

BOOK REVIEWS

An Anthropology of the Senses

Doing Sensory Ethnography,
by Sarah Pink

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This book proposes a methodology for the ethnographic study of the senses and sense experience. The sensory ethnography proposed by Sarah Pink draws on the works of anthropologists, geographers, and philosophers who advocate a phenomenological perspective. For her, sensory ethnography should be informed by a theory of perception and is best approached through a theory of place and place-making.

Doing Sensory Ethnography is programmatic. It deals with methodology, but the author is careful not to adopt a prescriptive tone. She recognizes that there is no single way of doing sensory ethnography. Nonetheless, her approach is characterized by a strong commitment to reflexivity. Indeed, she urges contemporary ethnographers

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to be more explicit about how sensory knowing becomes academic knowledge.

For Pink, sensory ethnography is not only a means to better explore the range of experiences and sensations. A sensory approach to ethnography seeks to reach a “more sophisticated” set of ideas through which to understand ethnography. The notion of emplacement is fundamental here. An abstract understanding of place offers a framework for rethinking the ethnographic process and the situatedness of the ethnographer (p. 29). Pink conceives of the ethnographer as an “emplaced” researcher. She sees ethnography as the collaborative making of “ethnographic places” involving both researchers and participants. As she puts it: “... if ethnographers can come to occupy similar, parallel or related places to those people whose experiences, memories and imaginations they seek to understand, then this can provide a basis for the development of ways of knowing that will promote such understanding” (p. 43). Pink admits that ethnographers cannot access directly people’s intimate sensations. We, ethnographers, should nonetheless try to create “correspondences” between our experience and those of other people. For her, we should try to align our bodies and our ways of sensing with those of the research participants so as to make places that are similar to theirs.

The book is divided in three parts. The first part covers the theoretical and philosophical roots of sensory ethnography. It deals with preparing to carry out research, reflexivity, sensory intersubjectivity, and the ethical commitment that this approach entails. The second part revisits a couple of established ethnographic practices. Pink advocates rethinking participant observation with particular attention to the multisensory and emplaced aspects of the research participants’ experience. She also reconceptualizes the ethnographic interview as a multisensory event that is both emplaced and productive of a place. The section concludes with a discussion of the uses of visual methods in sensory ethnography. The author admits that such a discussion may potentially be interpreted as according primacy to sight over other senses. Her argument is more subtle, however. She insists on the multisensory dimension of sight and sounds. For her, even if audiovisual media cannot fully reproduce multisensory experiences, they can be used in creating routes to multisensory knowing. The third part of the book deals with the analysis and representation of sensory ethnographic material. Fortunately, while the chapter on analysis is rather superficial, the discussion of the various methods available to researchers in communicating their work to their audiences is inspiring. The book presents some of the alternative routes developed in social sciences and in the Arts that are available to creative researchers.

The book is well structured. The author uses cases of ethnographies in movement (for instance, walking and cycling with participants). She discusses the place of mobility and motility in

ethnography (for instance the study of dancing) and she offers fresh and inspiring thoughts on ethnographic interviewing and the creation of places. The book is nonetheless, somewhat unequal. There is a slight disjuncture between the theoretical and philosophical chapters (1 and 2) and some of the practical ones such as chapters 3 (on research preparation) and 7 (on analysis). There is also an asymmetry in the treatment of the senses. The author shows an impressive mastery in the discussion of visual anthropology, media, and methods. She also talks eloquently about aural culture and audio techniques. But her treatment of olfaction, taste, and touch remain incomplete. Of course, Pink's previous work on visual anthropology gives her particular grasp on the topic. We can only wish that her discussion of the other senses might have received a similarly inspiring treatment.

More fundamentally, Pink's notion of sensory ethnography, and the emplacement it entails, is challenging. It creates a space of dialogue with anthropologists, human geographers, and philosophers. It is possible to ask, however, whether the phenomenological posture adopted by the author does justice to the work of sensory anthropologists. For instance, the opposition that Pink draws between the work of Paul Stoller and Constance Classen (which she characterizes as "conventional") and the "more recent" research practice of scholars like herself (which emphasizes reflexivity and is akin to auto-ethnography) is not as convincing as it should be. More importantly, the whole issue of sensualism, which pervades the recent work of François Laplantine (2005) on sensible culture, is totally silenced.

If Pink's reflexive engagement is a strength, the moral perspective of her approach is possibly overstated. Pink's commitment to reflexivity and ethics is appreciable. This is clear when reading chapter 3. It is also obvious in the closing sentence of the chapter: "... a sensory ethnography has certain congruences with the ethics of those who hope to make the world a better place, seeing greater sensorial awareness as a route to achieve this" (p. 59). Unfortunately, reflexivity is not a pledge of ethics and moral worth. Similarly, we cannot consider the senses to be inherently nobler, moral objects. Yet, we are left with few indices on the moral perspective of the approach. If the methodological character of the sensory ethnography proposed by Pink is convincing, the ethical and the moral sides of the program deserve additional thought.

Pink's sensory ethnography is nonetheless an important contribution to the emerging field of sensory anthropology. Her book is inspiring. It opens new avenues for research. It should definitely have a place on the bookshelf of every researcher interested in the senses.

Reference

Laplantine, François. 2005. *Le social et le sensible: Introduction à une anthropologie modale*. Paris: Téraèdre.