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## Grease and Sweat: Race and Smell in Eighteenth-Century English Culture

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### ABSTRACT

From 1690 to 1800 texts printed in England linked racial difference and foul odour through understandings of occupation, food, cosmetics and sweat. Even by the end of the eighteenth-century racial odour was represented as a labile, culturally and environmentally determined characteristic. This article traces how the social 'use' of olfactory stereotypes, particularly their links with cosmetics, food, and odorous spaces, determined the mobilization of explanations for and attitudes to racial scent. It argues that ideas of race should not be considered monolithic or described in terms of narratives that posit a divide between the body/culture, but that racial stereotypes should be understood as collections of traits, of which smell was one, with distinctive histories.

### KEYWORDS

Race; smell; senses; sweat; cosmetics; embodiment

In 1802 the natural historian Lorenz Oken elaborated a typology of race which, born of frustration at the inability of skin colour to serve the purpose, distinguished between races by associating them with specific bodily senses. The white European was the 'eye man' whilst various other races were classified as 'ear' (Asian), 'nose' (Native Americans), 'tongue' (Australian), and 'skin' (African) men.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the eighteenth-century, the senses had played an important part in constructing ideas of 'race'. The supposed sensory sagacity of Native Americans and the insensitivity of African skin provide two such examples.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the role of smelling, both transitively and intransitively, also has important implications for our understanding of the social experience of, and ideas about, race. Contrary to assumptions about the nineteenth century origins of 'race', numerous examples have been produced of early modern Europeans categorizing and dividing humanity by physical traits, often transmitted by lines of descent, sometimes in a fashion that justified discriminatory practice.<sup>3</sup> Yet a problematic tension underlies this work, since 'it is often difficult to tell where cultural difference ends and physical difference begins' in histories of race.<sup>4</sup> Smell is useful in examining the connections between the physical and the cultural. To smell is to be *productive* of an odour but it is also to *detect* the odours of others, linking the object of sensory impression with the act of sensing. By attending to smell we can get a better idea of the way race was perceived and represented as an embodied phenomenon.

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This article builds on a range of recent work, particularly that of Mark Smith on the nineteenth century, which has attended to the role that the senses and more specifically smell could play in producing historically situated ideas of racial otherness.<sup>5</sup> Little has been done to trace the role smell played in eighteenth-century racial stereotypes and this article seeks to fill this gap in historical knowledge. The recent historiography of race in the long eighteenth century has tended to emphasize that racial categories in general became more rigid, less dependent on the environment and further inscribed upon the body by the end of the period.<sup>6</sup> For smell, which blurs the line between body and culture, this was not necessarily the case. Explanations continued to invoke environments, culinary choices and cosmetic practices as explanatory factors for difference in smell between 'races'. Different explanations were invoked for perceived Jewish, Native American and African odour. Recognizing this encourages us to see race as a bundle of traits through which difference might be inscribed, traits that have their own divergent histories. Disjunctures often occurred between the different experiences of racial otherness and the way they were transmitted into different genres of text. Here three main genres of sources are used: travel writings, anti-slavery texts and writing on physiognomy and natural history. The former two genres emphasized descriptions of the cultural and localized explanations for bodily odour whilst the latter more synthetic genres abstracted the body from its local social context and sometimes, although not always, ignored the impact of cosmetic or culinary customs.

The first part of this article details the way in which dietary choices, occupational associations and cosmetic practices could be seen to create the odour of the racial other. Alain Corbin suggests the increasing association of stigmatized groups with smell from the 1750s onwards as part and parcel of a 'perceptual revolution' that encouraged a growing intolerance of odours. Jonathan Reinartz, on the other hand, has asserted that 'in the irrational world of racist politics, foreigners would always stink and possess the potential to contaminate.'<sup>7</sup> Whilst accepting that smell was used to indicate otherness or inferiority long before the eighteenth century, this article suggests that subtle changes can be seen in the way in which it did so. At the beginning of the eighteenth-century Native Americans were described as sweet despite their odorous way of living but by the end of the period outward stench was prioritized without ruminating on what lay underneath. By the early eighteenth century the perceived stink of the Jews, the *foetor judaicus*, had come to be seen as the product of hygiene and diet rather than a curse from god.

In writing about Africans different explanations for bodily odour could compete and intersect, including the cosmetic practice of using of grease to cover their bodies and the nature of their sweat. As the second part of the article demonstrates, the association of the African's dark skin with stench drew on a wider discourse in eighteenth-century society that associated blackness with putridity and foul odour. Many naturalists and writers on physiognomy used these theories to help explain the interconnection of skin colour and perspired racial odour. But the idea that sweat caused Africans to smell was still couched in terms of the interaction between skin, the environment and cultural practices. Whilst Europeans could not wash the proverbial Ethiopian white, it was argued by many that the foul odour associated with blacks could almost disappear when subject to European climates and cleanliness. Smell was less naturalized than other aspects of race's ostensible physical manifestations.

In the final section of the article attention is turned to the intersection between race, space, and smell. Recent work by Mark Jenner has critiqued the separation of environment and individual in some cultural histories of smell. Instead, especially in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, ambient smells were thought to permeate people and transform them, thereby breaking down the human/environment boundary.<sup>8</sup> Notions of foul bodies were thus inseparable from foul spaces. Plantation practice often attempted to avoid intimacy with slaves precisely because of their presumed body odour. In contrast anti-slavery writers, who were more willing to test these assumptions, linked foul odour with the cruel treatment and disease ridden conditions of slave ships and, once slaves were on plantations, with the poor hygiene and hard labour which they had to endure. All these descriptions tended to perpetuate a link between racial others, bad odour and foul spaces, a link which in turn reinforced the mutually opposed set of linkages between whiteness, sweetness and cleanliness.

## Grease and Food

During the long eighteenth-century one strand of thought about racial odour asserted itself consistently in a variety of texts and in relation to a variety of racial others including Jews, Native Americans and Africans: the food other races consumed and the cosmetics they used dictated their odour and, potentially, their skin colour. The supposedly distinct smell of the Jews, the *foetor Judaicus*, was originally described as an inherited mark innate to Jews.<sup>9</sup> James Howell noted that Jews 'have a fulsome sent, no better then a stink, that distinguish them from others.'<sup>10</sup> Jewish odour could be explained as the side effect of their ritual murdering of Christians and their propensity for male menstruation. However it was more common in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to ascribe the smell of the Jews to a curse from God that was inherited through several generations.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between the racial stereotype of the Jew and smell changed during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. From the mid seventeenth century onwards the idea that the *foetor judaicus* was caused by a curse from God came under attack. Thomas Browne argued that 'if rightly understood, we cannot well concede' that 'unsavoury odour is gentilitious or national unto the Jews'. Browne noted that Jews were too mixed with other populations for a pure Jewish odour to exist. No foul smells could be found in synagogues where Jews gathered in numbers or on the bodies of Jews who are 'cleanly in apparel and decent in their houses'. Lastly, Browne noted that Jews who were converted and baptised, despite being of the 'same seed' as other Jews, no longer 'savoured' of the Jew. The 'sluttish' lifestyle of Jews and Christian distaste for them had been combined so that 'real practise and metaphorical expression did after proceed into a literal construction'.<sup>12</sup>

By the early eighteenth-century the perception of a 'peculiar sort of smell' specific to Jews had not disappeared.<sup>13</sup> However explanations for its cause shifted. The stink of the Jews became the product of their ostensibly foul living and poor diet. Jews increasingly became associated with 'penetrating' smell of onion and garlic.<sup>14</sup> This scent, concomitant with poverty and religious difference, was also linked to Catholics, Scots, Spaniards, and rustic country dwellers.<sup>15</sup> Occupational explanations also appeared. In his essay on trades the Italian physician Bernadino Ramazzini, influenced by a long tradition of environmental medicine that was deeply interested in odour, argued that 'a natural and national stink is but falsely ascribed to the Jews; for that observed among the ordinary people is only owing to the necessity of their circumstance', which included the odorous occupation of selling old clothes.<sup>16</sup>

It was now recognized that rich Jews could avoid smelling 'Jewish' by accepting certain regimes of diet and cleanliness whilst poorer Jews were perceived to be more odorous.<sup>17</sup> Maximilien Misson, travelling in Rome in the 1710s, summed up the new attitude thus: 'the Jews... are very poor; those who are poor are always nasty, and those who are nasty, usually stink: That is the Mystery'.<sup>18</sup> The odour of the Jew had been desacralized and instead became materialised. It has been argued that the nineteenth century saw the 'religious underwriting' of Jewish odour 'diluted'. However, as this evidence shows, this shift was already occurring during the period from 1650-1750.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Native Americans early contact revealed a people that were, in travel accounts, said to be sweet smelling and cleanly despite their foul living. Native Americans were described as having breaths 'as sweet as the air they breathe'. John Lawson noted in 1709 that he did not feel 'any ill, unsavoury smell in their Cabins, whereas, should we live in our Houses, as they do, we should be poisoned with our own Nastiness; which confirms these *Indians* to be... some of the sweetest People in the World'.<sup>20</sup> Whilst there were those like Lawson who described Indians as sweet smelling, others were disgusted by the smell of bears' grease with which Indians frequently covered both their bodies. The Earl of Bellomont, writing a letter in October 1700 to the Council of Trade and Plantations reporting a meeting with Indian leaders in Albany, described the 'stink of bear's grease, with which they plentifully daub themselves' as a great fatigue.<sup>21</sup> Until the middle of the eighteenth-century writers tended to emphasize that despite foul living Native Americans remained sweet underneath. Mark Catesby described them as 'naturally a very sweet people'. When sleeping in their cabins Catesby 'never perceived any ill smell' despite being 'kept with the utmost neglect and slovenliness'. Such remarks were also comparative: Native Americans were sweet when compared to the 'stinks or unsavoury smells that we meet with in the dwellings of our poor and indolent' and the 'rankness that is so remarkable in Negroes'.<sup>22</sup>

By the latter eighteenth century a subtle shift occurs. The Seven Years War had meant that newspapers and periodicals were packed with overwhelmingly negative descriptions of Native Americans as a brutal and savage people.<sup>23</sup> Writers placed renewed emphasis on the nastiness of bears grease, stinking clothes and filthy habitations. But they failed to reflect on whether Indians remained 'sweet' underneath. Travellers such as Isaac Weld described the odour they exhaled as 'offensive in the highest degree' whilst enlightenment synthesizers like Lord Henry Kames assured readers that 'the nastiness of North-American savages in their food, cabins and in their garments, passes all conception'.<sup>24</sup> Descriptions emphasized the poor hygiene of Indians and their use of bear's grease, both of which resulted in foul odour. The travels of Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevoix to North America, published in an English translation in the 1760s, exemplified this new attitude. De Charlevoix wrote that Indians rubbed 'themselves directly with oil or grease of a strong scent' and that the resulting stench was so bad that 'one cannot enter into their cabins without being almost poisoned'.<sup>25</sup>

The use of grease on the body was also described in accounts of Africa. William Dampier noted in 1699 how both American Indians and Africans used various types of oil and grease to smear their bodies in an attempt to stop their pores against disease and add to their beauty, a practice that resulted in what he termed a 'very unpleasant smell'.<sup>26</sup> Such practices were also used to explain African odour at the end of the eighteenth century. Lady Anne Lindsay Barnard, writing to Henry Dundas from Cape Town in 1797, described how when traversing the area where slaves lived 'the first thing that struck me, strongly and disagreeably, was a very offensive smell in the air, and I afterwards found it in some of the houses'.

Lady Barnard 'was told it proceeded from the oil with which the slaves grease their hair'.<sup>27</sup> In 1799 Barnard complained that 'one of the worse points of [female] slaves... is the dreadful smell which they leave behind them – a fox is a rose to it' and subsequently complains that she would rather slaves were not able to attend a ball since she did not 'much like the smell' of their oil.<sup>28</sup> The comments of Lady Barnard suggest that travellers and writers during the late eighteenth-century linked the odour of black bodies to more labile cosmetic practices rather than relying on sweat or innate bodily odour.

These comments also throw light on the ways in which the racial odour associated with Africans was thought about in gendered ways. The trope of greater female odour was also present in the novel written and published in 1787 by 'Jonathan Corncob', a British naval officer. Sheltering from bad weather in Barbados Corncob found himself in 'midst of 'six overgrown negresses' whose 'strong smell of perspiration... almost suffocated me'. When Corncob told these 'black natives of the Congo' that they 'smelt very strong' the women replied that it was impossible that anyone would 'see de day dat ee fair sex smell'.<sup>29</sup> This was surely designed to encourage humour at the expense of their lack of knowledge since it was widely held in European medical thought and erotic literature throughout this period that women smelled fouler than men.<sup>30</sup> This intersection of race and gender could be used to reflect on anxieties about and cross-cultural contact. One story, found in a series of jest books and replicated in a satirical print, told of how a 'young lady at Kingston, Jamaica, in purchasing some rabbits of a negro, took them by the hind legs, to smell if they were sweet'. The 'African' seller then replies to the woman 'Ah, ah, Missee that no far - if buckara man take you Missee by the leg so, would you no smell too?'<sup>31</sup> Smell conveyed the danger of miscegenation by playing on common stereotypes of odorous female genitalia.

Such fears also reflected hierarchies of status among men. At Antigua the sailor Edward Thompson described how 'the disagreeable smell of their bodies' was 'so great' that he smelt 'a negro market a mile or more' away. Yet he added that 'bad smells don't hurt the sailor's appetite, each man possessing a temporary lady'.<sup>32</sup> The blunted nerves of the common sailor served as an embodied form of distinction for their betters. On Captain Cook's second voyage to the Pacific in 1772–5 the naturalist George Forster distinguished himself from the common sailors who gratified their 'animal appetites' with New Zealand's women. That they did so despite the 'certain stench' emanating from their grease-covered bodies served to differentiate them from Forster who was 'more sensible'.<sup>33</sup> Gender- and class-based olfactory stereotypes mutually reinforced ideas about racial odour.

In the case of Native Americans and Africans it was the use of oil and grease on their bodies and hair that was deemed particularly offensive to the English nose. This was also the case with many of the islanders met by Cook and his crews on the Pacific voyages.<sup>34</sup> The discomfort with the use of grease and fat can be explained in a number of ways. The distinction between Native American or African uses of grease and those of English perfumers seemed to depend in part on difference in use. Bears' grease, fat, and oil could all be found in recipes for eighteenth-century perfumery since they were included in pomatums and pastes, particularly for the hair or face. Yet travellers noted that in these other cultures the 'grease with which they rub their bodies' was 'not quite so fragrant as the perfumes used by our beaux and Ladies'.<sup>35</sup> It is notable that whilst various Native American groups use bears' grease on tents, bows and other objects; the smell of such applications are rarely, if ever, referenced in eighteenth-century travellers' writings. Instead travellers noted the use of bear grease and other fats on the bodies of natives, perhaps because of perceived similarities to

English cosmetic practices. Yet the odour of Native American and African cosmetic greasing was compared by eighteenth-century writers to, amongst others things, tallow, the whale oil produced at Greenland dock, a slaughterhouse, and kitchen grease.<sup>36</sup>

This was partly, then, a question of 'matter out of place', with the sorts of fats and grease used for other purposes and found in other spaces in England described as being used on the body in these other cultures. By daubing themselves with grease natives became akin to sanitary nuisances, linking the policing of urban sanitation with bodily hygiene. But there is also a distinction here between what anthropologists might call the raw and the cooked. Bears grease, as marketed in London, was described as 'pure' when it had been 'clarified and perfumed'.<sup>37</sup> The quasi-alchemical work of the perfumer, as with the excrement-based civet or musk, transformed grease from filth to sweetness. By contrast Native Americans and Africans were perceived to lack such transformational procedures: their choices of cosmetic suggested a difference of olfactory disposition from Europeans. Travellers attempted to project the underlying filth of perfumery, its base in grease and fats, on to racial others by contrasting 'pure' perfumed grease with the base and foul smelling grease used in other cultures.

## Sweat and skin

Throughout most of the long eighteenth century the odour of Native Americans was far more likely to be discussed in terms of cosmetic practices such as the use of bear's grease or poor hygiene.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the 'African' later eighteenth-century travel writing and print culture still frequently noted the role of cosmetics in creating black odour and colour. However work in natural history and physiology frequently described black odour as a product of the skin in tandem with the environment.

In Long's 1774 *History of Jamaica* the 'bestial or fetid smell' of blacks was described as a characteristic of the skin that could be detected by any individual, or indeed animal, with a stronger sense of smell.<sup>39</sup> Numerous writers noted that American Indians and Africans could themselves detect the difference in the smell of white and black bodies.<sup>40</sup> Reports of Indians who could track Europeans by the smell of body odour, gunpowder and footprints remained in descriptions of Native American sensory capabilities throughout the century.<sup>41</sup> Natives in the Americas were said to have larger olfactory vocabularies with 'three words to express their idea of the smell of the European, the aboriginal American and the Negro'.<sup>42</sup>

Mark Smith has noted the paradox of nineteenth-century Americans who argued that the ostensibly sensitive black nose was bestial whilst claiming to be able to sniff out racial difference. This irony was not lost on earlier, eighteenth-century, writers. The anti-slavery commentator William Dickson disparaged the 'intellectual ferrets' that claimed they could 'scent out men of parts, by the power of the nose'.<sup>43</sup> Yet by describing Native Americans and Blacks who could 'by the smell' distinguish 'between... an European and a negro' English and American writers were also neatly effacing their own role in distinguishing racial odour.<sup>44</sup> This trope absolved the European nose by turning the nose of the other upon itself.

A similar erasure of the European nose was demonstrated in the use of dogs to detect racial odour. This practice has resonances with the later use of dogs in nineteenth-century America to track runaway slaves and by the Nazis to detect the 'odour of dissent'.<sup>45</sup> Steven Connor has noted that 'while our senses mediate the world to us, animals mediate our senses



to us; animals are thus mediators of the mediation.<sup>46</sup> Long believed that dogs could trace black scent, noting how canines lost none of their natural sagacity when transplanted to Jamaica. He argued that slaves dreaded dogs because they were used to hunt them down, as they had been by the Spaniards when hunting American Indians.<sup>47</sup> Dogs operated for Long, as the noses of Native Americans and Africans had done, as sensory prostheses that mediated and therefore obscured the role of the European nose in detecting the odour of the racial other.

Such detection depended on locating some of the causes of racial odour on the body itself. An early example of a developing link between foul odour, skin colour and sweat is the work of John Mitchell. Mitchell, whose 'Essay on the causes of colours of people in different climates' was published in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* in 1744, argued that the 'rank Smell, or peculiar Faetor, of dark skinn'd People' was due to the more 'subtil and volatile' nature and more 'acrid, penetrating and offensive' effects of their 'perspirable matter'.<sup>48</sup> The nature of the sweat of dark skinned individuals was more likely to degenerate into 'miasma' and disease, causing both blackness and the smell of putridity. The use of the term miasma again demonstrates the overlap between ideas about racial body odour and sanitary medicine. However Mitchell was also open to the role of cultural factors in creating African odour and skin colour. He added that 'the custom of most people in hot countries anointing their bodies with some greasy and unctuous epithems, to defend their skins from the scorching heat of the sun' played an important contributing role.<sup>49</sup>

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century sweat continued to be the defining way of talking about black odour in a scientific and medical context. Sweat was especially appropriate for discussing racial identity since writers such as William Cruickshank, drawing on the work of Albrecht Haller, discussed sweat as an 'effluvia... from the essential oil of the animal' that arose 'from the elemental particles of the body'. It was this central role of sweat in identity that, according to eighteenth-century physiologists and natural historians, allowed dogs to trace races or individuals. It was also, Cruickshank and others believed, the cause of blackness and odour in 'the skin of a negro'.<sup>50</sup> The Scottish doctor Alexander Wilson argued in a 1780 discussion of sweat that the 'perspiration of negroes is of a strong pungent alkaline odour, which seems to arise from some peculiar property or power in the reticular covering which gives colour to the skin'. A similar explanation was also provided by Samuel Stanhope Smith.<sup>51</sup> Having linked skin colour and foul odour Wilson also drew on the associations of blackness with smell and putridity by describing the 'peculiar property' as originating in the 'putrescent matter' and 'putrescent effluviium' secreted by perspiration at a much higher rate in blacks than in white Europeans.<sup>52</sup>

Putridity, miasma, and an excess of phlogiston were described as the cause of foul black odour, borrowing their terms from environmental medicine.<sup>53</sup> As with descriptions of greases and oils, these explanations linked sanitation and hygiene. In environmental medicine blackness not only indicated putridity but the impregnation of walls and clothing, seen as epidermal layers akin to human skin, with foul odour and by extension disease. Whiteness was held to be less able to absorb odours and so health workers, at the recommendation of eighteenth-century environmental science, whitewashed walls in order to reduce the 'porosity of the stone' and give it a 'clean look'.<sup>54</sup> Black materials were believed to absorb and re-emanate the smell of nearby materials to a greater degree than the white objects.<sup>55</sup> Blackness and odour thus had, throughout eighteenth-century culture, a close and enduring link that fed into the conceptualization of the putrid, miasmatic qualities of black skin.



However the location of foul odour in the sweat produced by black skin did not mean that it was conceived to be innate and unalterable. Many believed that cleanliness and attention to hygiene could render Africans odourless. William Charles Wells was informed by Sir Everard Home in 1818 that black arms smelt more strongly than those of whites yet Wells, discovering that the particular 'dark negro' they were examining was 'not very careful with respect to the cleanliness of his person', found it more probable that 'all negroes do not possess a strong smell.'<sup>56</sup> Samuel Stanhope Smith emphasized the climatic qualities of smell. He noted that 'the negroes born in the United States of America are gradually losing the strong smell of the African zone.'<sup>57</sup> As these examples demonstrate, locating black body odour in sweat and skin did not necessarily render it unchangeable or innate for eighteenth-century thinkers since it might still partly be explained by hygiene, climate, or cosmetic practices. Edward Long was one of the few to suggest the complete inability to change the scent of the African.

During the period between 1750 and 1800 writers specified particular nations of Africans who were more or less odorous. Buffon's natural history, for example, argued that 'those of Guinea are extremely ugly, and have an insufferable stench' whilst 'those of Sofala and Mosambique are handsome, and have no bad smell.'<sup>58</sup> Similarly Bryan Edwards and Daniel M'Kinnen noted, in their history of the British colonies in the West Indies, that it was remarkable that 'in all the Mandingoes, they are less disgusting in features, and more free from a fetid smell, than any other Africans'. Here visual and olfactory disgust were coupled.<sup>59</sup> Edward Long was thus also unusual in arguing that 'all' Africans had a 'bestial or fetid smell' and that therefore a '*general uniformity* runs through all these various regions of people.'<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, despite his assertions for the innate and unchangeable quality of African odour, even Long could not get away from cosmetic explanations focused on the use of grease or oils. Long describes a story that, he says, Africans used to explain the odour of goats but adds that 'with equal propriety they might well apply it to themselves'. The story recounts how

there was a she-divinity, who used to besmear her person with a fragrant ointment, that excited the emulation of the goats, and made them resolve to petition her, to give them a copy Of her receipt for making it... Instead of the sweet ointment, she presented them with a box of a very foetid mixture, with which they immediately fell to bedaubing themselves. The stench of it was communicated to their posterity; and, to this day, they remain ignorant of the trick... but value themselves on possessing the genuine perfume.<sup>61</sup>

Here once again arises the role of cosmetic greasing in conveying a more labile quality to racial odour. These cosmetics are compared to perfumed ointments, and again point to the difference between English and African uses of scent, suggesting a lack of sensory refinement: according to Long Africans actively enjoyed stench.

## **Foul Bodies and Foul Spaces**

To better understand the way in which odour was used to stereotype racial others we need to link sensing to questions of space and place, of where and how individuals came into contact with ostensible black, and other racial, odours. We might start with accusations of Jewish odour. The move to more material, less theological, causes of Jewish odour occurred at the same time as Jews, particularly often-poorer Ashkenazi, started to settle in England in ever-greater numbers.<sup>62</sup> It was the physical presence of Jews in London, often in poorer run

down areas and engaged in trades associated with foul odour, that enabled a distinction between ostensibly poor and foul smelling Jews and the more hygienic and wealthy sort and thus an association of Jewish stink with poverty rather than divine wrath.<sup>63</sup> 'J.E' represented the intersection between new attitudes to Jewish odour and their physical presence in London:

... they are in general so indolent, slothful and nasty that they stink as they go, as well as their habitations: none being otherwise, except such whose wealth affords them to keep English servants... in order to prove that I do not aggravate circumstances, let any person that has not been there already, take a walk, incog. from Leadenhall-Street, through Duke's Court, Broad-Court, then into Duke's-Place, Bever's-Marks, Henage-Lane, down the Steps in London-Wall, and so thro' to Houndsditch, and up the Cribby Islands in Houndsditch, and then I think any person will allow they are the nastiest people by nature under heaven.<sup>64</sup>

When it came to Africans the presumption of stench was often used as a means of discouraging intimacy. Imperial identities and power often depended on the regulation of intimate relations and spaces, a regulation that could extend to concerns about odour.<sup>65</sup> Janet Schaw, writing during her time at St Kitts, noted that water was presented by slaves in a 'cocoa nutshell ornamented with silver, at the end of a hickory handle'. This was done so that the breath of the slave who presented it 'should not contaminate its purity', demonstrating how the management of intimate racial odour could extend to objects.<sup>66</sup> Long was similarly worried about the ability of African odour to contaminate: he argued that 'the scent in some of them is so excessively strong... that it continues in places where they have been near a quarter of an hour'.<sup>67</sup>

It is perhaps this fear of the contaminating effects of intimate contact with black odour that lay behind Long's story of a lady who attempted, to no avail, to rid her 'waiting-maid... a young Negroe girl' of her ostensibly foul odour.<sup>68</sup> Complaints about the odour of black servants are less frequent than discussions of the stench of black houses, living areas on plantations or the foul odour of slave ships. In Long's story the woman swaps her waiting maid for 'another attendant, somewhat less odoriferous'.<sup>69</sup> Perceived black stench could not be allowed to stay within the boundaries of the white household; instead it was to be associated with other abject spaces.

Understandings of African odour, whether innate or due to the poor care given to slaves, could therefore also lie behind the layout of plantations. In Jamaica the houses of planters were removed from the 'sugar, or other works' and the 'Negroes houses' so that they might be 'free from the noise and smell of them, which are very offensive'.<sup>70</sup> In the Charibee islands slaves were made to live in huts to the western side of the plantation so that slave owners could 'breathe the pure Eastern Air, without being offended with the least nauseous smell'.<sup>71</sup> It was advised that because of the 'bad smell' of African slaves plantation owners should 'keep always to the windward side of them when you visit them at their work' and should never 'suffer them to come near your children'. The regulation of intimate odours thus played out in the wider spatial organization of the plantation: 'so you may be as little incommoded as possible with their natural smell, you must... place the negro camp to the north or north-east of your house, as the winds that blow from these quarters are not so warm as the others, and it is only when the negroes are warm that they send forth a disagreeable smell'.<sup>72</sup>

The intersection between the working conditions and treatment of Africans and their supposedly bad odour was frequently bought out in those texts that aimed to refute black smell. One particular focus was the stink generated by the cruel treatment of slaves on board the ships that transported them to the colonies. Ships became one of the key focuses of

environmental medicine during the eighteenth-century as techniques of fumigation or ventilation were applied to these 'floating swamp[s]'.<sup>73</sup> The smell of slave ships was often remarked upon. Aboard one slave ship John Rilands, heir to a Jamaican plantation, was forced to share his room with twenty-five African girls 'whose stench at times was almost beyond endurance'.<sup>74</sup> Rilands implied here that slave bodies might be a source of foul smell. Others were more likely to view the stench as a consequence of the cramped conditions of the ship itself. John Newton noted that 'The heat and smell of these rooms... would be, almost insupportable, to a person not accustomed to them'.<sup>75</sup> There was more than metaphor behind the complaint of Mary Wollstonecraft that 'the owners of negro ships, never smell on their money the blood by which it is gained', since Thomas Clarkson described how 'voracious fish were supposed to have followed the vessels from the coast of Africa... being allured by the stench' emitted by the blood and putrefaction of dead and dying slaves.<sup>76</sup> Given these conditions it was unfair, Anthony Benezet argued, 'thus to reflect on the Black' since it was impossible that 'such a number be crowded together in so warm a climate, even if they had all been healthy, without being extremely offensive' to the nose.<sup>77</sup>

Once Africans were put to work on plantations anti-slavery campaigners similarly attacked the accusation of stench levelled at them. William Dickson admitted that 'some negroes have a fetid smell' but cautioned that 'so has every man, more or less, who toils and sweats much, in a sultry climate, and neglects bathing'.<sup>78</sup> In Long's Jamaica the barbaric punishments inflicted on Jamaican slaves, including force feeding them faeces and rubbing their wounds with urine, would have appeared to anti-slavery writers as the cause of their bad odour rather than the bodily explanation trotted out by Long.<sup>79</sup>

Connie Chiang has shown how, in early twentieth-century America, Chinese racial odour became naturalized through labour as Chinese fisherman became associated with the stink of their work.<sup>80</sup> Eighteenth-century contemporaries were aware of the potential for smells acquired through labour, food and cruel treatment, to become naturalized. Abolitionist writers attempted to denaturalize black odour in their accounts by reference to the poor conditions slaves were forced to endure. Yet it is notable that many of these writers did not disagree with the idea that Africans, or at the very least some Africans, smelt bad to English noses. Indeed the association such writings perpetuated between the odorous spaces of ships and the smell of slave bodies could even be seen to help cement ideas associating Africans with foul spaces. William Wilberforce finished an abolitionist speech in parliament with the words of Lady Macbeth, 'here's the smell of blood on the hand still, and all the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten it'.<sup>81</sup> This division between the slave trade's mortal stench and the luxury trade it indirectly supported implicitly reflected a division between the perfumed metropole and the abject space of the plantation and slave ship. The idea that the stench of the slave ship was 'insupportable, to a person not accustomed to them', as John Newton described, suggested a division between those who had and had not become so accustomed. As with sound, odour created 'communities... sealed by the revulsion and offence of others'.<sup>82</sup>

This spatial context was crucial in forming olfactory stereotypes during the eighteenth-century. Attention has recently been drawn to the culture of metropolitan taste that formed slavery's opposite.<sup>83</sup> Here a negative slave sensorium in which smell was implicated took on an important role that was contrasted to the gustatory metaphors and visual focus of aesthetics. Yet the fixing of the odour of black slaves to the spaces of the plantation and slave ship, the tales of Native Americans' foul huts, and the stench associated with Jewish

neighborhoods in London seem also to point to the mutually constitutive role that 'negative sensoriums' played in the invention of 'comfort' described recently by John Crowley.<sup>84</sup>

It is no accident that the stench of tallow and grease was one of the things that those pursuing 'comfort' expunged from their households during the eighteenth century, swapping tallow candles for their wax equivalents. Whilst he noted the stench at dances held by slaves Long was keen to note the ventilation of planters' houses and the detached kitchens and toilets which led to the absence of bad odour at his own gatherings.<sup>85</sup> The association of the foul odours of black and other racial bodies with foul spaces was a process of abjection in the sense that it associated the taboo stench of slavery with other races and spaces outside the white English home. On the other hand this process also shored up the identification of the English with comfortable, odour free, spaces.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that whilst by the end of the eighteenth century some writers, such as Edward Long, argued that black odour was innate and unchangeable many more individuals located the source of racial odour in food, cosmetic practices, hygiene or environmental causes. Even Long's arguments about innate African odour portray an ambiguity deriving from his recognition of the role of cosmetic greasing. This suggests that attitudes to racial odour were far more labile in the texts, printed and circulated in England, which we have surveyed here than in the nineteenth-century American sources examined by Smith. These, as Smith deftly shows, were far more likely to describe the body odour of Africans as innate.<sup>86</sup>

Examining smell's intersection with racial stereotypes demonstrates the capacity for eighteenth-century individuals, even by the end of the period, to see physical difference as constructed by, and deeply embedded within, cultural and environmental practices. That odour was explained by reference to the skin did not mean it was innate. Whilst African odour was linked to the skin's interaction with cosmetic practices and environment, explanations for Jewish and Native American odour tended to be based on foul living and, in the case of the latter, the use of cosmetic greases and oils as well. The enduring link between skin, cosmetics and environment should not surprise us. The explanations examined here depended on a long enduring understanding of the skin as a porous membrane between body and environment. In this understanding the use of cosmetic odours was akin to a second skin: attempting to further manage the transactions across the epidermal surface.<sup>87</sup>

It has been argued elsewhere that attitudes to Jewish, Native American and African difference changed in unison during the late eighteenth-century as ideas about race ossified and became fixed upon the body.<sup>88</sup> The above investigation suggests that in the case of smell and race attitudes to these groups changed in very different ways depending on very different contexts. Body odour was one trait that continued to be seen as a changeable rather than fixed quality of difference. Another trait examined here, the olfactory sagacity (keenness of smelling) of Africans and Native Americans, seemed to be seen as a more innate and fixed quality. This suggests that different traits, in a bundle of traits that might play a role in racial stereotypes, could have quite different histories.

This article therefore suggests that looking for a shift from 'cultural' to 'bodily' theories of race during the eighteenth-century, as suggested by Roxann Wheeler, might obscure some of the ways such changes worked. Jewish odour shifted from a religiously inspired

explanation to one rooted in occupational and dietary causes. To say that this is a shift from purely cultural to purely bodily explanations seems inappropriate. In the case of Africans identifying such a shift is dependent on a shift in genre as much as a shift in ideas. Whilst both travel literature and natural histories emphasized changeable quality of racial odour the latter was more likely to think in terms of skin and environment rather than cosmetic practices. The narrative Wheeler has described seems, in the light of the examples produced above, dependent on a movement from one set of sources to another, from literary and travel narratives to physiology and physiognomy, from sources that address social and cultural practice to texts that by virtue of their genre abstract the body from such contexts.

The broader social context remains important to our understanding of race and smell throughout the period. Margaret Hunt has argued that eighteenth-century travel writing demonstrates the 'delusions and self-referentiality of a nation and class in the making'.<sup>89</sup> Ideas about odorous women, the insensitive noses of the lower classes and the foul odour of inferior races were thus mutually reinforcing. Smell could be mobilized when discussing anxieties surrounding miscegenation and cultural interaction. It was therefore no accident that Edward Long should be one of the writers who went to great lengths in discussing the causes and qualities of African body odour. Recent scholarship has suggested the need to focus on how smell was 'used'.<sup>90</sup> Marc Lalonde and David Howes have argued that where visual discrimination failed the proximate senses of smell and taste could be mobilized in producing social distinction and, to quote Alain Corbin, their 'own form of social power'.<sup>91</sup> This was the case in late nineteenth-century America. As Smith shows this was a society where the distinction between 'visual' and 'actual' whiteness was blurred and thus smell was used to identify the visually white Homer Plessy as smelling, and therefore being, black.<sup>92</sup> Edward Long, in the context of anxieties about miscegenation with, differentiation from and control over slaves in Jamaica, surely felt the most acute need for tools of discrimination beyond the visual.<sup>93</sup>

The association of racial odour with foul spaces such as the plantation, slave ship, poor Jewish areas of London or the Native American hut and the focus on stinking grease as the cause of African and Native American odour also fulfilled a 'use' of sorts. These descriptions reinforced racial difference whilst expunging the less tasteful qualities of the slave trade and eighteenth-century perfumery from polite English spaces. Projecting their greasy and foul smelling underbelly onto other bodies and spaces thus reinforced the sweetness of English perfumery and the comfort of English houses. Recent work has suggested that looking at the specific connections between odour and space, the way the senses worked in localized contexts, can be productive of new insights.<sup>94</sup> As this article has shown, ideas about sanitation and hygiene could be used in marking both bodies and spaces as odorous, tying them together in a way that prefigures the nineteenth-century sanitarian's pairing of the fetid lower classes and their foul slums.<sup>95</sup>

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