

1 *Cheiro bom, cheiro ruim* – On bodies, senses, and social classifications

Thaís Machado-Borges

Thaís Machado-Borges is an anthropologist and research fellow at the Institute of Latin American Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden. She is the author of *Only for You! Brazilians and the Telenovela Flow* (2003), and has written articles in scholarly journals and popular magazines on topics such as media and transgression, cosmetic surgery, and practices of body modification among Brazilian women. She is currently doing research on the topic of garbage, social inequality, consumption, and citizenship among urban women in southeastern Brazil.
E-mail: thais.machadoborges@lai.su.se

“I’m poor but I’m clean” is an expression currently used in Brazil, uttered by a person who wants to emphasize that her moral qualities weigh more than her economic position. Different versions of this saying can be found not only in other Latin American countries but in other parts of the world as well. Indeed, the links between cleanliness, good and bad smells, morality, dignity, or even humanity have received considerable attention within the social sciences. Based on past and ongoing ethnographic fieldwork among middle-class and lower-income women in southeastern Brazil, I propose to discuss the way smells and olfactory borders – *cheiro bom, cheiro ruim* [good smells and bad smells] – are bound up with social classifications that mark positions in terms of gender, class, and skin color.

“Sou pobre, mas sou limpa” é uma expressão correntemente utilizada no Brasil e proferida por uma pessoa com o intuito de enfatizar que suas qualidades morais pesam mais do que sua posição econômica. Várias versões desta expressão podem ser encontradas em outras partes da América Latina e também em outras partes do mundo. De fato, o elo entre noções de limpeza, cheiros bons e ruins, moral, dignidade ou mesmo humanidade têm recebido atenção considerável dentro do âmbito das ciências sociais. Baseada em diversos períodos de trabalho de campo entre mulheres de renda média e baixa no sudeste brasileiro, proponho discutir o modo como barreiras olfativas e cheiros (bons e ruins) – estão ligados com classificações sociais que marcam posições em termos de gênero, classe e cor de pele.

Stockholm, May 2003. Spring was in the air. I was walking with my then seven-year-old daughter, on the way to her school. As we passed by the outdoor shelves of a flower shop, we were hit by a cloud of exhaust fumes coming from a truck that had just delivered fresh flowers. My daughter commented, “This smells exactly like Brazil! *Flores e fumaça* [Flowers and traffic fumes]!”

Smells can trigger memories and feelings, bringing flashes of past sensations up to the surface of our consciousness (Guggenheim and Guggenheim 2006; Shulman 2006).

Smells have been a constant presence in my latest research projects. But they has been a presence that I did not have time, until now, to investigate. They were simply there and then they vanished from my perception.

Let me briefly introduce some of my research interests. After writing my doctoral thesis in anthropology about the reception of Brazilian *telenovelas* (Machado-Borges 2003), in 2006, I started a project that aimed to look at bodily practices among urban women living in southeastern Brazil. The idea was to map out and compare the way women from different social classes think about and use their bodies in everyday life. I looked at plastic surgeries, diets, the production of beauty, and beauty ideals and tried to understand how these practices intersect with the context of social inequality that is so pervasive in contemporary (and past) Brazilian society (Machado-Borges 2007, 2008).

My ongoing research project¹ (Machado-Borges 2010) is a spin-off from the topic of consumption. In it, I am looking at consumerism and the production of garbage. A question summarizing the project is: What is garbage and for whom? Once again I adopt a comparative perspective between classes and have urban women from southeastern Brazil as informants.

Many friends and colleagues have laughed at the apparent gap separating the world of beauty and physical appearance from that of garbage. I, however, see several points bridging these two fields. Smell, the olfactory sense, is one of them. As Classen et al. (1994: 161) have suggested, “Olfaction does indeed enter into the construction of relations of power in our society, on both popular and institutional levels.”

So, in May 2010, reflecting on the topic of “Bodies and Borders in Latin America” and on my way to a month of fieldwork in Brazil, I decided to pay more attention to the world of smells and olfactory borders – an until then suppressed part of my fieldwork – and discuss it at *Haina*’s meeting in August 2010. My initial idea was that during the first days in the field, I would try to do an ethnography of smells, writing down my olfactory sensations in order to try, later on, to make sense of them. This idea turned out to be much harder than I first thought. It was very hard to be aware of my olfactory sense – it was only when I was hit by a strong (good or bad) odor that I was reminded of

my little experiment. I might say, *en passant*, that anthropologists have been trained to see and hear things – smelling one’s ethnography was not part of any of the methodological courses I ever took. So I decided to leave this subjective experience of the field aside and observe how other people talked about smells. This turned out to be a better methodological approach.

This essay discusses, then, the links between smell (*cheiro bom, cheiro ruim*), gender, racism, and class. Based in part on previous field observations about bodies, the beauty market, and social inequalities (Machado-Borges 2009), the contribution of this essay is to look at these pieces of ethnographic material foregrounding the way smells work as a means to create and reinforce social barriers.

Let me start by introducing a popular saying: “I’m poor but I’m clean” (in Portuguese, *Sou pobre mas sou limpa*) – an expression currently used in Brazil, is uttered by a person who wants to emphasize that her moral qualities weigh more than her economic position. Different versions of this saying can be found not only in other Latin American countries but in other parts of the world as well. Indeed, the link between cleanliness and morality has received considerable attention within the social sciences (Elias 1978; Vigarello 1988; McClintock 1995; Burke 1996; Laporte 2002 [1978]; Masquelier 2005). As Douglas (1966) once pointed out, in a now classic essay on the social meaning of dirt and cleanliness, dirt disturbs the established order as well as continually reinforcing it. The act of classifying goods, practices, and people as dirty and clean is an attempt to classify and structure the world in which people live. As Shove (2003: 85) affirms, these kinds of classification are bound up with social hierarchies of gender, class, race, and age.

Smell, according to Classen et al. (1994: 169),

can play a role in many different forms of social classification. At times it is an actual smell which triggers an experience of difference on the part of the perceiver. Often, however, the odour of the other is not so much a real scent as a feeling of dislike transposed into the olfactory domain.

Let me present some examples from the field in order to illustrate these words: “Could you imagine your daughter married to a black man? Could you?” a middle-class, middle-aged white woman asked her friend as she drank yet another glass of beer. “Can you imagine the smell of that man when he is sweating?” Excerpts of conversations similar to this one were unfortunately not rare in conversations among middle-class women who defined themselves as being white. This kind of racist olfactory discourse depicts groups of people – in

this particular case, black men – as having particular kinds of smell. Already in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the odor of bodies was commonly connected with explanations relating bodies and climate, bodies and diet, bodies and professions, bodies and temperament (Laporte 1978; Courbin 1986). The kind of discourse presented above makes odor into an intrinsic and inalterable trait of a certain group. It creates borders in terms of skin color, gender, and desirability. As other researchers on smell and the social imagination have suggested (Hyde 2006; Manalansan IV 2006), such odors are invoked as a way to justify avoidance behavior. In their explanation, “Social dislike appears first, and is then followed by the perception of a socially constructed odor as being foul” (Classen et al. 1994: 165).

Lena, a forty-year-old manicurist, provided me with yet another example of social classification through smell. This time, it was class, not skin color that supposedly emanated a disagreeable stench. We were on our way to the bus station and passed under the shadow of a huge tree and Lena reacted immediately: “Oh, the stench of beggars! They sleep out in the streets and then the smell remains... Look, how dirty it is here. There are homeless people who sleep in this part of town.” And she walked faster. In both cases, “smell provides a potent symbolic means for creating and enforcing class and ethnic boundaries” (Classen et al. 1994: 169).

As with other norms of social classification regarding, for instance, racism and notions of sexuality, those assuming the power to judge the other take the position of odorless beings. The “taken-for-grantedness” of whiteness or heterosexuality (Dyer 1997; Sheriff 2001; Lundgren 2010) seems also to have an olfactory correspondent in the form of the supposedly odorless (or fragrant?) middle and upper classes.

The experiences recounted by Dona Geralda, a sixty-year-old woman and one of the founding figures of the organized movement of garbage scavengers in Belo Horizonte, whom I met during my ongoing research project on garbage, reveals the point of view of people who are classified as “smelly.” Recalling the period before scavengers organized themselves in movements and cooperatives, she said in an interview:

We were seen as second- or third-class beings. We were not seen as workers, as citizens, as people.... Some people pinched their noses when they passed us. This has really left marks on me. Just because we were there, mixed with everything that surrounded us, mixed with garbage, trying to earn a living... We were not seen as workers. We were seen as garbage. I'm telling you. People pinched their noses, they called us garbage-women. (In Freitas 2005: 81,100)

What upset Dona Geralda most was that little distinction was made between *physical stench* and *moral corruption*. She was not seen as a worker, she was seen as being as disposable and unwanted as the garbage she worked with. Dona Geralda continues to recount her life story and the story of the organization of garbage scavengers in the city of Belo Horizonte:

We used to live in the streets, we were all dirty. People who went by thought of course that we would rob them, because we were there, in the middle of all the waste, living on street corners. I remember we were very unorganized at that time. (Excerpt from an interview with Dona Geralda, in Freitas 2003: 117)

Pacing the work of Classen et al. (1994: 167) on the cultural history of smell, if “you are told often enough that you have a foul odor, you come to believe it.”

How can people act to dispel a prejudice that flourishes on the fluid borders between the physical and the cultural? Can perfumes and deodorants help?

In 2007 alone, Brazilians spent US\$22 billion on hygiene and cosmetic products, making the country the third largest consumer of cosmetic products in the world (ABIHPEC 2008). Still according to these statistics, lower-income women spend, in proportion to the salary they earn, more of their income on hygiene and cosmetic products than women with higher incomes.²

Simara, one of the participants in a Brazilian documentary about vanity (Maciel 2002), illustrates the complex links between the body, poverty, and the beauty market:

I think I’m too short and too chubby but everywhere I go there is always someone who says, ‘Gee Simara, you smell so good!’ Why is that? I’m not beautiful, but I have vanity. And the little vanity I have makes me visible to other people. With my appearance, if I didn’t have vanity and take care of myself, I would be lost. So, I’m not beautiful but I do whatever I can to make people see me.

Simara is a woman who earns her living reselling beauty products to people living close to gold-digging settlements in the Brazilian part of the Amazon forest. She travels hours by boat on malaria-infested rivers and arrives with perfumes and beauty products that she resells to women and men who work in the region. But why would people living under very harsh and poor conditions want to buy perfumes and cosmetics? As I have noticed in my previous research (Machado-Borges 2009), different forms of body work are used to gain visibility and to stress and/or erase social differences.

Sandra, a thirty-two-year-old woman who earns her living by working as a hairdresser in her own tiny beauty salon in one of BH's *favelas*, says:

I have a client that has no wardrobe in her home. She stuffs her clothes inside boxes and things like that. It's a mess. But if you see her, you can't tell. (...) She has everything that is in fashion. But she hasn't got a wardrobe. She has lots of clothes and she is really stylish. But no wardrobe.

– And why, do you think, she does that? I asked.

I think it has to do with a certain need... the person wants to be noticed. She wants you to say 'Gee! You look great!' And if nobody says anything, she wants at least to know that she is being looked at. She wants to be seen, to attract attention in one way or another. (...) Otherwise you're completely out. You don't count!

An emphasis on the body and on bodily modification can be a possible means for some people to make themselves visible. Granted, these kinds of practices are indirectly contributing to making the happiness of manufacturers of perfumes, beauty and hygiene products. But the question is still a bit more complex than that.

Let us get back to Dona Geralda, the sixty-year-old waste scavenger and her memories of past experiences and experienced changes:

Nowadays we [garbage scavengers] are welcome, wherever we go. We know how to prepare ourselves, we put on perfume when we are meeting other people. It is so different from the time when we started having meetings many years ago. We couldn't stand each other because we couldn't stand each other's smell. Today you see that everybody smells good when we go to a meeting or a party. But back then, we didn't shower, you know? We couldn't. When we went to a meeting, oh my god, it was terrible! Nowadays we want to be nice and smell the best we can when we go to parties. I think it is because we are more self-confident, we feel we have worth and that we have a value. We have managed to conquer value. Years ago, I didn't have time to look at myself. And I didn't *want* to look at myself. Today I can see myself in the mirror. I couldn't do that back then. I thought I was ugly... I didn't feel I was beautiful. For me, back then, beautiful people were those people who had money. The person maybe didn't look so good, but if she was sitting in a fancy and brand new car, then she was beautiful..." (Excerpt from an interview with Dona Geralda, in Freitas 2003: 267)

A few words to finish: My aim with this short essay was to start gathering thoughts on the blurry and sometimes contradictory ways to think about and deal with the body and its senses. The particular case of smell enhances this confusing blurriness – smell is at the intersection between, on the one hand, the organic and undeniable common nature of bodies (bodies and smell as common denominators among all humans) and, on the other hand, the socio-cultural constructions of difference through taste and senses. I will let the words of Meire, a nineteen-year-old live-in babysitter, sum up this discussion. In a confrontation with an upper-class woman on her right to circulate in certain areas of the building where both lived, Meire said:

Why are you saying this to me? Is it because I'm a mere *empregada*?
Deep inside our bodies we both stink. The only difference is that you
have the money, but deep inside, we both stink!

Notes

- 1 The project “Beneath the surface, we’re all alike” was financed by the Swedish Research Council. My ongoing project, “Degraded Objects, Disposable People” was initially financed by SIDA/Sarec and receives continued support from the Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet.
- 2 The regulated minimum salary in Brazil was, in March 2008, R\$415 (approximately US\$196). Six kilos of meat were estimated to cost, in September 2007, R\$52.56 and seven liters of milk cost R\$14.18 (<http://www.portalbrasil.net/salariominimo.htm>, accessed October 6, 2008).

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