

## LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

**Hsuan L. Hsu (2020) *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics*. New York: New York University Press, 261pp., \$30.00 (paperback) ISBN: 9781479810093.**

Hsuan L. Hsu's *The Smell of Risk* (2020) opens with a discussion of odourlessness. For a text about the socio-political pulls of olfaction, this seems a peculiar place from which to begin, but Hsu soon establishes that the smell of nothing does not necessitate the absence of critical potential; instead, Hsu shows, projects of deodorisation have distinct ideological legacies that are constituted by intersecting notions of hygiene, moral purity and racial difference. Building on a nuanced understanding of the relationship between modernity and progressive deodorisation expounded by William Tullett (2019), among others, Hsu offers the concept of 'differential deodorization', which provides a useful framework for understanding atmospheric disparities and their insidious effects on, primarily marginalised, communities.

Drawing on a body of criticism that, for too long, has turned a blind eye to the impact of malodour on poor and racialised populations, Hsu's *The Smell of Risk* combines literary, geographical and critical perspectives to inform his pertinent account of systemic olfactory violence. Hsu positions smell as 'a tool for sensing the dynamics of atmospheric differentiation that have been vital to capitalism's processes of colonization, racialization, extraction, industrialization, urbanization, uneven developments, and environmental depredation' (7), taking care to tease out the range of consequences that stem from atmospheric inequities, from minor shifts in affect to long-term or terminal health conditions. Joining Kara C. Hoover (2018) and Christy Spackman (2020), who have both in recent years published articles on olfactory inequities, and building on seminal papers, such as Nathan Hare's 'Black Ecology' (1970), Hsu's work explores 'the olfactory dynamics of racialization and colonialism' (23) in inhabited spaces.

The work yields fastidious research into particular cultural moments, such as the widespread olfactory intolerance of Pacific Coast Chinatowns in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which represented Asiatic spaces as public health threats. Hsu combines this research with analyses of often overlooked texts, such as those penned by Indigenous authors and those dismissed as middlebrow, of which detective fiction becomes a leading example.

Further, through a prodigious canvassing of scholarly work in adjacent fields, Hsu produces a sense of cross-disciplinary community, which situates his text at a lively and complex intersection in contemporary critical thought, consisting of insights from Literature, Geography, Ecocriticism, and Critical Race Theory. Hsu is erudite but agile, taking seriously the contributions of scholars within his interdisciplinary network, which allows him to generously offer up a new framework and set of interpretive tools for the reader. Hsu's introduction, 'Deodorization and Its Discontents', best

represents this aggregation of scholarly perspectives, but his efforts are admirably maintained throughout the work.

Hsu justifies his decision to analyse ‘modernity’s stratified geographies of risk’ (6) across the work through a corpus of literary texts well, by exploring how ‘descriptions of unwelcome smells exert immense rhetorical force’ (5) and draw attention to the unevenly distributed nature of toxic, or intoxicating, atmospheres. *The Smell of Risk* focuses on texts and visual art exhibitions produced within the United States, which Hsu states is ‘not only one of the nations with the highest levels of carbon emissions but one whose culture has profoundly influenced patterns of consumption and atmospheric differentiation’ (22). Hsu pays attention not only to the semiotic functioning of olfactory language but also to the biochemical materiality of odours in the air, which uniquely informs ecocritical approaches to atmospheric violence.

The first chapter, ‘“Every Crime Has Its Peculiar Odor”: Detection, Deodorisation, and Intoxication’, considers detective fiction and biographical narratives of multiple chemical sensitivity that deploy an acute sense of smell to ‘detect, interpret, and resolve modernity’s proliferating risks’ (24). The two bodies of literature Hsu employs are markedly different, but the thematic link between them is strong enough to uphold the argument and justify their co-presence. Hsu selects a corpus of texts that spans over a century—referencing authors from Conan Doyle to Pynchon—which provide telling examples of detective figures using their hyperosmic sensitivity to identify (“sniff out”) and purge deviant odours. Hsu is successful in convincing the reader that smell is ‘a powerful tool for policing the boundaries of class, religion, race and nation’ (31), but the density of textual evidence provided, though engaging, limits the detail Hsu is able to provide through his own analysis.

Chapter 2, ‘Naturalist Smellscapes and Environmental Justice’, substantially evaluates the role of olfactory experience in literary naturalism, focusing particularly on Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* (1914). Hsu illuminates how smell operates in systems of oppressive sensory containment, referring to Peter Sloterdijk’s work on ‘air conditioning’ and its conceptual links with contagion and toxicity, particularly along racial lines. Hsu further provides a thorough and informed critical treatment of air and the many atmospheric experiences it heuristically describes, and his similarly conversant familiarity with foundational thinkers in the field of olfactory geography is evidenced by his incorporation of key terms and ideas from the works of J. Douglas Porteous, Victoria Henshaw and Jim Drobnick. The through-argument does not quite resolve into a coherent whole, but the analysis is sharp, establishing a set of recurring ideas of undeniable importance, such as the tendency for the odours of toxic atmospheres to be misperceived as characteristics of the social groups forced to live within them, among others. Though Hsu’s argument is distinctive and intelligent, his approach across the first two chapters relies on the reiteration of very similar ideas within a vast body of primary material, and these ideas consequently begin to feel hollowed out with repetition, despite their initial vibrancy.

The third chapter, ‘Olfactory Art and Museum Ecologies’, argues that ‘the modern, air-conditioned “white cube” art gallery’ serves to stage the unruly potential of olfactory art practices, which ‘activate the gallery’s air as a material medium of sensation, affect, and potential threat’ (24). It does so with aplomb, and pulls Hsu’s emphasis on the material effects of odours into focus, delivering a methodical account of the particularities of olfactory art and its disruptive effect on the visual

dimensions of perceptual experience. There has recently been an influx of texts published on the subject of olfactory art, such as Larry E. Shiner's *Art Scents* (2020) and Routledge's forthcoming *Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance* (2021, eds Lynn and Parr), to which Hsu contributes the chapter 'Olfactory Politics in Black Diasporic Art'. Hsu confidently adds to this flourishing area of criticism, offering assured readings of exhibitions by Anika Yi, Peter de Cupere, Sean Raspet and Boris Raux, which deploy a variety of conceptual, nonrepresentational and affective olfactory techniques to stage what Hsu calls the 'trans-corporeal' interaction between the atmosphere and the body. This term—trans-corporeal—usefully articulates the permeability of the body's borders and the very real materiality of odour molecules, while also taking into account the representational and interpretive challenges these microscopic molecules engender. However, Hsu relies so much on this term throughout the third chapter that its multifarious uses result in discordance.

In Chapter 4, 'Atmo-Orientalism: Olfactory Racialization and Environmental Health', Hsu posits that '*atmo-orientalism*'—a term he uses to denote the 'discourse that frames Asiatic subjects [...] in terms of noxious atmospheres' (115)—contributes to the racialization and colonization of Asiatic bodies and spaces. In this chapter, Hsu presents exceptionally detailed research into the role smell plays in the splintering of racial geographies, the persecution of Asian immigrants and the intensification of affect in Yellow Peril discourses. Building on ideas in Chapter 3, Hsu establishes that 'whereas vision preserves a sense of distance, smell calls forth feelings of vulnerability and terror at the specters of contagion and uncontrollable material intimacy' (126), though Hsu's focus on atmospheric odours limits the potential of this insight to elucidate how olfactory experience and language contributes to the othering of Asiatic subjects and the abjection of their bodies. The chapter includes certain counter-intuitive claims, such as that 'smell's immersive and visceral qualities make empathy unavoidable' (142), which seems to contradict Hsu's arguments surrounding the widespread contempt for, and rejection of, Asiatic atmospheres. However, the attention Hsu gives to a topic of great social significance, which has only previously received close attention from Connie Y. Chiang (2004), makes this chapter a hugely valuable resource for future scholars.

In Chapter 5, 'Decolonizing Smell', Hsu argues that 'colonization disrupts Indigenous cosmologies, cultural practices, and health by simultaneously derecognizing olfactory epistemologies and materially reshaping atmospheric ecologies' (25). Hsu's work on the colonization of smell is multifaceted, but is grounded in close readings of texts by Indigenous authors—Albert Wendt, Haunani-Kay Trask, and Robin Wall Kimmerer—who express, in a variety of literary forms, how olfaction has been mobilised to suppress, transform and exclude Indigenous cultural practices and modes of environmental knowledge. Hsu's treatment of 'smudging'—a 'spiritual healing ceremony practiced by numerous Indigenous nations' (182)—which involves the burning of sweetgrass, rewardingly complicates some of the assumptions found in the previous chapters; its inclusion is rendered with sensitivity, and the textual evidence called upon to support Hsu's claims is vital and dynamic.

Hsu's epilogue commendably draws together the separate strands of his argument with thoroughly entertaining examples of atmospheric interventions that disrupt the promotion of fragrance-free atmospheres, which, as Hsu establishes from the very beginning, also rely on questionable ideological models.

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