variety of historians in multiple subfields, tend (quite rightly) to stress the preeminent importance of context for fathoming the role a particular sense played in shaping the meaning of the world for contemporaries. Most sensory historians do not assume that what smelled foul to a medieval English nose is the same thing as what modern English noses would deem stinky. Sensory historians correctly understand that the definition and meaning of what was sound and what was noise, what was stench-ridden and what was perfumed, what functioned as permissible forms of touch and what didn't, and what certain foods tasted 'like' is and was highly contingent on who was doing the sniffing, tasting, touching and listening, the various technologies underwriting the meaning attached to sensory evaluations, and the particular political, economic and social contexts that shaped what the senses meant. This is as it should be. Historians are not – or should not be – in the business of claiming a transcendent, universal meaning to anything, let alone the senses, all of which changed a great deal over time. Instead, they are correctly much more interested in excavating the various meanings different constituencies attached to a particular sense at a particular time and in a particular place.

The second idea uniting most sensory histories is a bit more implicit but, nevertheless, important. In part, at least, historians of the sensate attend to the nonvisual senses principally because we have, for so long, assumed the supremacy of the eye in the human sensorium. Historical interest in smell, sound, touch and taste has been animated often because of the assumed ascendancy of vision that emerged following the print revolution and the developments of the Enlightenment, many of which supposedly elevated the eye as the arbiter of truth, the producer of perspective and balance (courtesy of the invention and subsequent dissemination of visual technologies such as the telescope, microscope and camera) and, in the process, diluted the value placed on the nonvisual, often proximate

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senses of hearing, olfaction, tasting, and touching. It seems – or, at least, some sensory historians now theorise – that this supposed revolution in the senses was so thoroughgoing that moderns – at least those of the Western 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century variety – increasingly dismissed the other senses as reliable indicators of reason and truth and, instead, came to associate them with emotionalism or, more often than not, hardly worthy of sustained scholarly investigation. Ergo, up until quite recently, most historical writing has attended almost exclusively to the visual, reading the past through the eyes of historical actors. It is only in the past couple of decades that historians have discerned that the same historical texts they have used to understand the past in conventional terms also contain a wealth of information on the nonvisual senses. The tremendous irony is, of course, that that evidence only comes to light when actively looked for (Smith, 2007).

Part and parcel of this increasing historical awareness of the senses is courtesy of work by psychologists, which has often been important for helping sensory historians not only sensitise themselves to sensory historical evidence but also contextualise it so that place and time become central to understanding the role of a given sense or senses.

Take, for example, work by Rachel S. Herz, whose 2002 essay, 'Influence of odors on mood and affective cognition' reveals very precisely the role that history plays in shaping sensory perception – in this case, olfaction. Herz examines the olfactory tastes of modern Britons and Americans. As Herz explains, two studies – one performed in the 1960s in the UK, the other a decade later in the US – found that Brits disliked the smell of methyl salicylate (wintergreen) while Americans really enjoyed it. Historical specificity – the context in which noses smell – accounts for the learned preference: among a particular generation in the UK, the scent of wintergreen was associated with medicine and ointments used during the Second World War (hardly the best of times). Conversely, wintergreen in the US is the olfactory cognate not of medicine but of candy (a minty smell).

It is, in fact, difficult to overstate the importance of psychology to the historical study of the senses. It matters a great deal and there are real-world contemporary problems that the historian of the senses and the psychologist can address and, in fact, have addressed.

What did smells mean to 18th-century Parisians?

Such is the case with the history of race and racism. Allow me to illustrate with a brief story (see Smith, 2006), one taken from the early part of the 20th-century American South, a place that was beginning to invent a system of racial segregation that arranged bodies in public and private spaces according to the idea of 'race' on a daily basis in an effort to secure and perpetuate white power. This was a system that was premised on the ability – and the need – to detect racial identity reliably and sustainably.

On March 6, 1907, white residents of Albany, Georgia ran a man named Peter Zeigler out of town. According to the local newspaper, Zeigler 'had been here for a month and palmed himself off as a white man'. Citizens had been fooled, even at close range: 'He has been boarding with one of the best white families in the city and has been associating with some of Albany's best people.' Luck failed Zeigler, it seemed, when 'A visiting lady recognized him as being a Negro who formerly lived in her city, and her assertion was investigated and found to be correct.' But Zeigler returned to Georgia accompanied by 'a party composed of relatives and influential friends from his native state of South Carolina' who verified that he was, in fact, white. Peter Zeigler went from being white to black to white because his 'race' could not be reliably fixed.

Instances of 'black' people passing into 'white' society, of whites mistakenly taking black people for white (and vice versa) are not uncommon in American history. And it is surely tempting to frame such instances as illustrating the fundamentally illogical system of segregation, one premised on the putative absolute difference between 'black' and white'. But there is more to this matter than, literally, meets the eye. To end with the observation that the Peter Zeigler episode and others like it reveals the operational and intellectual instability of 'race' in a period that touted the utter necessity of racial permanence begs too many questions. How did such a system recover from such episodes? How did it function for over half a century if it was built on a distinction that was itself a fiction?

Looking alone, in other words, cannot explain the Peter Zeigler case, cannot explain the nature of segregation, and cannot adequately excavate some of the essential underpinnings of race consciousness and racism. But by examining the way that southern segregationists used their sense perceptions – historically condition perceptions about racial sensory stereotypes – we can make sense of the Zeigler episode. In short, whites used their nonvisual senses to fix and stabilise racial identity when sight alone was not up to the task.

Psychologists seem to have been more keenly aware of the important role played by sensory perception in creating and perpetuating race consciousness and racism for rather longer than historians.

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The importance of the nonvisual senses to the construction of racial identity was, for example, fully recognised by Harvard psychologist, Gordon Allport. As he argued in his landmark 1954 study, *The Nature of Prejudice*, race is usually treated as a 'visual category', something mediated and framed by the eye. But Allport made a compelling case for identifying other, non visual, ways in which race was socially constructed in an effort to expose the mythology of race and the irrational nature of racial prejudice. 'Where visibility does exist,' maintained Allport, 'it is almost always thought to be linked with deeper lying traits than is in fact the case… [M]any white people try to enhance the "visibility" of the Negro by claiming that he has a distinctive smell, as well as appearance.' Such 'sensory aversion', Allport suggested, was common, powerful and learned. Prejudice increased if sensory stereotypes were repeated often enough ('one hears that Negroes… have a peculiar odor'). Sensory stereotypes generally, reckoned Allport, were potent and once acquired 'bring a shudder and lead us to move away or otherwise protect ourselves from the stimulus'.

Psychologists were also active in disproving the race–odor association. The very few scientific studies conducted between the 1930s and 1950s proved as much. An early unpublished experiment in the 1930s comparing the sweat of black people and white people found that not only could noses not distinguish the race of the sweat but that sweat from a black person was often ranked by whites as more pleasant than the smell of white sweat. In 1950 George K. Morlan reported in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* the results of a more detailed experiment in which white students smelled black students. Morlan found that 'neither the mass nor individual data support the theory that Negroes have a distinctive body odor that whites can identify'. He went on: 'If a peculiar odor is a racial characteristic that can be noted, it exists in every individual of any given group and can be accordingly identified. If it does not exist in a single member of that group or cannot be identified with complete accuracy, it cannot be considered racial.'

Historians – well, this one at least – have used such insights to some profit. Psychological work that tried to understand the role of smell in the construction of race and the perpetuation of racial prejudice was immensely helpful

Colonising sounds

Aurality, meanings of sound, ways of hearing were part and parcel of the cultural baggage European adventurers, explorers, and colonizers took with them on miscellaneous – and deadly serious – imperial quests beginning in the 16th century. Europeans exported well-honed sound technologies (often of medieval origin) and the new commercial and capitalistic cultural values underwriting them to discipline the bodies of natives, principally to exploit their labor but also to tattoo authority on colonized bodies via their ears.

This process can be seen in any number of colonial societies and in each the bell, allied with the clock, was often present. The sound of time, in short, stood in the vanguard of colonialism. In 19th-century South Africa, for example, European settlers used clock-regulated bells to introduce Natal natives, mainly Zulus, to ideas concerning wage labor, efficiency, and bodily discipline. In towns especially – public clock time was established in Durban in 1860 – European capitalists, intent on making disciplined laborers out of agricultural Africans who embraced a more flexible and less regimented sense of time, ran schools, civic affairs, and labor by the sound of clock-defined time. The use of public time and bells that had begun in earnest in early modern Europe was imported into the 19th-century colonial, capitalist mindset and then re-exported around the globe. It took time and effort to instill a sense of time-discipline among Africans in Natal and many resisted the clock and its aural courier, preferring instead to work on their terms at their pace – not unlike workers and servants in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, North America, and South America who waged similar struggles against the factory bell and what it represented at roughly the same time. But the sound of time and the wage labor economy that it regulated took its toll – as bells often do – and many Natal Africans found themselves firmly ensconced in clock-regulated capitalist social and economic relations by the end of the 19th century (see, for example, Atkins, 1993).

While a similar process seems to have unfolded elsewhere, notably in Australia where colonizers attempted to use clock-regulated bells to discipline not only the nascent Australian working classes but also aboriginal people, the function of sound in the process of colonial encounter in Australia is revealing in other ways. Here, the role of sound in the imperial and colonial project was not simply about imposing authority on various native and aboriginal peoples; it was also about the definition of selves and the formation of new national identities. As Paul Carter explains in his fascinating study, *The Sound In-Between* (Carter, 1992), we need to 'augment the eye with the ear' to understand the Australian past. Carter examines the history of the 'word-sound' 'Cooee', a sound now understood as quintessentially (white) Australian. But its history has everything to do with claiming

to me when it came to, for example, trying to decipher the likes of Peter Zeigler and how he was treated. What the psychologist told me was that white southerners believed they did not need their eyes alone to authenticate racial identity. Whites' noses and ears, their senses generally, could be used to detect blackness – or so they claimed. So when the racially ambiguous Peter Zeigler's of their world managed to pass as white, white southerners simply deployed their non-visual senses in an effort to relocate him, to fix him racially. In the Zeigler case, it didn't seem to have worked too well, but in other cases, it did.

In one critical instance it worked perversely well. Arguably the most important legal case having to do with race relations in US history was the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*. It was important – pivotal, in fact – because it was the case that made segregation by race legal in the United States. It was not overturned until the famous *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision in 1954, and even then racial segregation persisted for many years (some might reasonably argue that it is with us still).

The basis of the *Plessy* case was a ruling in Louisiana. In 1890 the state instituted segregation on some of its railroads – black passengers had to sit in one railroad car, white ones in another. 'Elite blacks' – many of whom were visually white or very light-skinned – were quick to challenge the legislation and, with the support of some white, lawyers, elected to challenge the very basis of the statute by having Homer Plessy – a man who was seven-eighths 'African' but visually ambiguous (so light his race could not be reliably ascertained by the eye) – sit in a whites-only car. According to Louisiana law, Plessy was, technically, black because of his proportion of African ancestry; but the train conductor's eyes couldn't detect it and Plessy himself had to tell him that he was, in fact, legally 'black'. In court, Plessy's attorney maintained that the statute itself was unenforceable because racial identity could not always be seen. The logic was impeccable: if you couldn't see race, how on earth were people charged with enforcing segregation going to reliably confine black people to exclusively 'black' public spaces?

Louisiana's prosecuting attorney, John H. Ferguson, replied by drawing on centuries of racial, sensory stereotypes. It did not matter than the conductor couldn't see Plessy's race; instead, Ferguson insisted, he could smell Plessy's racial identity. The argument, as later psychologists showed, was hardly empirical – there is not, nor has there ever been, an olfactory signature to race. After all, race itself is a social and cultural construction. But that didn't matter. That whites had the authority to designate, culturally, race as a stable category by appealing to smell was, in the context of 1896, enough to make Homer Plessy black. The specific context of power relations dictated that southern whites could invoke the stereotype, one cultivated under slavery, to effect a stabilisation of race. Here, a specific cultural authority with a very particular history made the nose more powerful than the eye. Context mattered a great deal.

Because the association of race with smell is quite ubiquitous (we find examples in many countries across time), because it is so pernicious, and because it can be (and often is) used to perpetuate racial stereotypes and reinforce social hierarchies, the role of the psychologist and of the sensory historian, their sensible inclination to contextualise the meaning of the senses and expose the ends for which sensory stereotypes have been sometimes employed, is really quite invaluable. Their work offers a powerful reminder that the past is not always fathomable by the eye, that it is sometimes hostage to an Enlightenment way of understanding the past. Simply 'looking' back can, in other words, be quite blinding.

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ownership of a sound, its appropriation, and its incorporation. European definitions of the word differed markedly from Aboriginal ones. Explains Carter: 'the Aboriginal "Cooee" criss-crossed a space where people felt at home, the European "Cooee" was cast out into the unknown, a voice crying in the wilderness.' In the late 1800s, Europeans adopted Cooee – and abandoned 'hallo' – not for any cultural reasons but for purely physical ones: pronouncing Cooee 'produced a greater volume of sound' that 'carried farther than its English equivalent,' an important consideration in such a large geographic space as Australia. Cooee did not invite cross cultural bonding – although it had the potential to do so since Europeans were plainly mimicking Aborigines. Instead, the European adoption of Cooee, their appropriation of a sound, distanced the two groups. Moreover, Europeans in Australia exaggerated the extent to which the sound was a generalized Aboriginal sound and term (chances are it was limited to a few Aboriginal groups but not shared by others until Europeans spread the sound to them) in an effort to authenticate themselves. Cooee did not bring colonizers and colonized closer 'but, as a term of exclusively local origin, it served to bind the *colonists* together.' Cooee became the sound of Australian identity. The Aboriginal sound had become white Australia's 'call of the bush.' It was a sound that allowed Australians to construct their identity at home and abroad, to identify who was genuinely Australian and who was a newcomer by the authenticity of the sound. In this way, white Australians appropriated and then incorporated an Aboriginal sound to form part of their own national identity (see also Davison, 1993).

Hearing, listening, sounds, noises, aurality generally, were not simply peripheral to modernity, existing on the outskirts, but, rather, deeply implicated in its daily elaboration. Hearing had occupied an important post in the ancient and medieval world, where it was considered a reliable sense, a sentinel of sorts, a sense that could reveal truth and had a meaningful intellectual component. The print revolution, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, all enthusiastically promoted the power of the eye, but hearing seemed to hold its own, with no discernible dilution of its social and intellectual importance. In fact, hearing, sound, and aurality generally were critical in many ways to the unfolding of modernity and to downplay its importance only deafens us to the meaning and trajectory of key developments of the post-Enlightenment era.

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