

Aromatherapy Oils

Commodities, Materials, Essences

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—INTRODUCTION

Aromatherapy is a modern form of plant medicine in which highly concentrated plant extracts known as essential oils are used, singly or in blends, as therapeutic agents. They are commonly used via inhalation (in an oil burner or vaporiser), but may also be used topically (for example dispersed in a carrier oil, or in a bath) and, more rarely, ingested.¹ Aromatherapy is, then, more reliant on physical *things* to do its therapeutic work than many other complementary/alternative (CAM) therapies. Unlike, say, massage, which uses touch as its primary therapeutic vehicle, or spiritual healing, which relies on belief and ritual, or mind-based techniques like meditation, hypnotherapy or psychotherapy, aromatherapy is centred on objects and materials: the essential oils. Today, these oils are almost always industrially produced and sold as commodities. This makes aromatherapy an interesting example to study if one wants to explore some of the different understandings of materials and materiality at play in a Western consumer context.

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Drawing on a distinction made by the anthropologist Tim Ingold between materiality (an abstract concept) and materials ('the stuff that things are made of'),² this article contrasts different ways that the core 'objects' of aromatherapy—the essential oils—can be viewed. It begins by considering how they look from a traditional Marxist-feminist perspective, which focuses on the oils as commodities exchanged in a global market and bound up with particular ideologies of youth and beauty. I argue that this critical approach opens up important perspectives often missed in mainstream aromatherapy discourse, providing a valuable corrective to the political insouciance or naivety that so often characterises New Age (and some CAM) discourse. Yet while this approach, relatively new to CAM but familiar to cultural studies, introduces important political perspectives where they might otherwise be missed, it has its own limitations, especially for a cultural studies audience. First, as cultural studies has insisted for decades, this type of approach risks disregarding the complexities and cultures of commodity use and underplaying the embodied experiences of participants. Moreover, when it comes to therapeutic commodities, it ignores or sidesteps an absolutely central set of material concerns—that is, the actual pharmacological properties, material effects and potential medical efficacy of the oils—which ought to be at the heart of the matter. Third, by failing to take seriously the traditional understanding of the oils as 'essences', it also misses an opportunity to explore different conceptions and experiences of smell, and of matter itself. Drawing on aromatherapy texts and handbooks, a multidisciplinary literature on olfaction and interviews with two Australian aromatherapists,³ this article hopes to bridge this gap a little by surveying three approaches to essential oils—as commodities, materials and essences. It concludes with a brief consideration of what is at stake, for cultural studies and for aromatherapy, in these different conceptions and approaches.

—BACKGROUND: THE ORIGINS AND STYLES OF AROMATHERAPY

Contemporary aromatherapy has its origins in traditional plant medicine. Its modern form dates from the early twentieth century in France, where two scientific figures—the chemist René-Maurice Gattefossé and the doctor Jean Valnet—pioneered the medical use of essential oils. Valnet's 1964 book *L'Aromathérapie*, aimed at both physicians and the lay public, is usually considered the first medical

book on aromatherapy.⁴ Both Valnet and Gattefossé respected the traditional plant medicine of rural France. Valnet's medical training in Lyon in the 1940s included the study of medicinal plants;⁵ Gattefossé saw it as the role of science to help explain rather than question the efficacy of traditional plant medicine.⁶ This French medical tradition was exported to England via the work of the nurse and biochemist Marguerite Maury, who was influenced by Valnet. Maury and her husband developed the use of aromatherapy massage in therapeutic contexts, especially in nursing, and the use of essential oils in the beauty industry. This so-called English style of aromatherapy involves the use of individually prescribed oil blends in gentle massage. The beauty therapy side of Maury's work was continued by three of her pupils: Daniele Ryman, Micheline Arcier and Eve Taylor.⁷ There are, then, a number of 'very distinct' traditions within aromatherapy, and quite some professional division about what the future of the profession is to be.⁸

In recent years, aromatherapy has become increasingly enmeshed in consumer culture, seizing on opportunities provided by the English therapeutic tradition and the cosmetic dimensions of aromatherapy. Arguably this has been to the detriment of medical aromatherapy, which has comparatively little public visibility. Mainstream aromatherapy has become entangled with the grand-scale commodification of smell: the 'fragrancing' of products and environments; the availability of commodities to eliminate or mask bodily smells; and the perfume industry and its extensive advertising correlate. This latter industry is huge (worth over \$30 billion globally)⁹ and highly concentrated; virtually all new perfumes in the world are made by six large companies.¹⁰

Aromatherapy is caught up in complex ways in this broader picture. On the one hand, the markets for aromatherapy have expanded. On the other, the success of aromatherapy in the marketplace threatens to undermine its claims to specificity and to therapeutic validity. In response to the rampant use of the term 'aromatherapy' to describe products with 'a sprinkling of lavender or something in there', as Australian aromatherapist Salvatore Battaglia describes it, some aromatherapists have mounted a campaign to have the term 'aromatherapy' protected in law, restricting it to products using only genuine essential oils and containing no petrochemicals.¹¹ But the distinction between beauty and aromatherapy products becomes harder to maintain as authentic aromatherapy

producers themselves widen their scope, producing potions, soaps, sprays and perfumes that, while they are genuinely aromatherapeutic (in that they use essential oils and reject fragrances, petrochemicals and animal products), further contribute to blurring the boundaries between the beauty industry and aromatherapy. To the extent that traditional aromatherapy has embraced this market-friendly version of itself, it has perhaps eroded its own political power to demand such changes, by making it harder for many customers to discern the distinction between aromatherapy products and the vast bulk of beauty products.

In such a consumer landscape, aromatherapy can easily be viewed as simply one niche product within a grand-scale commodification of smell in the service of the beauty industry. In this view, essential oils are commodities like any other.

—ESSENTIAL OILS AS COMMODITIES: A MARXIST-FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Cultural studies has, as I have argued elsewhere, paid scant attention to CAM practices and even then has tended to have a relatively uncomplicated view of them, almost always being content to regard them with hostility.¹² A seminal contribution to this argument was Rosalind Coward's book *The Whole Truth*, which critiqued the conceptual paucity and political weakness of alternative medicine.¹³ Coward argued that alternative medicine was founded on a set of fantasies (of nature, of wholeness and of perfect health) that set consumers up for futile and costly quests. A decade later Jackie Stacey developed these approaches with a focus on the transnational dimensions of these fantasies within the context of postcolonialism and globalisation.¹⁴ Such perspectives clearly offer useful correctives to the romanticised conceptions of nature that typify popular CAM discourse. Some of Stacey's other work has dealt, intimately and painfully, with CAM as an organised system of encounters whose personal and political ramifications are of stark import.¹⁵ On the whole, though, most cultural studies engagement with CAM avoids considering its worth as a set of clinical practices and embodied experiences, more or less sidestepping its core claims about the therapeutic potential or efficacy of the bodily encounters it makes possible.

Coward, for example, treated all alternative therapies as though they were just differently flavoured elements of one great delusion. She did not engage seriously with the specific histories of particular practices. It is as if that which (allegedly)

unites CAM therapies—their conceptual naivety, their ideological complicity and their political complacency—overrides any consideration of their specificity as embodied techniques, medical cosmologies or conceptual schemas and even of their therapeutic worth.¹⁶ Indeed, Coward is knowingly and deliberately indifferent to any potential distinction between different bodily practices and their histories (including, for example, any distinction between ‘the “respectable” and the “fringe” therapies’) in order to undertake what is for her the more important task of uncovering and critiquing the ‘fundamental tenets’ shared by all alternative therapies.¹⁷ My point here is not to disparage a book that was an important contribution in its time, and whose central critique retains its bite since popular alternative medical discourse has remained impervious to it; it is to note how persistent this lack of engagement with CAM therapies in their specificity remains within the cultural disciplines. Nearly a quarter of a century after Coward’s book, the assumption of the conceptual weakness, political conservatism and ideological insidiousness of CAM therapies *as a group* has remained so strong that there are still very few analyses that are either more nuanced or more specifically focused. In some ten years of studying CAM therapies, I have seen only one sociocultural analysis dedicated specifically to aromatherapy—a chapter by Kimberley Lau that considers aromatherapy as part of the global commodity system.¹⁸

Lau’s analysis forms part of her book *New Age Capitalism*, and as such it pays particular attention to the role of commodification in CAM practice and discourse. She castigates the commodified version of aromatherapy for many things: its enmeshment in the cosmetic industries and hence in repressive and normalising ideologies of femininity and feminine beauty; its segmenting of the body into numerous component ‘parts’, each requiring its own separate aromatherapy product (hair, skin, foot, hands and so on); its conflation of beauty and health with sexuality and romance; its often specious equation of ‘natural’ products with environmental beneficence; and its nostalgic repudiation of modernity and technology.¹⁹ The proliferation of aromatherapy as product (therapeutic treatments, but also oils, lotions, books, lamps and so on) is fuelled, Lau argues, by the ‘capitalist necessity to divide the product line as well as the body and mind and spirit into as many parts as possible to ensure a continually growing market and consumer base’.²⁰ Lau considers this expansion to be a form of serialisation that is

fundamentally incompatible with aromatherapy's claims to holism. In its commodified form, she argues, aromatherapy is practically and philosophically insidious because its practices are transformed into 'a collection of products', a process that 'ultimately fragments the body into a series of parts and separates the mind and soul into various states of being, each "treatable" with different aromatherapy products like lip glosses and hair conditioners, foot lotions for pedicures and hand treatments for manicures'.²¹ Commodified aromatherapy is thus, ironically, the antithesis of the holism that aromatherapy, like all alternative therapies, ostensibly seeks, and is, she argues, thus doomed to failure:

This disjuncture between aromatherapy as a practice and aromatherapy as a product underscores the functional futility of searching for a way to unify mind, body, and soul in the midst of consumer culture and New Age capitalism.²²

Certain of these arguments could be refuted, refined or debated, but my aim here is not to engage with Lau's argument point for point so much as it is to note both the usefulness and the pitfalls of making an analytical distinction between aromatherapy practices and aromatherapy *products*.²³ Lau's picture of aromatherapy as seamlessly connected to the global beauty industry makes sense when one focuses on aromatherapy products. Within aromatherapy as a profession, however, connections with the beauty industry may figure less as a political problem than as a professional dilemma—the question of whether the high visibility of cosmetic applications undermines clinical aromatherapy's aspiration to be understood as a serious adjunctive clinical practice with a credible scientific base.

The focus on the structural and ideological dimensions of commodification also underestimates the complexity of aromatherapy as a consumer *practice*. For example, in contrast to Lau's reading of marketised aromatherapy as a capitulation to capitalist ideologies and to oppressive ideologies of femininity, it is truer to life to recognise that the consumer face of aromatherapy is not uniform, and its consumers are not a monolithic group. In fact, aromatherapy is one of the CAM practices in which the development of a cohort of amateurs and autodidacts that so typifies alternative health is most pronounced. While some consumers indubitably purchase aromatherapy products with little attention to aromatherapy as a field of knowledge or awareness of the oils' differences from synthetic fragrances, it is also the case that

the intersection of the English style of aromatherapy with the market has produced a significant demographic of informed consumers for whom the purchase of aromatherapy oils is part of a purposeful rejection of petrochemicals and other synthetic products. Salvatore Battaglia, who is both a clinical aromatherapist and the founder of a successful chain of aromatherapy stores, characterises the core demographic of his aromatherapy stores as ‘twenty-first-century bohemians’. While it might be easy to dismiss such a group as succumbing to a view of nature that is ‘hopelessly romantic and deluded’²⁴—and indeed, this is how consumers of alternative medicine are usually read within cultural studies—it is also important to recognise that, for many, aromatherapy forms part of a broader picture of active, politicised consumption. In Lau’s analysis, however, the consumption of aromatherapy products is discussed merely as an emblem of something else—as a manifestation of a ‘risk society’, in which people are naively trained into an anxious view of modern life as toxic.²⁵

Undoubtedly, those in a position to seek out and purchase essential oils, which are expensive and less widely found than synthetic fragrances, must enjoy both material privilege and cultural capital. But a sympathetic way of thinking of the ‘hobbyism’ of contemporary aromatherapy in the marketplace—where the dominant users of aromatherapy (and most alternative medicine) are young to middle-aged, educated women of reasonable means who purchase expensive oils and blend them at home or in the office—might be to connect these consumers to aromatherapy’s roots in folk herbal traditions and medical herbalism. Barbara Griggs characterises Jean Valnet’s seminal contributions to aromatherapy, for example, as at once highly technical and remaining in touch with aromatherapy’s origins in traditional medicine. His *Aromathérapie*, she notes, where complex chemistry sits alongside recipes for lavender water, juniper wine or garlic soup, was an overnight bestseller.²⁶ Viewed this way, perhaps today’s lay self-practitioners appear less like affluent dilettantes and more like descendants of grandmothers preparing home remedies.

But this symbolic resonance can’t be sustained analytically to any great degree. It is a romanticisation that glosses over the human and environmental implications of the fact that contemporary aromatherapy consumers gather their ingredients in shops rather than fields. While these active consumers may be acutely aware of the

debates around synthetics and health, there appears to be less discussion within within the aromatherapy industry about the human and environmental implications of essential oil production (a pointed omission I will return to in the final section of this article). This is the most useful contribution a classic materialist critique can make: the crucial recognition of the environmental impact of essential oil production, where acres of land are given over to the production of the raw ingredients of luxury commodities. A feminist perspective such as Lau's adds to this an understanding of how gendered ideologies of the body contribute to this environmental story. This is materialism at its political best.

And yet, in another way, such studies of material culture are not sufficiently material. Their focus on the systemic side of commodity production and exchange and on the commodity as a *form* means that the material properties of objects can paradoxically disappear from view. Tim Ingold, for one, argues that in many 'material culture' approaches, the properties of the materials are, paradoxically, overlooked.²⁷ Interest tends to centre on the political implications of the production process, on the object's cultural meanings, or on the way the object is used or consumed rather than on the properties of the materials that went into its making. We have inherited a critical habit of considering materials only once they have been 'congealed into objects': 'Thenceforth it is the objects themselves that capture our attention, no longer the materials of which they are made.'²⁸ So while a classic materialist critique of aromatherapy can help us to see how the desire for pure oils might be connected to a fear of toxins or pollutants typifying risk society, it can do so without being obliged to confront the question of whether accumulated parabens, plasticisers, xeno-oestrogens and so on actually *are* endocrine disruptors or *do* cause epigenetic effects.²⁹ Such material properties or consequences are in fact irrelevant to the argument. The patent inadequacy of this lends weight to Ingold's suggestion that cultural analysts need to 'take a step back, from the materiality of objects to the properties of materials'.³⁰

—ESSENTIAL OILS AS MATERIALS: THE PROPERTIES AND EFFECTS OF ESSENTIAL OILS

It would seem self-evident that any rounded consideration of aromatherapy ought to consider the actual pharmacological properties and physical effects of the oils. But as I have noted, such questions are often ignored or bracketed off in order to focus

on what are considered the more pertinent issues of politics and ideology. Coward, for example, claimed that even though she was grouping all alternative therapies together this was not intended to be 'dismissive': 'Indeed, I have used alternative medicines and feel sympathetic to some of their practices and ideas.'³¹ Perhaps it is fair enough for any individual project to bracket these questions off, but as a disciplinary reflex it is troubling. It is as though sociocultural approaches have been happy to maintain a distinction between the material and the symbolic, effectively leaving the question of the material properties and effects of particular therapeutic techniques to the scientists and clinicians and contenting themselves with dealing in the symbolic, the ideological and the political.

If one wanted to do this differently, taking aromatherapy as the case, a critical starting point would be aromatherapy's foundational distinction between essential oils and synthetic fragrances. While both oils and fragrances can produce physical, psychological and emotional effects, aromatherapy stakes its therapeutic claims on the distinction between the two. The obsession with authenticity and purity is both both pharmacologically valid and commercially useful; purity (a therapeutic value) and luxury (a marketing value) intertwine.

The authenticity and purity of oils have to be established on two fronts. First, essential oils are to be distinguished from synthetic fragrances. Essential oils are plant products; synthetic imitations may smell similar but have none of their pharmacological and therapeutic properties, though they may be 'psycho-physiologically active'.³² Second, *within* the category of essential oils, low-grade oils are distinguished from high-grade oils. Low-grade oils may have been adulterated with synthetic fragrances or other, cheaper, essential oils, or diluted with vegetable oils, or they may be sourced from regions that produce oils with a lower concentration of the active constituents.³³ Many are grown with pesticides.³⁴ Aromatherapists often condemn the lack of purity (and hence the diminished therapeutic effectiveness or the potential toxicity) of more cheaply produced oils,³⁵ and websites of major manufacturers frequently emphasise the purity of their ingredients.³⁶

What is a cultural studies reader with, perhaps, a practised twitch at the words 'authenticity' and 'purity', make of these claims? First, we have to note that it is not merely marketing hype to point out that different grades of natural product are

chemically different and thus might have different types or intensity of effects—and with a surprising amount of precision. Even within the one plant species, particular specimens produce different amounts of essential oils, depending on factors such as geo-climatic location, soil type, and even the time of day when they are harvested.³⁷ Variants in chemical composition within the one species are known as chemotypes.³⁸ Chemotypic profiles have been drawn up for some species. For example, rosemary oil can be CT 1 (from Spain), CT 2 (from Tunisia) or CT 3 (from France), each type producing an oil with its own particular therapeutic profile. Clearly, a product identified with this level of chemical precision is worlds apart not only from the synthetic imitation, but also from the cheap bottle of rosemary oil and the mainstream shampoo with its added ‘natural’ rosemary extracts. Purity is thus simultaneously a genuine pharmacological priority and a means of product differentiation in marketing terms, which is why any critique of essential oils as consumer items that doesn’t engage with questions of their medical or therapeutic efficacy is inadequate.

A second question is to wonder what aromatherapy consumers actually make, in mind and body, of these differences. What do contemporary consumers—so comfortable with synthetics, and yet so drenched with (usually misplaced) discourses of ‘naturalness’—make of this call to truth and purity? Some of them, of course, relish the ideal of purity and have a long tradition on which to draw. In pre-modern European cosmologies, essences were indicative of the intrinsic worth of the substances from which they emanated. Indeed, to encounter a scent was to encounter proof of a material presence.³⁹ Now, in an era in which synthetic odours dominate the olfactory landscape (or the ‘smellscape’, as Porteous termed it),⁴⁰ the situation can sometimes be reversed. Synthetic scents point not to essences but ‘are evocative of things which are not there, of presences which are absent’:⁴¹ the lime cordial with no lime in it, the floral perfume with no connection to flowers. How has this affected the perception of contemporary consumers? Are they apt to be disappointed, in stereotypically postmodern fashion, when the subtlety of essences does not emulate the vibrancy of the simulation? I asked this of Salvatore Battaglia. Has he encountered consumers, brought up on fake lime, fake lavender and so on, who are disappointed with the ‘natural’ products on sale in his aromatherapy shops?

Yeah. For those people that probably have no awareness at all of natural remedies and aromatherapies, that is often quite a common comment. That they actually feel disappointed that the real thing doesn't smell anything like what they had been used to smelling. Yeah.

So what happens? Do they retrain their perception or follow their preferences? According to Battaglia, those in search of a quick fix may well be 'totally disappointed and they will just prefer using the synthetically compounded products' while others will be happy to use it as a learning experience and may grow 'a lot more appreciative of the natural line'.⁴² Thus the existence and proliferation of both essential oils and synthetic fragrances co-produces new types of products, new types of consumers and particular bodily responses to smells. The shopper fully interpellated as an 'aromatherapy consumer' is one who knows—in mind, nose and indeed full body—the difference between essential oils and synthetic fragrances.⁴³

This leads us to a third consideration: the individual and cultural variability and malleability of smell experiences. Odour perception is notoriously complex. On the one hand, certain material properties of essential oils make them likely to have rapid systemic effects. Their lipophilic quality (that is, their ability to readily dissolve in fats) means that they are likely to diffuse easily in and out of cells and be rapidly emulsified within the body.⁴⁴ While massage increases the rate of dermal absorption of the oils, inhalation delivers more rapid doses than topical applications, given the large surface area of the lungs.⁴⁵ Owing to the physiological directness of olfaction and the olfactory receptors' connection to the limbic system, they can produce immediate psychological, emotional and physical effects, but they also have a range of longer-term physiological effects, and most aromatherapy handbooks include functional groupings (for example, diuretics, analgesics and carminatives) as well as details of the specific actions of particular oils.

But odour perception is no simple question of 'effect'. It is mediated by many factors, including individual and cultural expectations and experiences. The science of smell is thus bound up with understanding the significance of memory and signification. For smells aren't 'neatly defined objects', but 'experiences of intensities', like joy or pain.⁴⁶ Odour perception is learned and synthetic.⁴⁷ Perception of a 'whole' smell results from the synthesising activity of hundreds of olfactory receptors in the nose, which 'recognise' a particular odour object based on

its similarity to previously learned patterns.⁴⁸ Since the smells that matter to us, biologically speaking—mother, mate, home, food, danger—are neither singular nor unchanging, the human brain isn't hardwired to recognise individual smells from birth. Rather, we learn from experience to synthesise the component molecules into perceived wholes.⁴⁹ Smell is linked to memory because the olfactory neurons go straight to the limbic region of the brain.⁵⁰ The olfactory bulb connects directly to the hippocampus (which plays a key role in learning and memory).⁵¹ When an odour is smelt it triggers the emotions associated with earlier experiences of it.⁵² Smelling thus involves a complex interplay of experience and pharmacology. Oils have long-term pharmacological effects that are likely to be similar from person to person, but plant medicines, including essential oils, are still understood to have 'differing psychological and physiological effects depending on the requirement of the host'⁵³—that is, their therapeutic effects are affected by the 'terrain' of the patient.⁵⁴ In any case, since the 'additional psychological mechanisms' brought into being by 'immediate perceptual effects' vary from person to person, there may be 'complex effects at the individual level'⁵⁵—hence, no doubt, Marguerite Maury's emphasis on the individual prescription.⁵⁶

Psychophysiological responses to smell are thus a fascinating blend of objective pharmacological properties, personal experiences and the larger cultural contexts in which smells are experienced, valued and coded. The calming and soothing effects of lavender, for example, have been widely reported. But what happens to these pharmacological properties when lavender is inhaled by people who associate it culturally with death and funerals, or by people for whom it is linked experientially with the pain of childbirth?⁵⁷ (A midwife reported to me that some women coming back for their second child hate the smell of lavender, having used it in their first labour.) These broader cultural dimensions to the variability of olfactory experiences mean that smelling involves a *physical* encounter with myths—whether they are marketing myths or broader cultural stories. In the Western context, both the mythology and the language of aromatherapy connote history, luxury and the exotic. Mark Webb's introduction to aromatherapy, for example, traces its prehistory to the use of 'aromatic substances such as unguents, incenses, spices, herbs and macerated oils' in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and China.⁵⁸ Even a term like 'unguent' signals an imaginary immersion in a pre-modern world of sensual

delights. A typical aromatherapy handbook tells us, for example, that jasmine oil is known in India as the ‘queen of the night’ or ‘moonshine in the garden’:

To adequately describe [jasmine’s] magic would require poetry. In a secret way queen of the night excites sensuality. As if touched by a silvery wand, men and women under its influence open up to sensual love. Natural sensuality grows from a state of wholeness, which requires that we trust ourselves and others. Jasmine helps set the stage for experiencing warm love, total abandon, trust, and relaxed physical awareness. It envelops people with a mantle of mystery and magic.⁵⁹

This kind of orientalism has been thoroughly and rightly critiqued,⁶⁰ so there is no need to wield the stick again here. But it’s worth noting that the mythical evocation of jasmine’s association with the night, though orientalist, is not nonsense. It is based on the kind of empirical knowledge noted and valued by Gattefossé and Valnet. Maury, a chemist, noted that jasmine at midnight develops an indole that makes its smell much more potent.⁶¹ I will return to this fact later, to give it political and ethical, rather than mythical, weight.

My point here, though, is that such cultural myths, however politically dubious or historically feeble, are a genuine part of the aromatherapy experience for those consumers who (literally) buy into them. The strong role for culture, experience, expectations and learning in the actual sensory perception of smells—the significant role for ‘context and expectancy’ in the perception of smells, even to the point where perception can be ‘inconsistent with the actual sensory output’⁶²—means that these cultural resonances are part of the phenomenological experience of an aromatherapy treatment. The cultural expectations of the user and his or her stored bodily experience conjoin with the objective pharmacological properties of the oils to produce palpable, but not predictable, effects.

—ESSENTIAL OILS AS ESSENCES

So far, we have seen that even the science of olfaction recognises the cultural dimensions of smell perception and hence the way pharmacological ‘properties’ are not inert, but rather a set of potentials activated in encounters. But for traditional aromatherapy, the ‘aliveness’ of the essential oils runs far deeper.

Aromatherapy's origins in traditional herbalism mean that it construes essential oils as much more than chemicals with particular pharmacological properties. Rather, they embody three interrelated principles that typify, according to Classen et al., pre-modern conceptions of smell.⁶³ First, they connect to essences, interiors and truths. Second, they are understood to be the life force of the plant. Third, the symbolic dimensions of the oils cannot be disentangled from their material properties.

To begin with the first of these: in pre-Enlightenment European cosmologies, smell was a vehicle for interacting with interiors, and odours were believed to reveal inner truths.⁶⁴ Smell is by its very nature concerned with essences, since it is carried to us on 'the life-giving breath which unites interiors and exteriors in a dynamic interchange'.⁶⁵ Odour could function as 'a metaphor for truth and an indicator of the sacred reality behind the false world of appearances'.⁶⁶ In such cosmologies, medicine and perfume were not intrinsically divided.⁶⁷ Later, the visualism of the Enlightenment helped undermine this sensory regime in which odours led back to essences⁶⁸—sight increasingly functioned as 'the revealer of truth' while fragrance started to become 'purely cosmetic'.⁶⁹

Aromatherapy retains the pre-modern commitment to smell as a mode of interacting with essences. The visual presentation of the essential oils in the marketplace has more in common with medicines than with perfumes. Oils are usually sold in identical small dark bottles, with no changes in font, colour or packaging to distinguish one from the other (within the same brand).⁷⁰ They are labelled plainly and arrayed in a row as though on an apothecary's shelf. Though ready-made blends are now available (with names like 'Relax', 'Study', or 'Woman'), the bulk of oils are sold as single essences. This 'medical' presentation is one of the things that is threatened by the now greater visibility of aromatherapy as product; a diverse assortment of consumer items, from soaps to shampoos can be marketed (accurately or otherwise) as aromatherapy.

Rather than viewing smells as frivolous, superfluous or misleading, aromatherapy contrasts the truth of essential oils with the artificiality of perfumes. In that way, even while Lau's critique is aimed fairly and squarely at the contemporary commodified version of aromatherapy, its moral lines are, in fact, congruent with an ancient moral uncertainty about the secular use of luxury

aromatics, and the ambivalence about scents in particular. Classen et al. note that the ancient Greeks and Romans were ‘sharply divided’ about the use of scent.⁷¹ Some associated perfumes with frivolity and dissipation and others saw them as uplifting. Such ambivalence continued into modernity, reshaped by the development of mass markets and the redrawing of boundaries between the sacred and the secular. Perfumes could be valued as precious or condemned as an indulgence of the rich, and were thus ripe for the castigating attention of puritans and moralists, who might at best grudgingly concede their usefulness as a necessary sanitisation of our animality. Thus, like most fashion pursuits, they have been lamented in terms that leave their feminisation (and their class meanings) in no doubt—as deception, artificiality, excess or indulgence; as evidence of the trivial, the vain, the superfluous and the inauthentic; as characteristic of women, dandies, fops, homosexuals or the idle rich.

Against this familiar construal of bodily adornment as morally dubious and/or personally and philosophically inauthentic,⁷² few philosophers have stood up for the ancient counter-tradition in which smells bear witness to essences and hence to authenticity. Nietzsche, in his insistence that smell is the ‘sense most attuned to truth’ is one of very few modern philosophers willing to follow the ancient view that ‘smell contains the principle, the virtue, of any substance’.⁷³ Aromatherapy, of course, relies on such a notion: ancient meanings and consumer values happily converge, and authenticity, luxury and purity are bound together as symbolic, pharmacological and market values.

Turning to the second principle, aromatherapy’s debt to vitalism means that the transitoriness with which smells are so often associated (and for which they are classically feminised)⁷⁴ gives way to an idea of the essential oil as ‘captur[ing] and intensify[ing] the fleeting aroma of flowers, herbs, woods, and fruits’.⁷⁵ This essence is understood as alive and communicative:

Essential Oils are the volatile liquid ‘intelligence’ of the herb, tree, spice, flower, citrus, grass or resin from which they are derived. Essential Oils communicate to the plant the information needed for survival.⁷⁶

Gattefossé and Maury, both chemists, considered essential oils to be ‘vegetable hormones’—in Maury’s words, a ‘fundamental force which seems to be the motor, the driving power of growth’.⁷⁷ This is why Maury considered them such useful tools

for rejuvenation. In aromatherapeutic discourse, this 'scientific' explanation of their efficacy shades into a more vitalistic idea of the life force, testament to aromatherapy's connections to herbalism and to other forms of alternative medicine. The life force can be used as a healing tool, but in ways that exceed the control of the practitioner:

By inserting this energy force into our body, we can therefore expect an efficacious and selective action on its part. The body will thus have at its disposal a vital and living element. It will use its energy for its own ends.⁷⁸

The third point—that the material is not *a priori* opposed to the symbolic—means that in aromatherapy, the odour, its therapeutic properties and its symbolic meanings cannot be disentangled. This is evident in popular aromatherapy handbooks, where the profile of each oil typically begins with mythological/historical material, but it is no mere background. Rather, the chemical properties of the oil, its historical, ritual or religious uses, and sometimes the physical properties of the plant from which it is derived, are all understood as mysteriously transmitted into the oil itself and from there able to be of assistance to humans. A typical example would be Susanne Fischer-Rizzi's introduction to cedar, which includes not only some background on the various historical uses of cedar wood, and a summary of the chemical properties and therapeutic effects of the oil, but also a description of the tree itself, since the therapeutic use of an oil involves an engagement with its mythical/spiritual/psychological 'essence' and of the plant from which it is derived:

What the lion is in the animal kingdom, the cedar is among trees. Majestic and full of strength, cedars stand tall in the loftiest regions of the mountains. They demand space for their expansive branches and stand undaunted by the elements in total inner harmony. Cedar trees grow up to 100 feet high, and when undisturbed they may reach an age of 1,000 to 2,000 years. During biblical times, forests of cedar trees covered Lebanon and a large part of the Taurus Range in southern Turkey. The wood was honored as a symbol of strength, dignity, and nobility. The Temple of Solomon was built with cedarwood.⁷⁹

The most striking example of this holistic principle that I have seen is French aromatherapist Philippe Mailhebiau's book *Portraits in Oils*, which combines

botanical and medical information with pharmacological and functional analyses of oils, medical indications and, most idiosyncratically, a ‘characterology’ of the oils.⁸⁰ Although these very different types of information are presented under different subheadings, they are clearly understood as mutually informing, as in Mailhebiau’s description of rosemary oil:

Rosmarinus officinalis b.s. camphor is a good muscular decontractant in cases of rheumatic pain or cramps, externally for the striated muscles, internally for the smooth muscles. It blends well for internal treatment with *Cupressus sempervirens b.s. pinene*, but once again we are not convinced of the advantage of this over Rosemary *bav.* When blended with the lipidic extract of *Hypericum perforatum* (the red oil of St John’s Wort), it has a good effect on the rheumatic complaints, and, more specifically, spinal arthritis ... Rosemary *b.s. camphor* is an elderly man, essentially characterised by the temperament of an old moaner. Old he is indeed, but more in heart than body. Basing his existence on a narrow, personal creed, consoling himself with outdated, overturned values, he refuses any adjustment in relationship to those around him and rejects, on principle, anything that might in any way modify his entropic existence.⁸¹

Though Mailhebiau’s handbook is stylistically idiosyncratic in its ‘characterological’ dimensions, the underlying principle that no distinction can ultimately be made between the pharmacological and the symbolic typifies much aromatherapy literature.

So it is that in aromatherapy, the aesthetics of smell is not understood as merely decorative, superficial or pleasure-giving, even though aromatherapy texts may well emphasise the luxurious, nurturing qualities of a treatment or the preciousness of the oils. Rather, aromatherapy’s aesthetics of smell is multilayered—weaving together the scientific, the mythological and the therapeutic.

To get a sense of this integration of the symbolic with the material, compare the way a sociologist like Anthony Synnott separates the symbolic meanings of a smell from the way an aromatherapist describes scent and meaning as utterly commingled. In this extract from Synnott (a sociologist who has played a major role in putting smell on the agenda for cultural analysis) we see the work of separation and distinction that characterises modern analytical thought:

I will illustrate [the fundamental moral construction of smell] with examples from food and drink, the environment and ... people. I should clarify at the outset that what I am attempting to demonstrate is how people *think* about odours, i.e. in metaphorical and symbolic terms; I am not concerned with the odours themselves, which are intrinsically meaningless. To paraphrase Hamlet: 'there is nothing either fragrant or foul, good or bad, but thinking makes it so'.⁸²

A holistic aromatherapist, however, has a fundamentally different notion of the relationship between symbols and materiality:

For people who have become thin-skinned, neroli can strengthen their inner being and build a protective shield ... Neroli has been assigned to the diamond. Both provide light that reduces inner emptiness and anxiety. Neroli offers the gift of strength and courage that helps us see life's beauty. Neroli helps treat psychosomatic illness, used in the aroma lamp, the bath, a compress, or, a massage oil ...⁸³

Here, the odours, their functions, their pharmacological properties, their effects, and their associated metaphors and symbols, though they can be separated for analytical purposes, are understood to be entirely interwoven functionally and even ontologically.⁸⁴

For those traditional aromatherapists (who sometimes call themselves holistic aromatherapists), oils can quite matter-of-factly be understood as having 'personalities'. They can be companions, comforters and teachers: 'Neroli, an aphrodisiac, teaches us to like and care for our bodies. Pamper yourself and your loved ones. A bath or hot compress will help you forget the day's worries.'⁸⁵ Neroli's powers are not understood as merely cosmetic, however. The idea of the essence carries with it the implication that the oil can impart qualities not just to the surface of the body, but to the essence of the person: 'The sweet scent reaches deep into the soul to stabilize and regenerate. For long-standing psychological tension, exhaustion, and seemingly hopeless situations, the oil strengthens and brings relief.'⁸⁶ This is, according to Maury, a property of aromatics that has been understood by all human cultures: 'Since time immemorial men have had recourse to perfumes. Their aid has perpetually been solicited and as a result they have become our closest, most intimate and most faithful companions'.⁸⁷ Essential oils

point backwards to a world in which smell evoked the sacred; back to a medical past in which plants were valued; and forwards to the hope of a 'sweet-smelling' medical future.⁸⁸ Since these medicine-friends are now also commodities, they find a contemporary home in a society in which consumerism and the sacred need not pull in opposing directions. Medicines, perfumes and companions—essential oils clearly do not belong to a world in which smell is merely decorative, luxurious or frivolous, but rather to one in which truth can be allied to pleasure.

For critics working within the cultural materialist tradition, these three dimensions of the materials of aromatherapy—as essence, life force and material-symbolic amalgam—are enough to condemn it. For Lau, the logic of the life force, resembling as it does that of the totem, where, typically, the ritual eating of a particular animal might be understood as a mechanism by which it imparts some of its qualities to the human, edges close to the pre-modern principle of sympathetic magic.⁸⁹ For Coward, this totemic logic is not only unscientific but also a hypocritical selection and sanitisation, the reduction of nature to its benign elements: 'No [advocate of alternative medicine] suggests eating a freshly killed young rabbit on the grounds that its life forces would greatly benefit the consumer.'⁹⁰

Such criticisms, while they are useful in pointing to the philosophical and ideological debts of, and internal contradictions within, the viewpoints of some Western consumers, ultimately imply that traditional principles like vitalism and animism are simply delusions. They follow the traditional Eurocentric dismissal of animism as the primitive tendency to imbue inert matter with spirit and so endow it with agency.⁹¹ But for Tim Ingold this dismissal fails to recognise that animism is not a belief system, false or otherwise, so much as a way of inhabiting the world⁹²—'a condition of being alive to the world'.⁹³ (Perhaps we should refine this to say it is not *only* or not *necessarily* a belief system). In an animistic cosmology, the distinction between life and non-life is not a fundamental starting point.⁹⁴ Rather, the entire lifeworld is conceived of as animate; it does not need agency or spirit to be 'infused' into it.⁹⁵ In that sense, agency is, according to Ingold, a false problem generated by modern ontologies that do not share this starting point and that are bound by 'our conceptual habit of dividing the world into inorganic matter and organic life'.⁹⁶ Ingold notes that 'people do not universally discriminate between the categories of living and non-living things'.⁹⁷ Ingold is 'sure' of this, because ethnography reveals it

to be so.⁹⁸ Perhaps ethnographies of contemporary CAM users might also have interesting things to reveal about how individuals can differentially mobilise contradictory perspectives on the aliveness of things and indeed of the entire cosmos.

—WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THESE DIFFERENT WAYS OF VIEWING THE OBJECTS OF AROMATHERAPY?

Aromatherapy opens a window into the intellectual and political working out of different conceptions of objects and matter. For cultural studies, it presents an opportunity to learn about and engage with different models of ‘thingness’ as they play out in one popular context.

Essential oils might make an interesting case study for those cultural studies scholars drawn to the various ‘new materialisms’, those forms of materialism currently enjoying a resurgence, that do not see matter as inert but are, rather, entranced by the animate possibilities of things—what Jane Bennett calls the ‘not-quite-human capaciousness’ of ‘vibrant matter’.⁹⁹ Such materialisms question the absoluteness and/or usefulness of the life-matter distinction and aim towards a more ‘distributive’ conception of agency than that accorded by the traditional division between life and non-life, spirit and matter. The core difference between the ‘one-stuff’ ontologies¹⁰⁰ that are the basis of most CAM therapies and those that are rising in visibility in the humanities is whether or not the aliveness or ‘quasi’ agency of matter is conceived of as intrinsic to matter *itself* or as a type of ‘nonmaterial life force’, a ‘spiritual supplement’ that animates matter.¹⁰¹ Most of the ‘vital materialisms’¹⁰² finding favour in the contemporary humanities tend to eschew the traditional idea of an animating life force in favour of what Jane Bennett calls a nontheistic materialism.¹⁰³

For this reason, some CAM practices will no doubt prove of more interest to cultural studies than others. Perhaps contemporary theorists of vital matter might be drawn less to aromatherapy’s traditional vitalism than, to take one example, to the eclectic *materia medica* of homeopathy.¹⁰⁴ For homeopathy is more inclusive than aromatherapy in its choice of therapeutic agents, using remedies derived from animals, minerals (including metals, acids and elemental substances), hormones, tissue extracts and even disease products.¹⁰⁵ In homeopathy, ‘any substance whatsoever’—be it ‘conventional drugs, unproven folk remedies, toxic or laboratory

chemicals, pollutants, and commercial or industrial products (dyes, insecticides, paints, solvents)—can be tested for its potential medicinal action: ‘The homeopathic materia medica is as boundless as the creation of the earth and as inexhaustible as its transformation by human or environmental forces.’¹⁰⁶ Its therapeutic agents are understood as actants with a catalytic power that cannot be predicted in advance, only understood through investigation. Aromatherapy, on the other hand, is more bound to a vitalism that discriminates between life and non-life. When asked why both animal scents and petrochemicals are shunned, an aromatherapist explained that within the herbalist framework, the former are disallowed since they are obtained through violence; the latter because they are produced through chemical means. Both are considered to be dead or inert—to have no life force.¹⁰⁷ There are hints of other possibilities in early aromatherapy texts—Gattefossé’s book shows a great interest in the smells emitted by humans, animals and even minerals, and Maury was interested in plant–animal interrelationships (the ‘intimate kinship of animal and vegetable cells’),¹⁰⁸ but aromatherapy did not develop these paths, falling rather more conventionally into line with a spiritualised vitalism in which matter is understood to be ‘ensouled’.¹⁰⁹ For Bennett, such philosophies are enticing but, ultimately, ‘discredited’.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, the question of whether or not vitalism is ‘discredited’ forms part of aromatherapy’s *own* professional battles, with some aromatherapists also seeing it as a tainting legacy. Thus to aromatherapy’s battles on external fronts—for example, between a therapeutic aromatherapy and its commodified imitations, and between a therapeutic aromatherapy and an often hostile medical orthodoxy—can be added internal division, between its different styles, conceptions and trajectories. The most notable of these is the conflict between esoteric and hardline scientific versions of aromatherapy. More scientifically minded practitioners accuse others of mystification and dangerous ignorance, and the more spiritually inclined practitioners accuse them in turn of ‘losing the soul’ of healing.¹¹¹

Having suggested that the new materialists may learn something by studying aromatherapy (and other CAM therapies), I close by returning to the question of what aromatherapy might have to learn from cultural materialism. For while one type of environmental politics emerges from this new interest in the vibrancy of matter and in weakening or even eliminating the subject–object distinction,¹¹²

another, rather different, environmental politics emerges from the classic materialist critique.

Aromatherapy's dependence on essential oil commodities means that it is unavoidably implicated in global systems of production. This goes well beyond the question of the material privilege of those able to afford aromatherapy massages (though this is not insignificant), and it isn't a dilemma able to be salvaged by pointing to the large role of amateurism in aromatherapy (where consumers mix up their own blends for home or office use). For whether you are an amateur or a professional you cannot, quite simply, practise aromatherapy without purchasing essential oils, and the human and environmental costs of this production need to be examined. How many hectares of land can reasonably be cleared to produce the massive quantities of rose petals needed to produce rose oil? While a classic aromatherapy handbook will characterise this in terms of romanticised and market-friendly notions of luxury, purity and preciousness, no amount of romanticisation can wash away the fact that much jasmine oil, for example, is produced through child labour. In Egypt, children, chosen for their nimble fingers, work barefoot through the night without lights, food or breaks.¹¹³

As I have argued, questions of provenance and purity are not a clinical irrelevance, some mere rehearsal of romantic tropes. But the medical and therapeutic emphasis on provenance and purity could be enriched (and complicated) to include ethical, environmental and political questions to do with the conditions in which oils are produced. There is already some discussion in aromatherapy about pesticide use, and about indigenous property rights in traditional herbal knowledge. Clinical aromatherapist Jane Buckle, for example, has written a pointed article about the threats posed by land-clearing and 'pharmaceutical prospecting',¹¹⁴ where pharmaceutical companies scour the world for potential plant remedies, using indigenous knowledge as their source, in a process known to the companies as 'Ethno-Directed Sampling Hypothesis' and to certain resisting nations as 'biopiracy'.¹¹⁵ She does briefly mention that aromatherapy might be implicated, noting that very few distributors of essential oils work with environmentally friendly suppliers.¹¹⁶ By and large, though, she positions aromatherapy as the antithesis of, and answer to, the ethical limitations of what she calls 'petrochemical medicine', seeing it as part of an ethically and medically sound

future paradigm, rather than as complexly implicated in the politics of habitat and biodiversity loss and the appropriation of indigenous knowledge. Clearly, in the David and Goliath battle between plant medicine and ‘petrochemical medicine’, the actions of pharmaceutical companies—including the appropriation and copyrighting of the sacred herbal medical secrets of indigenous peoples¹¹⁷— vastly outweigh in scope and power the impact of the aromatherapy industry, but it is still to be hoped that aromatherapy can continue to foster this emerging political consciousness by considering its own implication in environmental degradation and/or reduction of land for food production via land-clearing for essential oil production. Tony Burfield’s *Cropwatch* website, for example, which reports on, among other things, threats to ‘these natural commodities’ via their over-exploitation, is a sign that things may be changing.¹¹⁸

But these ideas have not hit the shops yet to any great degree. Since, as Lau argues, aromatherapy is now bound to consumerism, an ethical aromatherapy will have to use whatever discourses the market currently provides, such as those of ethical and green consumerism—and to push other discourses towards a new ethics. Even the New Age, an unlikely candidate for social justice issues given its characteristic individualism, could provide a popular discursive repertoire through which to broach ethical issues. Surely, after all, it must be ‘bad karma’ to use jasmine oil produced through child labour.

There are, then, discursive openings in existing aromatherapy discourse and even in the more populist discourses of the New Age, where ethics, pleasure, spirituality and politics could be made to converge. That, however, will require both an aromatherapy profession willing to take on the challenge, and a marketplace that allows these new voices room to be heard. It would need an aromatherapy handbook happy to tell us not only that ‘in India people have known about the power of the jasmine plant for centuries’ and that ‘many portrayals of lovers bathed in moonlight near a garden or lake include the jasmine plant, which mirrors the mysterious moonlight in its blossoms’¹¹⁹—but also to teach us that the people mirrored in the moonlight in the jasmine fields are less likely to be lovers than women and children picking jasmine flowers for a transnational corporation, working for a pittance, and being beaten if they stop.

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—NOTES

¹ Strictly speaking, not all the oils used in modern aromatherapy are essential oils. Webb lists three other types of aromatic substances in common use: expressed oils (citrus oils derived from the rind), absolutes (extracted from flowers like jasmine or rose using petrochemical solvents that do not damage their aromatic properties) and carbon dioxide extracts (derived via a high-tech extraction from dried plants). Mark A. Webb, 'Aromatherapy', in Terry Robson (ed.), *An Introduction to Complementary Medicine*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, p. 111.

² Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 20.

³ This article emerges out of a larger study of CAM therapies as sensory practices. Interviews with aromatherapists are a subset of this larger project, carried out under the auspices of the University of Sydney between 2004 and 2011. My sincere thanks to the participants for their time and insight.

⁴ Jean Valnet, *The Practice of Aromatherapy*, C.W. Daniel Co, Saffron Walden, 1980.

⁵ Barbara Griggs, *New Green Pharmacy: The Story of Western Herbal Medicine*, 2nd edn, Vermilion, London, 1997, p. 281.

⁶ René-Maurice Gattefossé, *Gattefossé's Aromatherapy*, ed. R.B. Tisserand, trans. L. Davies, C.W. Daniel Co, Saffron Walden, 1993 [1937], p. 32.

⁷ Janetta Bensouilah, 'The History and Development of Modern-British Aromatherapy', *The International Journal of Aromatherapy*, vol. 15, 2005, p. 135.

⁸ Jane Buckle, *Clinical Aromatherapy: Essential Oils in Practice*, 2nd edn, Churchill Livingstone, Philadelphia, 2003, p. 11.

⁹ Roulhac B. Toledano and Elizabeth Z. Coty, *François Coty: Fragrance, Power, Money*, Pelican, Gretna, 2009, p. 12.

¹⁰ Luca Turin, *The Secret of Scent: Adventures in Perfume and the Science of Smell*, Harper Perennial, New York, 2006, p. 11.

¹¹ Interview with Salvatore Battaglia, Brisbane, January 2008. All subsequent quotations from Battaglia come from this interview.

¹² Ruth Barcan, *Complementary and Alternative Medicine: Bodies, Therapies, Senses*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2011.

- ¹³ Rosalind Coward, *The Whole Truth: The Myth of Alternative Health*, Faber and Faber, London, 1989.
- ¹⁴ Jackie Stacey, 'The Global Within', in Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Global Nature, Global Culture*, Sage, London, 2000, pp. 97–145.
- ¹⁵ Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, Routledge, London, 1997.
- ¹⁶ Coward, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Kimberly J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000.
- ¹⁹ Lau, pp. 34, 45, 30.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 35.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 34.
- ²² Ibid., p. 36.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 41.
- ²⁴ Coward, p. 29.
- ²⁵ Lau, pp. 41–2.
- ²⁶ Griggs, p. 290.
- ²⁷ Ingold, p. 26.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ P.D. Darbre, 'Environmental Oestrogens, Cosmetics and Breast Cancer', *Best Practice & Research Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, vol. 20, no.1, 2006, pp. 121–43; Mark A. Rothstein, Yu Cai and Gary E. Marchant, 'The Ghost in our Genes: Legal and Ethical Implications of Epigenetics', *Health Matrix*, vol. 19, no.1, 2009.
- ³⁰ Ingold, p. 26.
- ³¹ Coward, p. 5.
- ³² Peter Damian and Kate Damian, 'Environmental Fragrancing', in Jim Drobnick (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2006, p. 157. Perfumes of course have some psychological effects. The development of commercial perfume industries 'separated cosmetics completely from the therapeutic use of essential oils, except perhaps for good feelings experienced by people wearing and experiencing the perfumes' (Caroline J. Stevensen, 'Aromatherapy', in Marc S. Micozzi (ed.), *Fundamentals of Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2nd edn, New York: Churchill Livingstone, 2001, p. 149).
- ³³ E. Joy Bowles, *The Chemistry of Aromatherapeutic Oils*, 3rd edn, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, pp. 159–60; Buckle, *Clinical Aromatherapy*, p. 74.
- ³⁴ Buckle, *Clinical Aromatherapy*, p. 27.
- ³⁵ Philippe Mailhebiau, for example, claims that many oils on the market are 'synthetic essences or adulterated, doctored mixtures' (*Portraits in Oils: The Personality of Aromatherapy Oils and their Link with Human Temperaments*, trans. Susan Y. Chalkley, C.W. Daniel Co, Saffron Walden, 1995, p. ix).

- ³⁶ For example: 'In Essence Aromatherapy is Australia's leading Aromatherapy company. We understand that pure essential oils have healing properties. Hence we are **serious** about delivering the purest oils and plant ingredients available for their therapeutic efficacy in all our products ...' (In Essence Aromatherapy website, <<http://www.inessence.com.au>>).
- ³⁷ Bowles, p. 34.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 205.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 62.
- ⁴¹ Classen et al., p. 205.
- ⁴² Of course, it is possible to appreciate synthetic fragrances and their makers for their skilful blending of authentic, isolatable molecules, as in Luca Turin's idiosyncratic discriminating passion for the synthetic: 'Some functional perfumes are true works of art: I would pay real money for a bottle of the 1972 fabric softener Stergene, which smelled sensational' (pp. 13–14).
- ⁴³ For those sensitive to synthetic fragrances, effects go well beyond the nose, and may include a constricted throat, watery eyes and asthmatic reactions.
- ⁴⁴ Bowles, p. 50.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 118.
- ⁴⁶ Rodaway, p. 65.
- ⁴⁷ Donald A. Wilson and Richard J. Stevenson, *Learning to Smell: Olfactory Perception from Neurobiology to Behavior*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2006, p. 2.
- ⁴⁸ Wilson and Stevenson, p. 3.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 6.
- ⁵⁰ David Howes, 'Olfaction and Transition', in David Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1991, p. 132.
- ⁵¹ Christine Broughan, 'Odours, Emotions, and Cognition: How Odours May Affect Cognitive Performance', *International Journal of Aromatherapy*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2002, p. 92.
- ⁵² Buckle, *Clinical Aromatherapy*, p. 104.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 88.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 7.
- ⁵⁵ Michael Kirk-Smith, 'The Psychological Effects of Lavender II: Scientific and Clinical Evidence', *International Journal of Aromatherapy*, vol. 13, nos 2–3, 2003, p. 85.
- ⁵⁶ For another story in which lavender's positive hedonics contradicted its negative affective associations, see Kirk-Smith, pp. 84–5.
- ⁵⁷ Buckle, *Clinical Aromatherapy*, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Webb, p. 110.

⁵⁹ Susanne Fischer-Rizzi, *Complete Aromatherapy Handbook: Essential Oils for Radiant Health*, Sterling Publishing Co, New York, 1990, p. 104.

⁶⁰ For example, Stacey, 'The Global Within'.

⁶¹ Marguerite Maury, *The Secret of Life and Youth. Regeneration through Essential Oils: A Modern Alchemy*, trans. Mervyn Savill, MacDonald, London, 1964, pp. 81–2.

⁶² Wilson and Stevenson, p. 8.

⁶³ Classen et al.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 28.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁰ The exceptions to this are chakra blends, which colour-code the chakras, and some other forms of ready-made blends.

⁷¹ Classen et al., p. 50.

⁷² Karen Hanson, 'Dressing Down Dressing Up: The Philosophic Fear of Fashion', in Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds), *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, Indiana State University, Bloomington, 1993, pp. 229–41.

⁷³ Annick Le Guérer, 'Olfaction and Cognition: A Philosophical and Psychoanalytic View', in Catherine Rouby et al. (eds), *Olfaction, Taste, and Cognition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 6, 5.

⁷⁴ Kant, for example, called the pleasures afforded by smell 'fleeting and transient' (Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. and ed. Robert B. Loudon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 51). For a fuller exploration of the feminisation of aromatherapy, see Ruth Barcan, 'Aromatherapy and the Mixed Blessing of Feminisation', *Senses and Society*, vol. 9, no.1, 2014, pp. 33–54.

⁷⁵ Lau, p. 23. Having said this, it is recognised that the oils lose their potency. Citrus oils may last only six months; most oils last around two years. There are a few (for example, sandalwood and frankincense) that improve like good wines. There is even a market for vintage frankincense (Christine Westwood, *Aromatherapy: A Guide for Home Use*, 3rd edn, Amberwood Publishing, Guildford, 1991, p. 10).

⁷⁶ Personal Health Facts website,

<<http://www.personalhealthfacts.com/aromatherapy/cardamon.html>>.

⁷⁷ Maury, p. 81.

- ⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 81.
- ⁷⁹ Fischer-Rizzi, p. 77.
- ⁸⁰ Mailhebiau.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 110, 111.
- ⁸² Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 190.
- ⁸³ Fischer-Rizzi, p. 142.
- ⁸⁴ Alfred Gell also considers the symbolic and material dimensions of smells to be intertwined. The 'smell-sign ... does not properly detach itself from the world'. Alfred Gell, 'Magic, Perfume, Dream...', in Ioan Lewis (ed.), *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, Academic Press, London, 1977, p. 27. Olfaction is, he notes, both 'part of, and a reference to, the world' (p. 27).
- ⁸⁵ Fischer-Rizzi, p. 144.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 142.
- ⁸⁷ Maury, p. 76.
- ⁸⁸ Buckle, *Clinical Aromatherapy*, p. 22.
- ⁸⁹ Lau, p. 22.
- ⁹⁰ Coward, p. 25.
- ⁹¹ Ingold, p. 67.
- ⁹² Ibid., p. 69.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 67.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid..
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 68.
- ⁹⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, p. 50.
- ⁹⁷ Ingold, p. 67.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 67.
- ⁹⁹ Bennett, p. 3.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. xi.
- ¹⁰¹ Bennett, pp. viii, 48, xiii.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., p. 17.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 16.
- ¹⁰⁴ The homeopathic *materia medica* (a reference list of remedies and their uses) was compiled in the nineteenth century by the founder of homeopathy, the German physician Samuel Hahnemann. It currently lists over two thousand remedies. Jennifer Jacobs and Richard Moskowitz, 'Homeopathy', in Marc S. Micozzi (ed.), *Fundamentals of Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2nd edn, Churchill Livingstone, Philadelphia, 2001, pp. 88–9.
- ¹⁰⁵ Jacobs and Moskowitz, p. 89.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ I have seen a single exception to this within aromatherapy—a perfume/aromatherapy website offering animal scents (for example ambergris, musk, civet) for sale, and extolling their sympathetic properties. The website of an Italian perfume/aromatherapy company called La Via del Profumo is highly unusual in offering for sale not only essential oils but a kit of animal scents: musk, civet, ambergris, honey bee tincture, hyraceum (from the hyrax) and castoreum (from the wild beaver). The language of this site yokes together contemporary science (olfactory psychology) and marketing (aromachology) and the vitalism and totemism of traditional perfumery: a tincture of castoreum is ‘pure pheromone’, bestowing on the wearer ‘the pure animalistic vital force’ that will give him mental and spiritual energy, an ‘enormous aura of sensuality’ and a ‘psychological advantage’ see <www.profumo.it>. This use of animal scents, and the unabashed totemism, is completely anomalous in contemporary aromatherapeutic discourse, although I have found some minor references to animal scents in Valnet, who includes two traditional recipes (one aphrodisiac and one digestive remedy) that include minute amounts (e.g. 0.09g) of ambergris and musk (Valnet, pp. 243, 251).

¹⁰⁸ Maury, p. 81.

¹⁰⁹ Bennett, p. xvii.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹¹ One example is aromatherapist Martin Watt. See <www.aromamedical.com>.

¹¹² Bennett makes it clear that her approach is motivated by the search for a new type of environmental politics.

¹¹³ Marie Dorigny and Sorj Chalandon, in association with the International Labour Office, *Enfants de L'Ombre/Children in Shadow/Niños en Sombras*, Marval, 1993.

¹¹⁴ Jane Buckle, ‘The Ethics of Plant vs Petrochemical Medicine’, *The International Journal of Aromatherapy*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2001, p. 9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Cropwatch is an independent watchdog for natural aromatics, see <www.cropwatch.org>.

¹¹⁹ Fischer-Rizzi, p. 104.

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