

A Conversation with Mark M. Smith

Author of *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*
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Q: Why does talking about the five senses add to our understanding of history?

A: Vision can be blinding sometimes, especially when it comes to history. For various reasons, historians have been accustomed to "see" the past, always searching for "perspective." My effort is simple, if ambitious: I want to restore the importance of the non-visual senses—smell, taste, touch, and hearing—to our understanding of the past. What such a restoration achieves depends a lot on the topic under consideration and which sense or senses were at play. Sometimes, attending to the senses—individually and collectively—helps us texture the past and explains how people of a particular place and time understood, say, the function and meaning of smell or the values of particular sounds. In other instances, the senses can offer us explanative power—how, for example, olfaction helps explain something that vision alone can't explain, or has difficulty explaining.

Q: What are some of the most common sensory stereotypes related to race?

A: The vast majority, peddled most aggressively under slavery and segregation, were applied by whites to blacks. They were crushingly candid: black people smelled; black skin was especially thick and insensitive; black people had poor taste both aesthetically and literally—their tongues could not appreciate good food; they were prone to noisy outbursts, lacking the discipline to control themselves. And so on. The stereotypes worked in other ways, too. Black people were also believed to have more heightened senses—they saw better, farther, could hear at great distances, and pick up scents that white noses couldn't. In other words, their senses were portrayed as like those of animals. Both forms of sensory stereotyping had the effect of animalizing and debasing blackness in the white mind.

Q: How have African Americans challenged these stereotypes?

A: Did black people hold stereotypes of whites? Actually, there is just one that I encountered with any frequency: the stereotype that white people smelled like dogs when they were wet. But that's about it. Black people were reluctant to engage in racial sensory stereotyping for a simple reason: doing so wrongly credited the very idea that "race," itself a construction, could be sensed. And even this stereotype had limited currency. Some black people tested it by sniffing wet whites and found that they didn't smell (white segregationists never returned the courtesy, preferring instead to simply accept the stereotype, "feel" sensory difference, and not subject their core values to intellectual or mental rigor.) Blacks challenged the stereotypes using a materialist critique. Yes, they argued, we might smell, but if you lived in such appalling conditions, were the victims of deep, prolonged discrimination, you might well smell too. In other words, they tested the stereotypes, found them wanting, and offered a materialist analysis of the sensory world.

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Q: Did the Civil War change the way that race was defined?

A: Not really—but postbellum segregationists did up the emotional ante when it came to sensing race and they did so using a vocabulary they inherited from their colonial and antebellum forebears. Like slaveholders, segregationists still deployed sensory racial stereotypes, but with rather greater frequency, intensity, and urgency. The increasingly visual instability of race meant that white southerners had to rely heavily on what they believed were reliable ways to fix, anchor, and identify blackness through their non visual senses. Without the belief in sensory identification, segregation would have crumbled.

Q: Although your book spans from 1750-1960, great emphasis is placed on the 1950s. Why?

A: The last chapter details the 1950s and traces the sensory dynamics and white response to the 1954 Brown decision. As I argue in that chapter, the debate about black sensory inferiority and difference before, during, and after Brown was, in many ways, a product of over two centuries of thinking—more properly, feeling—about race, space, power, and identity by southern whites. The raw, emotional quality of segregationist reaction in the 1950s shows, I think, with powerful and unnerving clarity just how important the senses were to the visceral world of white racists.

Q: Although your book focuses on the South, does your research have wider implications for the rest of America?

A: Frankly, and as evidence peppered throughout the book suggests, sensory stereotypes were never the exclusive provenance of southern whites. Antebellum northerners, even liberal ones, shared beliefs concerning, for example, black scent. In the 1950s, people throughout the United States—as the book's last chapter shows—held the same racial sensory stereotypes as did southern segregationists. And, as we know, the senses have been used throughout history to denigrate a variety of racial and ethnic groups as well as to establish class distinctions.

Q: You're originally from Great Britain. Do sensory stereotypes there differ from those in the United States?

A: It's hard to say—I rarely go back these days. But, yes, when I was growing up there were widespread sensory stereotypes at work in British culture especially regarding race and smell. Certain immigrant groups in particular were often accused of smelling and white Britons invested a good deal of authenticity and meaning in that particular stereotype.

Q: How does your research reveal the irrationality of racism?

A: Because, at base, I think the non visual senses give rise to feeling rather than thinking. Smell works at the level of the gut, of intuition, of immediate reaction. So too do the other non visual senses. And while I do not mean to endorse the old stratification of the senses that posit sight as the most intellectual sense, I do think that the people I examine in *How Race Is Made* considered the senses in that way—so that the more "proximate" senses of smell, taste, touch, and to some extent, sound, were considered "lower," more "animal," and more visceral than the balanced perspective and considered focus that could often accompany seeing and looking.

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Q: What kind of response have you received to *How Race Is Made*?

A: Very encouraging. I've been invited to speak on the topic on a number of radio shows and at several public venues. It's a difficult topic to talk about, of course, but I'm pleased that people seem to want to air it. In a way, I couldn't ask for a better response because keeping silent about sensory stereotypes is one way they have retained such enormous and unwarranted cultural authority.

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