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SENSING DIRTY MATTER

Sensory ethnography as a more-than-human approach to urban inequalities

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From the very first days of my research on gentrification in Tor Pignattara, a multicultural suburb of the city of Rome, waste imposed its overwhelming presence on my senses. In those days and throughout my research stay, waste could be found basically everywhere around the neighborhood. Garbage bags were spilling out of overflowing bins and discharging foul leachate on the asphalt. Large and small waste ranging from mattresses and copy machines to empty beer bottles and shredded paper lay abandoned on sidewalks or in flowerbeds. Fetid organic matter like human feces and urine could be found in little back alleys. Human waste left behind by drug addicts or homeless people, such as burnt spoons, used syringes, and piles of rags, lay scattered in green areas. Due to its perceivable and overwhelming presence, urban waste became almost an obsession in the narratives and experiences of local residents. There was not a single research participant who failed to mention waste as the most pressing problem and biggest obstacle to urban regeneration in the neighborhood. Waste became a catalyst for the anger and frustration of a local population worn out by the city's failed waste management and street cleaning system.

While the situation of perceivable environmental degradation was not unique to Tor Pignattara—waste management and sanitation were plummeting in the whole of Rome due to a structural malfunction in the city's waste management (Nardi, 2017; Riitano, 2018)—all my research participants shared the conviction that the neighborhood was actually much dirtier and more degraded than other areas of the city. Almost everyone concurred that the ruined state of the neighborhood had to be imputed to Tor Pignattara's sizable immigrant population. The dominant discourse¹ accused local immigrants of polluting the neighborhood through what was perceived as unhygienic everyday practices such as cooking smelly food, improperly disposing of their waste, and drinking and urinating in public. This, paired up with a widespread sense of institutional abandonment, led to a multitude of small and larger scale clean-up operations in the neighborhood's streets, parks, and squares, in an attempt to banish those individuals and activities that threatened the area's propriety. The conflation of immigrants and waste in a negative stereotype points to how racialized perceptions of urban dirt and disorder can become tools for exclusionary placemaking, especially in ethnically diverse neighborhoods undergoing gentrification like Tor Pignattara.



Figure 23.1 Self-portrait with waste on a discarded mirror. © E. Fiore, September 2017.

Academic literature on gentrification is mostly concerned with its economic, ecological, political, and sociodemographic components. This literature is extremely useful in providing answers regarding the causes of gentrification, its positive or negative effects, as well as its insertion into global neoliberal practices for urban regeneration. However, what is still lacking in gentrification literature and debates is a serious focus on the link between material urban environments and social relations. How do the sensory and material qualities of place relate to—and become vectors for—the inclusion or exclusion of specific lifeforms in/from the public life of the city? Based on the assumption that power materializes in the sensory-spatial textures of place (Degen, 2008), this chapter foregrounds everyday sensory experiences and their associated affective intensities as powerful means to look into the material conditions of urban life and how they intersect with questions of power.

In my research, I deployed sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009) as a methodology capable of capturing the commingling of bodies and spaces, as well as the embeddedness of social relations in changing sensory-material urban environments. Through explicit and sustained embodied engagement with the sensory-material reality of everyday urban contexts and practices, sensory ethnography does not only allow to probe the interplay of culture and the sensorium by connecting sensory experience with urban culture and power relations in city space. It also provides the possibility to reconfigure urban identities into emplaced-embodied encounters, and thus appreciate the contribution of material agency in the ontology of the urban social in gentrifying urban contexts.

In order to illustrate these arguments, this chapter presents a sensory ethnography of urban waste in Tor Pignattara. By paying close attention to the ways in which local residents

react to, distance themselves from, or try to remedy the perceived state of disrepair and degradation of their neighborhood, my analysis sheds light on the active contribution of “dirty” matter and discarded materials in the social production of urban difference and the shifting moral geographies of urban renewal.

Sensory ethnography: accounting for the agency of material urban landscapes

Questions around urban sensory politics have been tackled by scholars of sensory urbanism. This emerging field of scholarship has broadly investigated the role of the senses in the making of urban places, as well as emphasized “the extent to which the socio-spatial order of cities is a sensory order” (Jaffe et al., 2020, p. 3). Sensory urbanism has highlighted the dynamicity of urban sensory landscapes as socio-material realities in constant transformation through the myriads of bodies, spatial practices, and uses of city dwellers (e.g., Law, 2001; Palipane, 2017). At the same time, sensory urbanism has shown that a focus on sensorial and experiential parameters of the city links the personal lives of its diverse users with broader structural changes in the city’s politics and economics (Degen, 2014). These can manifest in the ways in which state authorities and their allies consciously adapt, manipulate, and frame the senses to market and brand urban places (e.g., Degen, 2008; Pardy, 2009; Summers, 2019), as well as in the “visceral micro-politics” (Pow, 2017, p. 270) and intimate socio-spatial contestations that shape and regulate urban exclusion (Low, 2013). Sensory urbanism, in other words, has shown that power operates through the sensuous intertwinement of the human with the urban environment, thus reframing it into a material expression rather than an abstract process.

Sensory ethnography has emerged as an apt methodological companion to sensory urbanism for its capacity to focus on “the sensory-experiencing body and [explore] its interdependency with landscape” (Pink, 2009, p. 17). Sensory ethnography, in fact, builds on an understanding of social identities as inherently emplaced, that is as always embedded in the unique constellation of sensuous bodies, things, and artifacts that constitute the body’s environment (see Howes, 2005). This reframing of the embodied subject through the sensuous materiality of the world extends subjectivity beyond the individual and toward those “social, sensory and material contexts characterized by, and productive of, particular power configurations that [people] experience through their whole bodies and that are constantly changing (even if in very minor ways)” (Pink, 2009, p. 33). Sensory ethnography’s emphasis on the role of the environment in the emergence of embodied subjectivities essentially brings forth the non-human element as another active factor in the ontology of our social worlds.

In my research, sensory ethnography has been particularly helpful in tracing the power relations inscribed in the sensuous urban landscape of Tor Pignattara and understanding how the sensuous-material textures of place enabled or obstructed residents’ emplacement. As Pink (2008a) explains, sensory ethnography can help the researcher catch a glimpse of the multiple and sometimes intersecting subjectivities emerging from multisensory spatial interactions with the material environment. Indeed, even though a neighborhood can be identified as a particular physical urban space, phenomenologically it can be experienced as many types of place simultaneously, depending on who is experiencing and making place. This irreducibility of urban space to a single meaning and experience for all reveals the power differentials in the sensory constitution of place, as well as the contests and tensions between different actors (Degen, 2001; Rodman, 2003).

The different experiences and interpretations of place that a variety of users express point in turn to the sensorial as both the vehicle through which material agency manifests itself and the substance of entanglement between the material and the social. Through their sensory qualities, material urban environments have the power to affectively interpellate certain groups while alienating others, and can thus be understood as active agents in the social and cultural spatialization of life across the city (Degen, 2001, 2008). In this sense, by drawing attention to the different ways a city or a neighborhood is felt in the immediate lived experience, sensory ethnography also helps reconfigure the relationship between bodies and places as a constant relational process.

Sensory ethnography's capacity to acknowledge the agency of both human and non-human elements in the making of place enabled me to account for the active contribution of waste matter in the iterative materialization of racialized processes of urban exclusion and dispossession in Tor Pignattara. In what comes, I will show how the conflation of immigrants with waste does not only prove that sensory designations of disordered landscapes can act as means of social classification and are thus inextricably enmeshed in urban relations of power and domination (Campkin & Cox, 2012; McKee, 2015). It also highlights the role of waste as "an actor from which stigma can . . . emanate" (Baumann & Massalha, 2022, p. 550). Through sensory revulsion, waste reifies and reinforces the unequal position of local immigrants in the material space of the neighborhood, as well as gives rise to moral spatial interventions that make them vulnerable to exclusion and displacement. The analysis of my fieldwork data rests on scholarship that links phenomenological experiences of littered landscapes to the socio-material processes of stratification implicated in city making (Ghertner, 2015; McKee, 2015).

Tor Pignattara: brief overview of a changing neighborhood

Tor Pignattara is a densely populated district administratively located in Rome's V Municipality, which emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as one of the first spontaneous settlements of the southeastern quadrant of the city (Ficacci, 2007). The high population density is reflected in an intensively built and highly irregular urban environment, resulting from a disorderly process of urbanization that led, over the years, to the juxtaposition of ancient archaeological elements, abandoned industrial conglomerates, high-rise condominiums, small houses, and numerous examples of spontaneous, often illegal, architecture (Pompeo, 2011; Severino, 2005) (see Figure 23.2). As a consequence of the fast process of depopulation and productive evacuation caused by the economic crisis of 1992, Tor Pignattara became the elected destination for large immigrant communities, predominantly Bangladeshis, attracted by the availability of empty and affordable commercial and residential spaces (Pompeo, 2011; Pompeo & Priori, 2009; Priori, 2011, 2012). Due to this concentration, over the years the area underwent a spontaneous process of renaming that labeled it as the Banglatown of Rome. While the term "Banglatown" was introduced by the local Bangladeshi community to instigate a sense of pride and territorial appropriation (Broccolini, 2017), in the public opinion and in the media the toponym has often been used to signify the area as an immigrant ghetto at risk of Islamic radicalization (Fioretti & Briata, 2019).

Over the last ten years, Tor Pignattara has undergone a process of bottom-up gentrification due in large part to the influx of middle-class Italian newcomers drawn to the area by affordable rents or property prices, on the one hand, and a rising multicultural consciousness



Figure 23.2 The mosaic of spontaneous architecture in Tor Pignattara seen from my kitchen window.
© E. Fiore, January 2018.

on the other. However, what these middle-class newcomers found was a neighborhood in a state of physical, social, and cultural deterioration, governed by a weak and ineffective public administration incapable of properly providing for their needs and demands. In response to this situation of institutional disinterest that slowed down the spontaneous process of gentrification already underway, many Italian newcomers organized themselves in a multitude of neighborhood committees and organizations promoting a form of bottom-up regeneration that gradually led to the symbolic and cultural reappreciation of the neighborhood from degraded periphery to vibrant (multi)ethnic quarter. Today, the toponym Banglatown has ceased to be a label of spatial stigmatization and has turned into a spatial brand intensifying the ethnic and cosmopolitan character of the neighborhood. While aestheticized ethnicity played a central role in Tor Pignattara's desirability, the everyday conflicts and tensions connected with the tangible presence of Bangladeshi and other immigrants raises questions about the real degree of acceptance and tolerance inherent in the neighborhood's revival, and issues a warning as to the exclusionary potential of ensuing gentrification in the area (Annunziata, 2010; Coletti & Rabbiosi, 2020).

Urban waste, in particular, has been and still is a major point of contention between native and immigrant residents. For the last ten years, the omnipresence of waste in Tor Pignattara has been experienced, narrated, and interacted with through a racializing prism that conflates local manifestations of urban pollution and degradation with the tangible presence of immigrant residents. In the next section, I will analyze one citizen-led activity launched in October 2017—and still ongoing—to clean and upgrade one of Tor Pignattara's public parks: the *Comitato Spontaneo Acquedotto Alessandrino* (hereafter, only *Comitato*). This case will help me reveal how the overwhelming presence of waste in the neighborhood instigates the proliferation of organized practices of waste policing and removal that substitute environmental for racial contamination and posit the displacement or containment of racialized bodies as a necessary

process of urban improvement. Through a focus on waste's sensory, affective, and moral entanglements, I will reframe dirty matter as an active participant in the racialized socio-spatial regime of gentrification in Tor Pignattara. It should be noted that the *Comitato* is only one among several other bottom-up environmental upgrading interventions I was able to observe during my eight months of fieldwork (see Fiore, 2021 for more on this). This initiative has been chosen as a case here not only because it is, to this day, the most active, prolific, vocal, and successful organization trying to contrast environmental degradation in the neighborhood. It is also the one that got the most support from the local population in terms of active involvement and funding, which signals the widespread approval of their mission and the methods employed to accomplish it.

Dirty matter as a vector of racialized gentrification in Tor Pignattara

The Giordano Sangalli Park is a small but rather impressive green area situated at the heart of Tor Pignattara. The park owes a great deal of its charm to the *Aqua Alexandrina*, a stunningly well-preserved stretch of the ancient Roman aqueduct that flanks the park on its northern side. Despite its central position, this urban park was for a long time experienced by the local Italian population as a no-go zone. For years, the park was in a state of total abandonment after local institutions suspended all waste collection and public green maintenance services. The situation of environmental degradation became so severe that the park was described by local residents as “a latrine” and “an open-air dump” (Comitato di Quartiere Tor Pignattara, 2016).² At the start of my fieldwork in the late Summer of 2017, the park was still in a rather dreadful situation. My field diary is punctuated by entries where I remark about the overgrown grass and unkempt hedges, but also the large amount of waste scattered around and ranging from beer bottles, plastic bottles, and advertisement flyers to broken furniture, abandoned scooters, and a burnt-up car carcass (see Figure 23.3).



Figure 23.3 Burnt-up car-carcass in Giordano Sangalli Park. © E. Fiore, December 2017.



Figure 23.4 Mattresses under the arches of the Aqua Alexandrina at the Giordano Sangalli Park. © E. Fiore, October 2017

Alongside institutional abandonment, the local Italian population identified a second culprit in this process of environmental degradation. Over the years, in fact, the park had become a space of socialization for groups of Bangladeshi and North-African men who gathered at night around the few available benches to drink beer and smoke. These groups were portrayed by residents as “gatherings of drug dealers, junkies, and drunks” who soiled the park with “glass bottles and garbage of all kinds” (interviewed in Nozzoli, 2012). To make matters worse, the park also gave shelter to homeless refugees. The situation was particularly severe at the start of my fieldwork, when many refugee centers across the city had to close their doors due to defunding (Minister of the Interior, 2018). With nowhere else to go, between 10 and 15 homeless refugee men regularly slept on discarded mattresses under the arches of the aqueduct (see Figure 23.4). Their presence was poorly tolerated by the local population, who accused them of contaminating the park by “pissing and shitting in it” (Comitato di Quartiere Tor Pignattara, 2017). The frustration and anger of residents reached its peak on the night of 12th October 2017, when a fire destroyed some of the makeshift shelters and damaged one arch of the aqueduct. It was never clear whether it was arson or an accident.

It was as an immediate response to the fire that the *Comitato Spontaneo Acquedotto Alessandrino* was born. Formed by a group of Italian residents fed up with the situation of environmental and social decay of the park, the *Comitato* took charge of the park’s maintenance, cleaning, and upgrade to fill the void left by local institutions. The day after the fire, a group of volunteers armed with hand carts, shovels, garbage bags, and thick work gloves forcefully

removed all the mattresses, sleeping bags, blankets, cardboard boxes, and clothes they found under the arches. That same day, a triumphant post appeared on the brand-new Facebook page of the *Comitato*: “This weekend, we have decontaminated a vast area of the Giordano Sangalli Park. . . . We made use of the municipal bulky waste collection service . . . to free the park from eleven mattresses and other waste” (Parco Sangalli Comitato Spontaneo Acquedotto Alessandrino, 2017).

Through the symbolic conflation of racialized poverty with contamination and waste, the founding gesture of the *Comitato* highlights what Maurizia Boscagli (2014, p. 230) has defined as “the recalcitrance” of waste matter, that is “its capacity to signify the redundant, the wasted, the irredeemably out of place” once its characteristics are extended to human beings who have become themselves disposable. By virtue of their closeness to waste, homeless refugees are constructed here as “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004) to be removed from the park so that the livelihood of respectable citizens can be ensured. This suggests that waste in Tor Pignattara does not figure solely as “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966, p. 44), but also and most importantly as “displacing matter” (Baumann & Massalha, 2022, p. 560) that marks immigrant park users as trespassers seen to be “out of place” in their neighborhood and framed as dangerous for spoiling the otherwise clean urban environment.

The displacing force of waste matter in Tor Pignattara manifests itself in its entangled sensory, affective, and moral qualities. As I learned in my interview with Sergio (a pseudonym), one of the founders of the *Comitato*, sensory grievances were vital in legitimizing and justifying displacement.

There is constant bivouac [at the park], the drunks’ rendezvous. And then, being uncivilized, they drink 18 beers and leave 18 empty bottles under a tree or on a flower-bed. They make the neighborhood degraded, dirty. . . . When you walk out the door, you smell the stench and see the filth. Then you go home and feel like you need to have a shower, because you feel dirty.

(Sergio, 12 December 2017)

Sergio’s construction of racialized poverty as an abject outsider relies on a rich sensory language—of foul smells, waste, filth—that naturalizes dirtiness in the bodies of those immigrant men who inhabited the park, evoking them as a threatening category and placing them beyond accepted standards of civility and propriety (see Ghertner, 2015; McKee, 2015). But it is the stickiness of racialized urban defilement that is especially noteworthy here. Stickiness heightens Sergio’s revulsion toward waste matter and increases the urgency of its removal, lest it contaminates upstanding citizens like himself (see Ahmed 2004). We can thus see how sensory grievances - olfactory, visual, and haptic - work performatively to create symbolic distance to those objects whose proximity feels threatening, contaminating, or corrupting.

The heightened disgustingness of waste plays in turn a crucial role in affectively reinforcing racialized power relations in Tor Pignattara. Indeed, disgust does not simply create distance to waste, but also creates adherence between those bodies who engage in wasteful practices and the waste they leave behind. So much so that these bodies come to stand for waste and come to be perceived as themselves disgusting. As the following excerpt shows, the metonymic contact between poor immigrants and waste has translated into a “spatial politics of abjection” (Ghertner, 2015, p. 79) that constructs the removal of racialized poverty as a process of

urban improvement and a positive form of violence aimed at cleaning the neighborhood to speed up its march toward a fully middle-class status. The *Comitato*, in fact, operates according to a logic of “spatial purification” (Sibley, 1988) that normalizes sensory revulsion into an organizing lens for remaking the city.

Citizens need to intervene when they see a drunk sleeping on a discarded mattress. They should say to him, “Hey, what are you doing here?” Then they should take the bloody mattress and throw it away, call the police, activate themselves. People walk past as if it was all normal. They look and leave. It’s disgusting.

The affective conflation of homelessness with waste irremediably confirms its unsightliness and inherent nature as an object of urban disorder, thus marking it for removal. In this sense, waste in Tor Pignattara operates as a “border object” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 88) that reifies racialized relations of power in the sensory-material textures of space.

The *Comitato*’s logic of spatial purification emerges also in their linking morality with waste. This becomes especially evident in the following excerpt, where Sergio elaborates on systematic waste removal as a civilizing project. During our interview, which was held at the park, he directed my gaze around to appreciate the striking cleanliness of the park while at the same time conjuring the park’s degraded past to make the difference even more apparent.

It’s only three months we are active, and you can already see the results! Before, it was normal to see empty beer bottles and waste all around. Now, if there is a piece of paper, it stands out. You see there? [He points to a piece of paper not too distant from us] There is one. You can see it. Before, instead, you could not see the green. . . . Before you had hobos and drunks who came here and left beer bottles in the park. Now, you have a clean park where kids go play. When you create beauty, the scum goes away.

Even in their absence, waste and wasteful bodies continue to operate in Sergio’s account as the constitutive outside against which middle-class propriety and civilization are defined. The removal of waste from the park bears a twofold function in the social and hence moral revaluation of the park. First, it imposes specific felt standards of order and appearance in the urban landscape that enable the easy identification of what does and does not belong in the regenerated urban landscape (Ghertner, 2015). In the new aesthetic order enforced by the *Comitato* on the park, where even a small piece of paper stands out, wasteful bodies (the homeless or the drunk) and activities (rough sleeping or drinking in public) are self-evidently out of place. Second, and consequently, waste removal in the Giordano Sangalli Park can be understood as a moral reform attempting to attract certain kinds of citizens and subjectivities by imposing a civilizing spatial arrangement, while simultaneously excluding, controlling, and containing undesired bodies and behaviors (Sandercock, 2000; Summers & Howell, 2019). Sergio explicitly frames waste removal as a displacing strategy to keep debased bodies and behaviors out of the park. The opposition between wasteful immigrants and playing children—as sensory-affective-embodied tropes of corruption and purity respectively—articulates racialized poverty and middle-class whiteness as embodied social identities inhabiting opposite moral positions.

Through waste removal, the *Comitato* was able to impose a whole new organization of social life in the area of the park. In barely two years, they have transformed the Giordano Sangalli Park into a clean and vibrant green space hosting activities for upstanding middle-class

citizens like book clubs, yoga classes, and an organic farmers market. So much so that, in the neighborhood's newspaper *Viavai*, the park has been renamed into "the Central Park of Tor Pignattara" and elevated to the symbol "of a neighbourhood who wants to redeem itself" (Ranalletta, 2019, n.p.). The park's revival, however, has reinforced existing power structures that enable the surveillance and marginalization of poor and racialized park users. The *Comitato's* noble fight against waste and disorder in the Giordano Sangalli Park ultimately took the more disturbing contours of a social cleansing operation leading to the active exclusion, expulsion, and erasure of racialized poverty from the space of the neighborhood.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how sensory ethnography can sustain studies investigating the active contribution of materiality in the (re)production of social inequality. Earlier I explained that sensory ethnography is a research methodology that posits everyday sensory experiences and their associated affective intensities as powerful means of inquiring into the material conditions of life and how these intersect with questions of power. By "attending to the sensoriality and materiality of other people's ways of being in the world" (Pink, 2008b, p. 193), sensory ethnography reconfigures the sensory as the locus where the dichotomy between inside and outside gets challenged. As such, it highlights the co-constitutive nature of body and environment and reveals the self as always already constituted by place. Thus conceived, the sensory is reconfigured as a performative engagement with reality, a generative way of knowing the world through which the knowing subject and the world co-emerge.

In the specific context of my work, sensory ethnography has helped me account for the agency of material urban environments in shoring up racialized processes of urban exclusion and dispossession in gentrifying multicultural neighborhoods. The case I presented here uses sensory ethnography to highlight "the important role and layered operations of waste in processes of urban exclusion" (Baumann & Massalha, 2022, p. 564). Starting from the omnipresence of waste, I was able to show how the materiality and sensory experience of the city become important vectors for delineating social boundaries in contested urban space. Sensory ethnography made me first and foremost attentive to the cultivated sensory affective, and moral orientations that conflate racialized poverty with tangible manifestations of disorder and degradation in the urban environment. The *Comitato's* deployment of racialized discourses of cleanliness and dirt testifies to how sensory stereotypes become embedded in the perceptual and affective patterns through which people learn to sense evidence of and assign responsibility for disorder in their surroundings (see McKee, 2015). Moreover, by drawing attention to the ways in which racialized forms of disgust are mediated through the sensory-material components of place in Tor Pignattara, a sensory ethnographic approach enabled me to reframe waste as "an *actor* in urban geopolitics" (Baumann & Massalha, 2022, p. 565; original emphasis), advancing the social and spatial abjection of those racialized and classed bodies perceived as obstacles to urban regeneration.

Ultimately, sensory ethnography's understanding of sociality as sensory and material encounters through which identities are lived out can help (re)animate a world of things that we generally perceive as inert. This redistribution of power and agency to the material (see Bennett, 2010), however, should not be taken as a way to reduce human responsibility

for the symbolic and physical violence of social inequality. On the contrary, it should serve as an invitation to be more aware and mindful of how the material reality of social hierarchy is saturated with and kept in place by our mundane senses and perceptual habits. Only by politicizing our sensory perceptions and imaginations as implicated in socio-material processes of stratification can we begin to disconfirm their authenticating power while staying open to other and more ethical ways of sensing (Sekimoto, 2018). Here lies the great political potential of sensory ethnography, in its capacity to reveal how both subject and object are implicated in the networks of power that produce them and opening up the possibility for alternative and more ethical ways of being in the world.

Notes

- 1 Although an alternative explanation of the littered landscape of Tor Pignattara existed among residents, which interprets waste as an indicator of institutional abandonment following the area's reputation as an immigrant ghetto, this explanation remains marginal to the dominant discourse discussed here.
- 2 All quotes from newspapers, social media, and interviews included in this section are translated from Italian by the author.

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