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Olfaction and the Presentation of Self

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Abstract

This paper considers smell as a social intermediary with regards to the body, presentation of self, and social/moral order. Employing the trajectory of a sociology of everyday life, the data presented here is collected from narrative interviews conducted with seventeen respondents, out of which five are anosmic. The study looks at how respondents react to bodily odours, and how they go about maintaining acceptable bodily scents in order to facilitate social interaction. The discussion is framed within Goffmanian sociology on the interaction order, and corporeal scholarship. The findings show that respondents equate foul odours with social and moral defilement, and this affects how they view social others, adopting attitudes and behaviours of social inclusion and exclusion. Managing bodily odours also point to the idea that instead of approaching the body as an object of analysis, the body should also be analysed as an active and acting subject, located and influenced by sociocultural conditions.

Introduction

Corporeal sociology has increasingly taken a ‘hot spot’ in social science debates and theorising (Rodaway 1994; Shilling 1993), running the gamut of issues from anorexia (Garrett 1998; MacSween 1993), gendered bodies and sexuality (Adams 1997; Gilmore 1994; Seymour 1998), to disease (Harrington 1997; Wall 1997), and health and illness (Nettleton 1995; Weiner 1993; Toombs 1992). Such analyses often include empirical research, and also, sociological theorising. Yet, it seems as if these ‘entry points’ do not take into full account the role of the senses in relation to the body. Here, I contend that by using smell and the presentation of self as an example of how a foundational ontology of the body (as a pre-social, material entity) can potentially be synchronised with a social constructionist epistemology (Williams & Bendelow 1998: 7), the notions of how the ‘physical’ body transforms into the ‘social body’, can be apprehended through Douglas’ (1966, 1970) propositions of the body politic, as well as Goffmanian concepts concerning the presentation of self. Within these, I highlight the links between smell and

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morality, demonstrating that smell as a social medium is intertwined with issues of olfactory acceptance, and hence, social and moral approval.

Instead of approaching the body as an object of analysis, there appears a need to redirect sociological foci instead, towards the body as an active and acting subject, yet still located within and influenced by sociohistorical conditions (Howson & Inglis 2004). This requires ‘embodied practice’, where a shift from sociostructural accounts of the body towards the body as the ‘ground’ of experience (ibid.) is necessary. It follows that a phenomenological perspective (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Schutz 1970) is required, which addresses *lived experiences* of social actors. In this manner, respondents’ views on the need to smell clean and nice, for instance, are presented for analyses, thereby privileging individual subjectivities. The body as ‘social’ will be explicated, with a brief perusal of Douglas’ (1966, 1970) contentions, as well as other scholars (such as Berthelot 1995; Goffman 1956; Turner 1984, 1996, 1997; and Williams & Bendelow 1998), who argue for the body as a repository of social meanings that are at once presented by the individual, and perceived by social others. Also, issues concerning the need to smell ‘nice’ before and during social interactions are expounded upon, to illustrate the roles of smell in respondents’ everyday life experiences, where concerns involve perfuming and cleansing, as well as how one approaches the ‘tricky’ task of managing, tolerating, and ‘exposing’ bodily odours to one’s friends, showing thus the sensitivity surrounding smells, personhood and social acceptance. The body therefore, can be perceived as a receptor of social meanings, where individuals employ different olfactory management techniques in order to present themselves as smelling clean, often with the emphasis that they do not have to smell fantastic or absolutely nice, just ‘clean’. As will be shown, the ‘individual’ body is constantly managed and read as in need of repair and rectification, in order to present a ‘social’ body that is deemed to be acceptable within olfactory judgments. In short, reading the body as embodying social meanings and association is exemplified by the following two variants: (1) presentation of social body through self regulation, and (2) issues of morality.

My main concern in this paper lies with the sociocultural processes and products that form as externalities and extensions of the body in different contexts of social interactions (Blacking 1977) vis-à-vis smell. By locating bodily techniques within olfactory practices, I thereby draw attention to ‘issues of *lived experience* and the problems of human embodiment, [as] there is little regard for issues of social *praxis*, including the ‘use’ to which bodies are put in society and the learnt ‘techniques’ they draw upon in the conduct and negotiation of everyday life’ (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 28, emphases in original). In other words, adopting a phenomenological stance on the body brings us beyond abstract, theoretical accounts, from the body as symbol (Douglas 1970) towards the body as experience, action and intention (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Schutz 1970). Linking the olfactory with the body thus offers new dimensions of corporeality for empirical investigations and analyses.

The present study also attempts to supplement the dearth of olfactory research, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, where research on smell remains in an inchoate stage, with only a few contributions such as that by Cohen (1988), Law (2001) and Roseman (1990). Literature on the sociohistory of smell and its social meanings and symbolic associations has hitherto focused on Western societies (see for example, Corbin 1986; Howes & Lalonde 1991), and anthropological olfactory studies have brought us to places such as Brazil, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Andaman Islands and elsewhere (see Classen *et al.* 1994). Hence, through the empirical case study of Singapore, I add to the existing literature by exploring the roles and meanings of smell beyond Western societies and anthropological studies, iterating the transition from sensorial/olfactory experiences to sociocultural expressions.

A Note on Methodology: ‘Borrowing Noses’

The data presented here is culled from my dissertation research spanning twenty-six months, where fieldwork include narrative interviewing (Pollio *et al.* 1997; PuruShotam 2000), breaching experiments (Garfinkel 1967) and participant observation. For present purposes, respondents’ experiences from the interviews form the main bulk of data analysed herein. As the paper intends to locate how social actors regard smells in everyday life experiences, it would be most logical to speak to two groups of respondents: people who can smell, and people who cannot. One of my respondents pointed out: ‘[F]or your research it’s important to talk to people who [have] a sense of smell and people who have never had it’.

Research and data collection began with the researcher approaching people who have complained about smells (such as body odours), or were interested in the present topic. Through preliminary rounds of interviews and breaching experiments, the issue of ‘race’ emerged as a recurrent one, where more often than not, respondents tended to use ‘race’ as a starting point in narrating their olfactive experiences.² Due to this, subsequent selection of respondents boiled down to making a conscious attempt to include respondents of different ‘races’, so as to procure a multiplicity of meanings, as well as to allow respondents to self-ascribe their racial identity. Also, there was a difficulty in locating anosmic respondents; through the help of a friend, I was introduced to only one such person in Singapore. Subsequently, the remaining five anosmic informants (non-locals) were approached through the internet, where online forums and discussion rooms catering to this group of people abound. Data from these

² Respondents’ olfactive experiences are often narrated in racial terms, and olfactive racial boundaries seem to emerge in tandem with the CMIO (‘Chinese’, ‘Malay’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Others’) racial model of Singapore as adopted by the local government. This model is largely a product of colonial administration (Leong 1997), where colonial administrators, in an attempt to manage the influx of migrant labour (and the locals), grouped people according to different nation-state origins. In the beginning, there were forty-seven ethnic groups listed for the 1881 census; these escalated to fifty-six by 1921 (PuruShotam 1995). By 1965, when Singapore achieved independence, the racial categories were reduced to just four, comprising thus, the CMIO quadratomy that is in existence till today.

anosmic individuals was gathered either through online chatting or through emails. In all, seventeen respondents were interviewed, comprising three ‘Malays’, three ‘Indians’, six ‘Chinese’ and five non-Singaporeans.

In sum, it is not of immediate interest here to select respondents based primarily on variables like that of class, age, or occupation. Neither will this study present findings that are predicated upon statistical similarities and/or differences in olfactory perception and behaviour among ‘participants’; these have been sufficiently undertaken by various other scholars (see for example, Bensafi *et al.* 2002; Filsinger & Fabes 1985; Gilbert & Wysocki 1987; Hannigan 1995; Herz & Cahill 1997; Lord & Kasprzak 1989; Martin 2002; Schleidt 1980). Instead, the present project aims to illuminate the plethora of ways in which smell acts and is acted upon by various social actors. Throughout the course of research, interaction with respondents was not merely reduced to a one-off interview, but rather, comprised continual meetings, including both formal and informal chats and interviews. Pseudonyms are employed here for purposes of confidentiality.

As already mentioned, the data presented here is drawn from narrative interviews, so as to provide rich discursive data for analysis. The method of narrative interviewing operates on the assumption that ‘human beings have a fundamentally narrative relation towards themselves, perceiving and accounting for their social experiences by a continuous narrational stream vis-à-vis a shared stock of knowledge’ (PuruShotam 2000: 24-25). This stock of knowledge, PuruShotam contends, ‘both gives to experience its social dimensionality, while [drawing its] source from the narrational relationship human beings have’ (*ibid.*). The starting point of narrative interviews for present purposes was: ‘Tell me about your experiences with smell’. Generally, this opened up a flow of narration that respondents chose to share with me. I was careful not to interrupt them except for clarifications, or for follow-up questions based on what each respondent has shared. Further questions were thought of *in situ*, dependent wholly on where the respondent was leading the researcher. In this manner, taking my cues from the respondent would lead us to talking about experiences and stories about smell that concerned him/her the most.

Presenting the Self, the Social Body and the Olfactory

Where social interactions occur on a day-to-day basis, respondents typically highlight that there is always a need to smell ‘neutral if not nice’, so as to facilitate social encounters. In the presence of bodily odours that are deemed offensive, negative reactions comprise that of truncating interaction, adopting covert methods of talking about the body odour, or simply, avoiding the social actor who smells. More importantly, such physical reactions bring forth issues concerning personhood and morality, as there appears to be a constant link between smelling ‘presentable’, therefore being accepted, and thus, being

compliant with social expectations by maintaining moral orders/odours. Either to smell foul, or to tell someone that s/he smells, is to be insulting:

We know that in our society one can't have bad breath, sweaty underarms, or noticeable genital odour. You can tell people they need a haircut or to wash their face, but if you tell them they smell, you are really insulting. The height of crudeness is the passing of gas in public. Sociologists call it the 'fart taboo' – which brings us to the second major reason we are embarrassed about our ability to smell. (Winter 1976: 15)

As one of my respondents shared: 'People would tell other people that you are smelly and not tell you directly because...it's a matter of social etiquette...it's a matter of face also...You won't tell a person outright [that s/he is smelly] because it's actually regarded as rude to tell a person that'. Ostensibly, the ways in which our bodies smell are very much tied up with who we are, and more pertinently, how others smell/read us, based on whether we are 'clean' or 'dirty'. Simmel points out quite rightly: 'Impinging on the human subject, the sensory impression of a person provokes feelings of like and dislike in us, of our own exaltation or degradation, of excitement or composure, from his or her look or the tone of his or her voice, or from his or her mere physical presence in the same room' (in Frisby & Featherstone 1997: 110-111).

In this manner, the body, according to Turner (1984: 190), stands as a site for symbolic work and symbolic production, forming an object of (olfactive) regulation and control. This is also echoed by Douglas (1970: 69), who declares that perceptions of the physical body are constrained by the social body, where there is a 'continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the other'. This exchange, Douglas adds, involves 'grooming, feeding and therapy', which contributes to a 'culturally processed idea of the body' (ibid.). Following these, mismanagement of the body, as manifested by the presence of body odours, is regarded by respondents as a form of defilement.

Respondents generally found body odours to be a 'social violation' and expressed disdain when talking about them (emphases mine):

Joshua: I don't think people would want to really stand next to a very sweaty person, who is giving out very bad odour. This immediately turn the person off, because given the fact that we have five senses, and smell is the main of it, so unless this person has totally no sense of smell, this body odour will put everybody off. So this is what we call *basic courtesy*, the fresh smell...especially when we are meeting people, we...smell at least, not fantastic, but at least we don't smell bad.

Gail: I should say that they should know how to get rid of that smell, or use some body deodorant? Something that would cover that smell...you know...*in social situations, if you smell bad, it's very embarrassing*. You are not a person who take care of yourself, your body...*how you present yourself to other people*...Sometimes when I smell body odour, I find that I don't like this person. It takes an effort, to try to communicate, try to make...sometimes it's bad to be so er...*kind of judgemental of them because of their*

body odour. But it's not easy lah, you just have to overcome certain things, to try to be nice to these people.

Evidently, detection of body odours would repel social actors from carrying out social interactions smoothly, but picking up such undesirable scents relates not just to physiological responses towards foulness, but also, social responses concerning disapproval and rejection. The presentation of self thus involves not only what can be seen, but also, that which can be picked up in terms of the olfactory. The body then comes to symbolise personhood, either representing one as able to take care of oneself, or as failing to do so. This is also suggested by one of my respondents, Ian:

I think...a lot of people mark a person's identity, a person's sense of self and sense of being based on smell...I think people react to a particular person because of the way he smells or the way he looks and I think, the one thing...the one indicator I think is that, would...mark or differentiate the person from another person, especially today is smell.

More pertinently, social actors who emit bodily odours are perceived as committing not merely odour defilement, but also, social/moral defilement, and therefore, induce social rejection:

Lancy: Often people who smell bad are left apart from groups...Sometimes if I have problems with friends or even when working, I'm afraid it could depend on my smell...I heard a lot of people saying that they don't have relation with one person because he or she smells bad.

Gail: I think it's actually part of them, how they smell, like how they look, how they talk...these are all part of you. So when people show that they don't like how you smell, you think that it's a sign of rejection by them. So they think that they are not accepted by you. I think that's a...it's in a certain sense, it's true lah, that you can't accept the smell, but you may be able to accept the person if they do something about the smell.

It is interesting to note that in Guangzhou, China, one of the selection criteria for civil service jobs include an absence of body odour, for its presence represented 'carelessness in personal hygiene' (*Streets*, October 14 2002). And in Japan, it was once believed that body odour signified poor genes and bad character, hence one would immediately be disqualified from military service (Glaser 2002). Recently, a new law has been proposed in Johannesburg, South Africa, where commuters and passengers with body odour would be expelled from public transport (*The New Paper*, February 16 2003). Such reports seem to indicate that the maintenance of one's body becomes, and has been, of crucial importance in situations of social interactions, be it for job applications, commuting, or informal meetings with friends and acquaintances. It demonstrates, both formally and informally, the need to present an olfactorily pleasing if not fragrant self, before one can be an 'accepted' member of society. As Largey and Watson posit: '[O]dours, whether real or alleged, are often used as a basis for conferring a moral identity upon an individual or a group. And certainly such moral imputations bear upon the processes of human

interaction' (1972: 1024). Morality and sociality thus intertwine with the olfactory in everyday life experiences.

The ways in which foul smells are related to moral defilement are simple. Odours are not merely physical phenomena; they are also moral phenomena (Synnott 1993). When scents are evaluated either in positive or negative ways, such moral appraisals therefore place olfaction as a paramount component within our 'moral construction of reality and our construction of moral reality' (ibid.). Synnott argues that the way in which we judge social others is similar to how we judge food and the environment for instance. He says: 'If a person smells "bad", or deviates from the olfactory cultural norm, the odour may be a sign that there is something wrong with their physical, emotional or mental health. The odour is a *natural sign* of the self as both a physical and a moral being. The odour is a symbol of the self' (1993: 190, emphasis in original). Similarly, other scholars such as Corbin (1986), Le Gu  rer (1992) and Turner (1984, 1996), all relate the moral dimensions of scents with how society perceives foul odours. Consequently, smell and morality or the lack of rectitude, often go hand in hand when one perceives and judges the social 'other' as either olfactorily acceptable or not. The process transpires where physical contamination modulates into moral condemnation. Odours manifest as the threat of contamination and challenge social values and norms. Hence olfactory boundaries, or the transgression of them, are in part moral boundaries, where moral values of positive versus negative associations are often imputed onto an individual's emanated bodily smell, or an expected smell coming from particular individuals (Synnott 1993).

On the other hand, Le Gu  rer brings us back to the placement of smells in history, and expresses the idea that repulsive odours, apart from reinforcing social class divisions, also carried with them moral stigma; for sin was often associated with stench. She refers to an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription which states: 'He whose odour is unpleasant shall be punished and ostracised' (1992:30). Furthermore, olfactory intolerance extended to 'marginal' groups³ such as Jews, prostitutes and other groups of the working class, as the 'supposed fetidness of such groups, a sign of their moral inferiority, serves to justify the exclusionary practices of bigotry' (ibid.). Malodours then, were often equated with moral laxity and vice versa, resulting in a projection of imagined bad odour on to the socially despised. Workers dealing with leather, wool and skins – due to their nauseating activities – were readily relegated to the outskirts of the town, instructed to remain there if they wanted to eschew fines and confiscation of their goods. Charles Darwin ([1872] 1965), who was probably the first scientist to give serious attention to the evolution of facial expressions as aspects of non-verbal communication, provides an insightful discussion on the close connection between expressions of olfactory and social disgust, which he proposes occurs 'through the

³ In similar vein, Largey and Watson (1972) point out that many alleged odours of groups are related to stereotyped notions about their moral laxity. The authors give examples of how Pakistanis in Britain are described by a London dockworker as 'passive and weak', therefore they 'smell'. Also, they quote an American white who was heard to speak of the 'stench of niggers', suggesting that they do not bathe, and do not follow 'decent human standards'.

force of habit and association' (1965:261). He describes in detail the common expression of contempt by a slight turning up of the nose and upper lip, together with a wrinkling and contracting of the nose, often accompanied by expiration of air from the nostrils (1965: 255). He continues:

All these actions are the same with those which we employ when we perceive an offensive odour, and wish to exclude or expel it....We seem thus to say to the despised person that he smells offensively, in nearly the same manner as we express to him by half-closing our eyelids, or turning away our faces, that he is not worth looking at. It must not, however, be supposed that such ideas actually pass through the mind when we exhibit our contempt; but as whenever we have perceived a disagreeable odour or seen a disagreeable sight, actions of this kind have been performed, they have become habitual or fixed, and are now employed under any analogous state of mind.

In terms of the evolution of human communication, it appears that a facial expression that began as a signal (immediate response to a stimulus, the smell of something rotten and therefore potentially dangerous to eat) has subsequently become detached from the original stimulus and carried over metaphorically into social contexts of inequality, where it functions as a sign, now used to indicate the social inferiority of the person to whom it is directed ('I respond to you *as if* you smelled rotten').

Darwin defines 'disgust' as 'something offensive to the taste' (1965: 256), and proceeds to explain how smell is also tied up with taste. He elaborates:

As the sense of smell is so intimately connected with that of taste, it is not surprising that an excessively bad odour should excite retching or vomiting in some persons,...and that, as a further consequence, a moderately offensive odour should cause the various expressive movements of disgust. The tendency to retch from a fetid odour is immediately strengthened in a curious manner by some degree of habit, though soon lost by longer familiarity with the cause of offence and by voluntary restraint. (1965: 259)

Similarly, Miller, in his *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), suggests that disgust necessitates

particular thoughts, characteristically very intrusive and unriddable thoughts about the repugnance of that which is its object. Disgust must be accompanied by ideas of a particular kind of danger, the danger inherent in pollution and contamination, the danger of defilement, which ideas in turn will be associated with rather predictable cultural and social scenarios. Even when the source of disgust is our own body the interpretations we make of our bodily secretions and excretions are deeply embedded in elaborate social and cultural systems of meaning. Feces, anuses, snot, saliva, hair, sweat, pus, the odours that emanate from our body and from those of others come with social and cultural histories attached to them. (1997: 8)

Miller contends that disgust can be regarded as a form of emotion which works to 'hierarchize our political order' (ibid.). At times, it also serves to maintain hierarchy. This is evident from the discussion above where I pointed out that where a socially marginal group (such as Jews, Pakistanis etc) is despised by a majority group, olfactive judgments may follow, more often than not being produced in negative

terms. Through smell, disgust ‘evaluates (negatively) what it touches, [and] proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object’ (1997: 9). In essence, both Darwin’s and Miller’s arguments concerning disgust and smell therefore demonstrate how olfactory intolerance and social and moral disgust manifest simultaneously.

Turner, in tandem, locates the body as a carrier of intricate corporeal existence, which involves us in a ‘constant labour of eating, washing, grooming, dressing and sleeping’. Negligence would ‘invite premature decay, disease and disorder’ (1996: 37). Disease therefore comes to represent disorder, becoming the most ‘salient metaphor of structural crisis’ (Turner 1984: 114). Evidently then, ‘disease’ may be related to emissions of foul scents from one’s body, thereby indicating a lack of proper care and cleansing - exhibiting not just physiological laxity, but also moral defilement. When scents are converted from physical sensations to symbolic evaluations, describing someone or something as ‘*smelling* good or bad is to imply that this someone or something is good or bad. This equation is built into our language’ (Synnott 1993: 191, emphases in original). Such an equation, Synnott argues, becomes embroiled in how we morally construct social others.

Apart from linking the presence of foul smells emitted from the body with moral defilement, respondents also relate how difficult it can be, to tell someone that s/he has body odour, for smells come to represent who one is, and indicate varied dimensions of personhood. And as mentioned above, to speak directly of bodily odours to the ‘owner’, would be insulting as the link between self and scents becomes more augmented, demonstrating the emanations of bodily odours as a mark of not just physiological, but also social, shortcomings.

Joshua, who runs an aromatherapy school, has this to say, when asked if he would tell someone directly that s/he has body odour:

On my part, as you can see ah, maybe at a younger age, when we talk to children or nursery...they are still receptive. As you grow up, we know that everyone now, have their own pride, their own ego. How receptive, it really depends on them. But if you are being too blunt, to go in straight at them, I believe it’s not my case – everybody has the same problem. If you were to go straight, blunt on them, unless you are willing to lose a friend, a colleague or...whatsoever. If they are not so open enough, you might easily lose them. They might not talk to you, because you are looking...to them we are looking down on them, based on their body odour, so a lot take this very personal. But a lot, after they can see that a lot of friends going off, then they become...will open up.

Similarly, Caitlin reasons that talking about one’s bodily odours is a sensitive issue:

Because it’s rude, number one it’s rude, and number two, you don’t know how they are going to take it. They might get offended, can’t take the truth. You know what I mean? It’s like...it’s like...because it’s a sensitive topic. If someone says you got bad breath, wouldn’t you get offended? Ya. So I think it’s rude. It means that that person something wrong, never clean properly. How to meet people like that?

When probed further as to the links between the need for familiarity and talking about one's bodily odours, Isaac mentions that there is a need to be in a 'comfort zone' if he was to tell his friends about their bodily odours:

It's more comfortable to tell somebody...eh, you got body odour...or...or you smell nice...you are more comfortable, just offhand, I would say to somebody I know very well. A friend...a friend whom I know that, you know, there's a certain bond, and we go back some time...some length.

This sentiment is also echoed by Felix:

It's very private. It's very personal, I think, and...I would feel bad having to tell someone, you know, you got body odour (laughs). Why? Because I would think it's sometimes not really the person's fault. But at the same time, ya it is. It's like trying to tell a person, you know, you're not clean enough. So you need to be close to that person before you can tell him or her that he or she is smelly.

Also, in a recent newspaper article in Singapore, Yeo (2004) offers a few tips as to how one can handle colleagues with body odours, including:

Show respect: Know that it will be difficult for the person to hear [about his/her body odour problem], so handle the awkward situation with sensitivity. Sit down with the person in a quiet private place. Be specific but caring. Make it clear that this is not an attempt to embarrass the person.

By emphasising the presence of a 'comfort zone' as an imperative before one's body odours can be discussed, or rectification can be asked for, this demonstrates two things. First, we can better grasp how smell comes to be a social conduit, reflecting upon one's lack of personal hygiene/cleanliness, thereby resonating both social and moral transgression, as noted above. Second, smell is also linked with one's sense of personhood and integrity, for bad smells such as bodily odours evince a lack of order and proper maintenance, thereby inviting social and moral disapprobation. These bring us to a more pressing issue: that of whether one with body odour would be able to obtain social approval or rejection, as pointed out earlier. Hence, by employing smell as an intermediary with which we flesh out how the olfactory goes beyond the physiological to the social and moral, I have shown that smell can be either an 'integrative' medium between social actors (via neutral or fragrant scents), or divisive (foul smells such as body odours), depending on reactions to (bodily) smells that are either emitted or picked up by social actors. As to whether individuals with body odours would be able to gain social acceptance, I discuss this in a later section.

On the whole, most respondents implore people with body odours to 'do something about it', or 'bathe and use perfume', and these forms of 'cleaning up' echo the demands and expectations of civilisation as a process, expounded by Elias ([1978] 2000). For him, processes of civilisation were

predicated upon the management of bodily functions and products. He elucidates these by citing examples such as the do's and don'ts of table manners (2000: 72), spitting (2000: 129), and also, behaviour in the bedroom (2000: 136). Briefly, these techniques of behaviour, termed as 'manner[s] of conditioning' and 'controls' (Elias 2000: 129), demonstrate how the 'civilised' body arises in all societies at different times and becomes subject to ever-increasing constraints (Seymour 1998). For present purposes, I refer to the various methods which respondents suggest and/or adhere to as they 'prepare' their bodies for social interactions, to be spelt out below. These 'body techniques' (Mauss [1935] 1979), I submit, exemplify how the body can be comprehended as having a role to play (Crossley 1995a), and not merely as an object for social science inquiry. But before that, a section on how individual body odours transform into social impropriety is presented, followed by examples of how such bodily derelictions are rectified.

Olfactory Impropriety as Social Stigma

Berthelot postulates that the body can be perceived as an instrument of communication, regarded not as an object, but rather, a 'mode of knowledge', a 'reservoir of signs' (1995: 19). Following this, we can thus understand and analyse the body as a 'repository of meanings and associations, thereby locating the body as a tool for constructing a discourse' (1995: 22). The 'discourse' that emerges within the present paper revolves around the links and influences between the individual and the social (concerning bodily, olfactory management), and how these links come to represent and indicate either a bastion or defilement of moral order, predicated upon acceptable or foul scents respectively, as exemplified. Within these, Goffman's interactionist perspectives such as 'face-work', 'stigma' and 'deference and demeanour' are useful when we explore how the individual body becomes managed in order to produce and maintain a social body.

Goffman (1956) argues that having a body would involve 'body-work', as the body is in constant need of attention, which comprises primarily expressive and symbolic significance. Instead of speaking about doing our bodies, Goffman contends that we should also, at a deeper level, talk about *being* a body. Any loss of control over our bodies becomes not just socially embarrassing, but also indicates a loss of control over ourselves (ibid.). Following these arguments, it is therefore justified to make a claim for how bodily odours can represent a loss of control over ourselves, and hence rectification is required, in order to undo the stigmatic equation of olfactory breach with social/moral defilement.

To begin, it would be regarded as olfactory impropriety (c.f. Goffman's 'situational impropriety', 1963a) for one not to cleanse oneself of discernible bodily odours that are deemed as unpleasant and thus in need of rectification. With cleansing, social interaction, or rather verbal and non-verbal communication, will go further and more smoothly than when one is caught with an odouriferous interlocutor for example.

To understand how olfactory impropriety can be perceived as an emblem of social violation, I cull from Goffman's notions of stigma (1963b), and concepts from *Relations in Public* (1971), to demonstrate and act as a corollary of why and how individuals with body odours are socially (and morally) rejected, as well as how these 'stigmatised' actors can undo the stigma via cleaning/perfuming body techniques. For Goffman, bodily odours form one of many 'modalities of violation' (1971: 44), subsumed under the modality of 'bodily excreta' (1971: 46). Violation, he claims, stems from processes of 'incursion, intrusion, encroachment, presumption, transgression, defilement, besmearing...and contamination' (1971: 44), where the source of such boundary offence are actually individuals themselves. Here, bodily excreta is considered in terms of four distinct agencies of defilement – corporeal excreta, odour (which includes bad breath, bodily smells and flatulence), body heat, and markings left by the body in which some bodily excreta can be imagined to remain, such as plate leavings (ibid.).

Goffman defines 'normals' as people who 'do not depart negatively from...particular expectations at issue' (1963b: 5). Also, he points out a distinction between 'virtual social identity' and 'actual social identity' (see 1963b: 2); the former refers to our expectations of the individual, otherwise known as how we characterise social actors via expectations. The latter then, points to the 'category and attributes he could in fact be proved to possess' (ibid.). Where the term *stigma* previously referred to 'bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier' (1963b: 1), it is, in contemporary times, applied 'more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it' (1963b: 1-2). Essentially, stigma refers to that which can be discrediting, and examples of stigma include 'abominations of the body' (1963b). These abominations may comprise (as shown above) the emanation of body odours from social actors who thus garner social and moral disapproval, being deemed as a source of olfactory opprobrium.

Where Goffman refers to stigma in more concrete terms such as 'physical deformities', 'blemishes of individual character', and 'stigma of race, nation, and religion' (1963b: 4), I allude to the role of body odours as forming a part of physical, or otherwise sensorial shortcoming, as the source of defilement, and thereby stigma. This qualification is necessitated as Goffman argues that people who are stigmatised tend to group together, i.e. 'sympathetic others' (1963b: 19) who share the stigmatised individual's predicament, thereby providing support and comfort to him/her. These people are also known, in Goffmanian terms, as 'fellow sufferers'. Additionally, people may bind together as stigmatised individual aggregates, thus forming some semblance of a community. However, such a conception tends not to cohere with one's bodily odour, as such a source of unpleasant smells stems from within specific individuals. Hence, I am invoking Goffman's concept of stigma in a general sense, where the shortcoming lies within the individual, who usually cannot, and probably would not, find solace in fellow sufferers.

Reactions against stigmatised, odoriferous others coincide with Goffman's take on how we believe that a person with a stigma is 'not quite human' and based on this assumption, a whole host of discriminatory actions is exercised, including social/moral condemnation, avoidance, rejection or truncation of social interactions. Some respondents exemplify these:

Charmaine: I take the bus to school, so in the morning, office workers [or whoever] goes into the bus. Some of them don't bathe in the morning! I'm like, oh my God! What? If I sit next to someone who's got body odour, the whole time I think I'm gonna faint. I come up with a headache. The first thing once I get off the bus is really, run to the toilet and puke.

Trey: Anything that puts off anyone to go towards the person, this is considered something like a body odour, be it instantly...you can't take a more than five minutes talk, you want to finish quick and then you go off, ah this is something like that. So a nice aroma, nice smell is something like you feeling very comfortable with the person. Be it talking, because talking you know that speech is also a sense of human; the next one is from the smell. If you don't mind talking...the same time ah, you can be with a person for more than fifteen minutes...even without talking...compared to body odour, to foul smell that you can't be with the person for more than five minutes.

By thinking/acting in this way, we tend to construct a 'stigma theory' (Goffman 1963b: 5), an ideology of sorts to explain a person's shortcoming, to account for the 'danger' s/he (re)presents. This theory concretises when we employ such terms as 'cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically without giving thought to the original meaning' (ibid.). Caitlin, for instance, claimed that the hostel where she was staying was 'infected' by students from China, as they do not bathe, and neither do they brush their teeth in the morning and therefore 'stink like crazy'. She adds that these students were 'unhygienic people', surmising that 'maybe people in China don't bathe'. Trey, on the other hand, labels 'Indian' students as 'carriers of poisonous green gases' when they entered the hostel lift with him. Thereafter, he arrived at a premature decision that his (yet to be born) daughter would not be allowed to marry an 'Indian'. Joshua illustrates vividly, 'beggars' from temples (emphases mine):

I believe [in] some of the temples...you know *those beggars*, not really pinpoint at them, but need to...they don't really get to wash up. At least once a day, you have to do that...But those who fail to do that, even from quite a distance, can also detect their body odour, very strong. *So these are the group of people* that you can't take the same train or bus with them. If they are in the front, you are the last row, you can still detect them. These are the people that [other] people usually avoid...You have to stand a few metres away from them. Things like you can't share the same bus ride, you can't share a train ride with them, definitely cannot endure all these.

Social stigma arising from the olfactory begins to further arrest social actors' attention and action when 'normals' (people who see themselves as members of a more desirable olfactive group) and stigmatised 'enter one another's immediate presence, especially when they there attempt to sustain a joint

conversational encounter [-] there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides' (Goffman 1963b: 13). Besides, Goffman also suggests that 'race' and 'nation' form examples of stigma (1963b: 4). These are raised in Caitlin's and Trey's comments on students from China and India, whom they accused of olfactory defilement. To label one as having committed olfactory defilement involves also making distinctions between a we-group and a them-group. In this case, the dichotomy of locals versus foreigners is brought up by both Caitlin and Trey, revealing that smell perceptions concerning foreigners are perhaps more derogatory than how locals are appraised. As I have discussed elsewhere (Low 2005), malodorous foreigners are treated with more disdain and suspicion than the locals; one local respondent labels Thai workers congregating at *Golden Mile Complex* as 'crooks, thieves and drunks'. In this sense, olfactory defilement is not merely about smells. Olfactory stigma arising from judgments on smell is also intertwined with other social categories such as race, class and nationality.⁴ When these categories intertwine, this is where respondents adopt attitudes of inclusion and exclusion. The notion of 'normals' therefore, is not just about people who do not smell, but also includes, according to Caitlin and Trey, people who are at least of the same nationality, if not race.

Having accounted for how stigma arises, I now discuss the methods respondents employ in dealing with olfactory defilement. I refer to Goffman's concept of 'civil inattention' (1963a: 84) which he defines as how 'one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present...while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design'. He goes on to explain that civil inattention can

⁴ I discuss at length, the demarcation of we-group versus them-group in my dissertation (*Scents and Scent-sibilities: A Sociocultural Inquiry of Smells in Everyday Life Experiences*, 2004) based on racial, olfactive, class, gender, and spatial boundaries in Singapore. For instance, I argue that racial constructs of social others are predicated not only on visible racial markers such as clothes, skin colour or other tangible traits. Rather, racial categorisation transpires via the olfactory, and this takes place through processes of stereotyping, arising from an individual social actor's expectations of a person's smell, thereby arriving at a perception of the racial 'other'. In this sense, social bodies are not merely racial bodies; they are also, in effect, odorous bodies which signify racial constructs. Additionally, I further the discussion on olfactive racial constructs by looking at racial enclaves in Singapore; namely *Little India* (Serangoon Road), *Little Thailand* (*Golden Mile Shopping Complex*) and *Little Myanmar* (*Peninsula Plaza*). Some of my respondents went along with me to these enclaves for a walk-about. This was because if one were to understand, in terms of *practice*, how smells are assigned to different racial groups, and thereby account for either social proximity or distancing, then one way to uncover these was to ask respondents to describe what they pick up and how they feel, while walking around these enclaves. These three enclaves are otherwise termed as *smellscapes* (Dann 2003; Porteous 1985; Rodaway 1994). Generally, respondents tend to speak negatively of the smells they pick up at, or imagine from, these enclaves, usually putting the blame on foreign workers who hail from places such as Bangladesh, Thailand and Myanmar. For example, Ian comments on Burmese workers seen at *Peninsula Plaza*: 'Look at those Burmese workers – hair unkempt, their clothes look dirty, unwashed. Surely stink'. Racial boundaries thus become reconfigured based on the polarities of locals versus foreigners, where smellscapes, the olfactory, the visual and the oral coalesce to differentiate 'us' from the foreign others, illustrating the oppositional boundaries of the nation and alien others (Sibley 1995).

be interpreted as tactfulness in the face of (olfactory) offensiveness, in order to maintain a social situation (1963a: 87).

Though Goffman employs civil inattention with regard to the visual, I borrow this term to apply to the olfactory sense instead, where the performative meanings of such inattention remain similar. In other words, though (olfactory) ‘offensiveness’ may be picked up by social actors, such recognition is played down where the issue of body odour as a problem is not brought up to the one emanating it. Such ‘polite’ olfactory ‘oblivion’ is probably exercised with measured nonchalance by social actors as they choose not to ‘confront’ an olfactorily stigmatised individual, for, as highlighted earlier, the presence of body odours on a person typically garners negative reactions and responses. Olfactory civil inattention is practised as follows:

Lancy: I had a school mate whose breath was bad and no one used to speak with him for this reason, but no one used to tell him that the problem was his breath...I think that if just only one of them told him [what] was the problem, probably he would have washed his teeth or [eaten] a sweet...in order not to [smell] bad.

Annette: I once went out with a guy previously, and he had really bad body odour! Many times, I wanted to cover my nose and turn away, but decided against it as it seemed rude and may be offensive, even hurtful to him. So what to do? I endured for a while, and didn’t dare to talk to him about it. I had to act as if there was no problem with him. After that I tried to minimise meeting up with him.

Although all respondents indicate repugnance concerning individuals with bodily odours, not all however, would exercise civil inattention in dealing with this olfactive problem. For instance, Vince adopts a rather forthright stand: ‘I would tell them [if they smelled bad]...I don’t hold back...Er...some of my closer friends...some of my closer female friends, they know that I would tell them...They just feel a bit conscious, stay away a bit lor’. Caitlin reveals that as she was brought up to believe that all ‘Chinese’⁵ smell bad, she would instantly cover her nose upon encountering any ‘Chinese’ (previously), albeit acknowledging that such a gesture was ‘very rude’. Civil inattention or the absence of it in relation to these individual lived subjectivities/experiences thus demonstrate that smell is regarded differently by various individuals, as they go about understanding and (re)producing their social realities with olfaction as a social intermediary, dealing with issues such as body odours and how social interactions may be affected as a result.

⁵ Here, Caitlin is referring to both Singaporean Chinese and Chinese nationals. Throughout the interview however, she indicates that Chinese nationals (due in part to her hostel experience as mentioned earlier) are more foul-smelling than Singaporean Chinese. She says: ‘I think China’s Chinese the worst!’.

Undoing the Stigma, Correcting Olfactory Impropriety: A Re-Presentation of Self

Having located how stigmatised individuals are regarded, as well as how civil inattention may or may not take place, I now discuss the various ‘corrective’ techniques to see how body odours are dealt with, arguing in tandem with Goffman who terms these techniques (concerning maintenance and management of the body) ‘preventive practices’ (1956). The use of cleansing/fragrance items such as soap, deodorant and perfume will be presented, to show that these items used in cleaning routines indicate how the body has to be constantly regulated, maintained and corrected for the presentation of self. This is also articulated by Shilling, who argues that self-care regimes do not stand merely as forms of prophylaxis. Instead, these regimes are also linked to how we present our bodies to ourselves and others (1993: 5).

To understand how rectification and maintenance of the body are accomplished, and what they mean for the individual social actor within the larger society, I begin by looking at Mauss’ ‘body techniques’ [1935](1979). Then, I discuss how one manages and attempts to avoid the olfactory stigma by referring to Goffmanian sociology of the body. Mauss refers to ‘body techniques’ as ‘the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies’ [1935](1979: 97). These include standing, walking, marching, climbing, to sitting, varying positions for sleeping and making love. Hence, even the most quotidian and banal of our everyday life experiences are predicated upon corporeal-cultural techniques (Mauss [1935]1979). Crossley, however, points out some criticisms of Mauss’ body techniques. For instance, Crossley points out that Mauss seems to treat body techniques as ‘historical and biographical acquisitions (which they are) but not as on-going practices which accommodate the anticipated exigencies of a present and future’ (1995a: 135). In doing so, this brings about a failure to take into consideration the extent to which these body techniques are predicated upon social interaction, and thus the ‘extent to which such action can be deemed as social action’ (ibid.). Crossley submits that although Merleau-Ponty might have partially tempered Mauss’ shortcomings by looking at how perception and action are articulated, and ‘therefore how action is always oriented to a present situation which it will both accommodate and transform’ (1995a: 135) through the example of the athlete (responding to passes and wind conditions – see Merleau-Ponty 1965: 168-9), this idea has yet to be developed to its full potential.

We should, following Crossley, turn to Goffman in order to materialise this idea fully. Crossley contends that social encounters which involve our senses such as sight or hearing, are predicated upon particular routines and negotiations from our repertoire of actions (1995a: 136). Essentially, acquiring and employing a body technique involves being able to adapt and apply it, depending on the circumstances. This, Crossley proposes, constitutes ‘carnal sociology’, which addresses the body as having an active role, as opposed to a sociology of the body, mainly concerned with what is done to the body (1995b: 43). Thus,

the negotiation and accommodation intertwined with the employment of body techniques can be filtered and exemplified via Goffman's works such as that of *The Presentation of Self* (1956) and *Behaviour in Public Places* (1963a).

Goffman divides preventive practices into two types. The first, which he calls 'defensive practices', refers to how individuals employ particular strategies in order to defend their own presentations. The second, known as 'protective practices' point towards how a participant employs them in order to save a situation projected by another, otherwise known as 'tact'. Together, both defensive and protective practices comprise the techniques utilised by social actors to safeguard the impression provided by an individual as s/he encounters social others (1956). I employ the term 'preventive practices' in relation to how social actors prepare themselves in the olfactory dimension before going on stage, so to speak. Such practices are understood as taking place in the 'back region' (Goffman 1956: 69), so as to 'perform' and 'function' appropriately in the 'front region' (Goffman 1956: 66).⁶ These forms of olfactory scrupulosity are to be understood not merely as attempts to remove socially discreditable odours, but also, to prevent body odours from being present, thereby presenting a social self that is olfactorily acceptable for social interaction. These are termed by Williams and Bendelow (1998: 58) as 'repair work' in order to rectify olfactory 'derelictions of interactional duty' (ibid.).

To begin, I present the techniques employed by anosmic individuals, who can only depend on those around them, to 'check' if they smell 'acceptable' before presenting themselves at the 'front region'. Tristan, who is born without the sense of smell, makes sure that he changes his clothes regularly so as to avoid being smelly:

Because I can't smell, I tend to be paranoid about smells, in a lot of ways, like I might smell or stink of sweat. But most people told me I don't at all, but it's more of a kind of paranoia that...so I tend to correct that by using perfume. Not excessively lah, but I will make a conscious effort to change my clothes often. It's a kind of *jié pì* (obsessive habit) – not so serious until I change my clothes every two hours, I would usually not wear the same shirt for more than a day.

And, in order to ascertain that the clothes he wears are clean and free of odours, this is what Tristan does:

It's like not knowing lor, because if you smell that you stink, you can correct it yourself. But for me I can't. So what I always do is I dangle my clothes in front of my brother – how? If smelly, then wash. If he say can, then I wear another day.

⁶ Goffman defines 'region' as 'any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception' (1956: 66). 'Front region' points to 'the place where the performance is given', seen as an 'effort to give [an] appearance that [one's] activity...maintains and embodies certain standards' (1956: 67). On the other hand, 'back region' refers to 'a place...where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted...[and where] illusions and impressions are openly constructed' (1956: 69).

Similarly, Lancy used to depend on her parents to smell her clothes before wearing them, when she was living with them. In the case of purchasing/choosing of perfumes and deodorants, both Tristan and Lancy comment:

Tristan: One thing that never makes sense to me is perfume. I get people to choose it for me. It's something that never makes sense to me. When I go and buy right, the salesgirl will try very hard to promote it to me, and I would turn to the person beside me, and say how? Can or not? Okay then buy.

Lancy: For the perfume I tried...when I was about sixteen...and in that case I trusted my mother's personal preferences but then I stopped, because I think it's like wearing a dress...you have to like it to wear it...so I cannot smell and I don't put perfume on...For deodorants I usually search for neutral deodorants or what they say fresh deodorants.

Where perfuming is concerned, Charmaine (non-anosmic) shares that she carries perfume with her wherever she goes:

There was once I went out and I forgot to wear perfume. Do you know what I did? I actually went to a shop...sprayed myself there you know (laughs)...I cannot live without perfume. I actually bring perfume with me wherever I go...because it's just a matter of self-presentation. Because I know how I feel when I sit next to somebody who stinks, so I wouldn't want to put anyone in that position.

Annette, on the other hand, talks about her cleaning regime and fragrance products:

I bathe, obviously. I...put baby powder all the time. And I make sure my shower foam is nice. Are you sure you want to hear this? My shower foam is pink in colour as well. You know the *Shokubutsu* one? But anyway, so I bathe, I...I...make sure I have my perfume on whenever I go out, regardless of where I go. It can be like the *Northpoint* (a shopping centre), it's like five minutes from my house. I...I have to wear perfume. My perfumes are not those cheap perfumes you know. I got *J.Lo Glow*, I got *Clinique* one, I got *Calvin Klein Contradiction*...all nice perfumes. But even if I don't wear it, for example like if I go to the beach, you don't have perfume on, I'll make it a point to bring deodorant. Always! I always make it a point. Never fail to bring it. If I actually forget I'll actually go out and buy you know. Ya. Because I cannot be stinking up a bus, or people around me.

It is interesting to note that the selection and use of scents – perfumes, soap, shower gel, etc – revolve around an imperative of smelling nice and luxurious, where the need for hygiene and proper cleaning seem relegated to a level of secondary importance. The fragrances of such products are often deemed as the most important criterion instead of the products' efficacy in cleaning. As Winter asserts: '[H]ow a product smells is more important than how well it does its task' (1976: 106). Correspondingly, Classen *et al.* (1994: 8) propose that where deodorants function to subdue undesirable odours, perfumes and colognes contribute towards the achievement of an 'ideal olfactory image'. Extending this proposition

to even detergents, antiseptic and house paints, they posit that 'odour is an important means by which consumers judge the value and effectiveness of a product' (1994: 193).

Such an argument may be supported by how respondents choose their fragrance products, for instance:

Charmaine: I think I would use a soap just because it smells nice. Or shampoo, or conditioner...I'm using *Dove*. That one has a very nice smell. Shampoo and conditioner I would choose it based on the smell.

Synnott takes the case of employing fragrance products a step further by contending that 'expenditure on colognes, perfumes, after-shave and other fragrances is not only an investment in the presentation of self, but it is also a major component in the *moral* construction of the self' (1993: 193), for to smell 'clean' was to be 'clean', both literally and metaphorically. This relates back to his contention regarding how odours intertwine with the moral construction of the self; if a person reeks of body odour/foul scents, thus deviating from olfactory cultural norm, then that odour may be indicative of either physical, mental or emotional deficiency (Synnott 1993: 190). Primarily, an 'odour is a *natural sign* of the self as both a physical and a moral being, [for the] odour is a symbol of the self' (ibid.). In sum, undoing the (olfactory) stigma means removing social and moral violations (thus gaining moral accreditation), for to rid oneself of olfactory excreta such as bodily odours, reflects positively on the bearer, thereby allowing him/her to move from the back region (of rectification, cleansing and maintenance) to the front region (by presenting an ideal olfactory image). The achievement of olfactory/social propriety consequently allows for a (re)-presentation of self in social situations.

Conclusion

In order to explicate how the body is both at once 'physical' and 'social', this paper deliberated upon the various ways in which smell is tied up with different dimensions of personhood, concomitantly intertwined with issues concerning the various domains of disgust, social and moral violations. Through the discussion of bodily odours - emanations, reactions, rectification procedures illustrated - (olfactory) (re)-presentations of social actors therefore reveal myriad dimensions of personhood with regards to the body and olfaction. These are (1) bodily odours coming to stand not just merely as olfactory defilement but also social and moral breaches; (2) civil inattention substantiating the proposition that smells are tied up with one's social 'performance', integrity and acceptability in society; and (3) management/prevention of body odours through cleansing, perfuming - 'preventive practices' so as to perform and present in the 'front region'.

These three complexes of personhood depict the multifaceted ways in which smells act and are acted upon for social actors, in relation to how the body is to be understood as both active and passive (Howson & Inglis 2004). On the one hand, it acts on the basis of culturally-generated schemata (that of body odours linked with morality and social acceptance, personhood and maintenance) and on the other, these schemata are created by 'body-subjects' (Crossley 1995b: 60). The imposition of the social upon the physical body is effected by social actors, who constantly move with/between social knowledge/expectations, thereby informing them of the need to manage their bodies; and this represents the realm of the social as a 'concrete intersubjective structure, reproduced through embodied action; it consists in sites of shared meaning and mutual (if conflictual) interaction, where bodies act and are acted upon' (Crossley 1995b: 61).

A further significance of these sociological dimensions is that 'the body, rather than being a naturally given datum, is a socially constructed artifact [similar to] other cultural products' (Turner 1997: 19). The body thus emerges as a 'culturally recognisable feature of social relations' (ibid.). And, with smell as an entry point, I also provide new dimensions in discussions on corporeality, where olfaction in everyday life experiences is equally germane in understanding the link between the body and personhood, concomitant with issues concerning social and moral approval or disapproval.

Analyses predicated upon Goffmanian interaction order also illuminate the process whereby 'bodily "interiority" becomes "externalised" and social "exteriority" becomes "interiorised"' (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 8). By presenting respondents' olfactive management techniques (such as perfuming and cleaning) through the concepts of 'front region' and 'back region', these techniques reveal how the body undergoes different stages and regions of preparation on a continual basis, which therefore reveals the body not as a passive object for analysis, but rather as an active and acting subject, situated within social/olfactory dynamics of appraisal, acceptance and rejection.

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