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Sense-experience

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My topic is sense-experience. As an anthropologist, I am particularly interested in charting the varieties of sense experience across cultures. I published my first book on this subject in 1991. In what follows I would like to present a survey of what the next generation of sensory anthropologists are up to, rather than old hands like me. As you will see, they are pushing the bounds of experience.

The first part of this position paper is derived from a preface I wrote for a collection of essays by a number of recent graduates of the PhD program in anthropology at the University of Nantes. It is called “Next Generation Sensory Anthropology.” The second part reports on some of the research-creation work we have been doing for the “Sensory Entanglements” research project. My presentation at the Summit will focus on the latter.

Part I: Next-Generation Sensory Anthropology¹

“Sensuous scholarship” is the name Paul Stoller (1997) attributed to the burgeoning interest in the senses as both subject of study and means of inquiry that has swept over anthropology and cognate disciplines in recent decades. The sensory turn came after the linguistic turn of the 1970s (whence the idea of cultures as “structured like a language” or “as texts”) and the pictorial turn of the 1980s (whence visual anthropology and visual culture studies), and the corporeal turn of the 1990s, which gave rise to “embodiment” as a paradigm for research (Csordas 1990). Sensory anthropology, in addition to calling out and seeking to correct for the logocentrism of the linguistic turn and the visualism of the pictorial turn, has introduced a further refinement to the corporeal turn. In place of the latter’s insistence on such constructs as the “embodied mind” or “mindful body,” sensory anthropology has directed attention to the way in which, in some cultures, the mind is regarded as a sense that is on a par with the other senses, instead of lording it over them, and it also emphasizes the importance of attending to how the senses may conflict, as well as coalesce. Just as there are different ways of discriminating and/or conjoining mind or spirit and body across cultures, there are many different ways of discriminating the senses, and of combining them in *assemblages* that depart significantly from the bureaucratization, hierarchization and commodification of the senses in mainstream Western culture (Jones 2018)

In addition to its focus on charting the varieties of sensory experience across cultures, sensory anthropology has highlighted the importance of attending to *intracultural* diversity. This point was first signalled by Constance Classen in her classic UNESCO journal article, “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses” (1997). It was reiterated by Classen and the

present writer in the introduction to *Ways of Sensing*: “Anthropologists must be attentive to intracultural variation, for there are typically persons or groups who differ on the sensory values [and practices] embraced by the society at large, and resist, instead of conform to, the prevailing sensory regime” (Howes and Classen: 2014: 12). This point is underscored again by the editors in their introduction to this volume.

The method of choice for exploring these cross- and intracultural differences in the life of the senses is sensory ethnography. Francois Laplantine aptly sums up the gist of this approach: “The **experience** of [ethnographic] fieldwork is an **experience** of sharing in the sensible [*partage du sensible*]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience” (Laplantine 2015: 2). Thus, ethnography involves sensing and making sense together with others. It swaps participant sensation for the older anthropological method of participant observation, and employs the senses, as well as their extensions via diverse practices and media, for ethnographic purposes. Laplantine himself has used cinema as a lens through which to study Japanese society (2010, and in his latest publication (2020) he enlists dance choreography, the body in motion, to “think the sensible.”

Apart from Laplantine’s recent work, the publication of *A Different Kind of Ethnography* (Elliott and Culhane 2017) also testifies to this ongoing multiplication of the modalities of anthropological research. Anthropology is no longer the “discipline of words” (as typified by the ethnographic monograph) it once was. In their introduction to *DKE*, Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane alert the reader that: “In each chapter of this book you will find participatory exercises that invite you to write in multiple genres, to pay attention to embodied multisensory **experience**, to create images with pencil and paper and with camera, to make music, to engage in storytelling and performance as you conceptualize, design, conduct, and communicate ethnographic research” (2017: 3).

The six chapters that follow each focus on a different means of investigation, or mode of perception-action-expression and communication. The first chapter concerns “imagining,” the second “writing,” the third “sensing,” the fourth “recording and editing,” the fifth “walking” and the sixth “performing.” It bears noting that even the chapter on writing goes well beyond the old and rather prosaic notion of writing as “thick description” (Geertz 1973): this chapter includes a discussion of drawing and poetry as research methods, and when it does turn to discuss writing, the examples cited, such as Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2015) are far from dry. Stewart approaches writing as a form of “worlding” which captures “emergent perceptions.” With her pen, it is a sensational, rather than representational, form of inscription.

The sensory awakening that first gave rise to the social anthropology of the senses (Stoller 1989; Howes 1991) has since spread to other sectors of the discipline, whence the *linguistic* anthropology of the senses (Majid and Levinson 2011), and *archaeology* of the senses (Hamilakis 2014; Skeate and Day 2019), and also crossed over into other disciplines in the wake of Alain Corbin’s seminal essay “Histoire et anthropologie sensorielle” (1990). “Sensory studies” is the name given to this highly dynamic, *interdisciplinary* field of inquiry centred on the sensible, which is increasingly *international* as well (see Bull et al 2006; Gélard 2016a, 2016b; Sabido Ramos 2018). What is particularly noteworthy (and gratifying) about this collection of essays, edited by Sisa Calapi, Helma Korzybyska, Marie Mazzella di Bosco, &

Pierre Peraldi-Mittellette, is that it is testimony to the extent to which sensory anthropology has also gone *intergenerational*.

What is the next generation up to? There are lots of exciting departures signalled by this edited collection. Some of the more salient themes include: the *focus on intracultural diversity*, which was originally flagged by Constance Classen, as noted above, but Classen's call went largely unheeded,¹ until now. Helma Korzybyska, explores the sensory world of blind persons who have received retinal implants; Anna-Livia Marchionni presents an intimate ethnography of the non-neurotypical sense-**experience** of persons on the autistic spectrum; Pierre Peraldi-Mittellette, describes how the members of an ethnic minority, the Touareg living in diaspora in Europe, stage gatherings at which they wear the colourful costumes of their homeland, prepare and consume food in the customary way, and exchange touches. All this enables them to feel at home while living apart. Peraldi-Mittellette's case study raises interesting questions for a geography of the senses, such as where is home anyway? (see further Low 2005)

Another theme is the *heightened reflexivity* displayed by the contributors. Marchionni reflects at length on whether she can really attune her senses to tap into the ostensibly hypo- and hypersensations of her non-neurotypical interlocutors. Anthropologists of the previous generation, such as Tim Ingold, did not think such reflexivity necessary, and affirmed the "prereflective unity" of the senses instead (see Howes and Ingold 2011, Howes 2019).

A third theme is their *attention to gauging intensities* in place of interpreting (or deconstructing) signs and symbols. Sisa Calapi observes that the sound of the conch when the Visperas of Turucu roll out is more than a signal, it is a force, and she goes on to show how this links up with traditional Andean notions of *bullá*, *energia* and *fuerza*. She also registers the "kinaesthetic contagion" of the movements of the dancers, which generates "collective euphorias" (Laplantine would approve). Sensory ethnography can be a sweaty (and exhausting) business, as Marie Mazzella di Bosco brings out with exceptional candour in her account of what it was like to dance feely with strangers at the numerous sessions of Danse des 5 Rythmes, Movement Medicine and Open Floor she participated in over the space of a year. I loved the way she swapped the notion of "mise-en-sens" for that of *mise-en-scène* in her description of the ambiance of the studios (the scented candles, the lights, the draperies, the humidity, the beat, etc.). Meanwhile, Elena Bertuzzi dares to speak of the "qualities of presence" in the songs and movements of the *debaa* dance (which is of Sufi inspiration) performed by women on Mayotte. It was not so long ago that any talk of presence was banished from the academy, under the censorious weight of the Derridean concept of *différance*. I dare any surviving poststructuralist to deconstruct the "*multisensorialities*" (a fourth theme) described by Bertuzzi, Mazzella di Bosco, or Calapi in their respective contributions to this volume: the perceptions of their research subjects are already inter- and crossmodal (see further Spence 2018)

A fifth theme is the *experimentation with alternate media* that, for example, Korzybyska shows when she uses line drawings and watercolours in her attempt to evoke the pixel-like flashes that blind people who have received retinal implants "see" (Elliott and Culhane would be impressed by the creative methodology of this essay). And then there is Anaïs Angeras' fascinating account of her **experience** building and inhabiting yourts and other "light" dwellings for over a decade. Hers was a sensory apprenticeship unlike any other in the literature. She became intimately familiar with the sensory properties of the building materials she sourced, and

once she had finished constructing her habitats (without-footprints), she was struck by the porosity of the relationship between the inside and outside of these structures, most notably the sounds of all the tiny creatures in the (living) walls.

To round out this discussion of next-generation sensory anthropology, I would like to present some of my own students' work. Mark Doerksen defended his Ph.D. thesis in Social and Cultural Analysis in 2018. In it, he reports on his field research in Canada and the U.S.A. in a subculture of the body modification movement known as grinders (Doerksen 2018). Grinders are not satisfied with the normal allotment of senses. They implant magnets in their fingers so as to be able to sense electromagnetic fields, and Doerksen followed suit so that he could sense along with them what they **experience**. There is no dedicated vocabulary for electromagnetic sensation; nor are there any medically-approved procedures for fashioning an "nth sense," as Doerksen (2017) calls it. Grinders must therefore improvise, or "hack," as they say, when they practice DIY surgery. Their reports of their experience of an otherwise insensible dimension of the material environment, (e.g. the "buzz" they get from a microwave) represent an intriguing opening, and underscores the need for a theory of the materiality of perception. Grinders could be likened to the X-men of Marvel Comic fame, only instead of their supersensory powers being the result of some genetic mutation, they develop their own sensory prostheses, which include not only implanting magnets but also ingesting chemicals and following strict dietary regimes. However, no self-respecting grinder would ever concur with this analogy, for they are rigorous counter-culturalists, including popular culture.

Marie-Josée Blanchard is currently writing her Ph.D. thesis. For her doctoral research as a student in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Ph.D. program at Concordia, Blanchard is engaged in a study of classical Indian dance, both in India and the diaspora. Her research focuses on arriving at an understanding of *rasa*. *Rasa* means savour or essence and also includes emotion in its spectrum of referents. One goes to a performance of Indian dance not to see it, but rather to "savour" the emotions conveyed by the gestures and movements of the dancers. This calls for a certain recalibration of the senses, since the idea is that one should taste and see, instead of merely perceiving the spectacle through one's eyes. She asks: How does the practitioner of classical Indian dance learn to channel the eight *rasas* (*Shringara*: The Erotic, *Bibhatsa*: The Repulsive, *Vira*: The Heroic, etc.) through their body for the delectation of the audience, and what do they feel in the process? This is a fascinating research question, and the only way to begin to answer it is through the practice of participant sensation (Blanchard 2020).

Roseline Lambert recently returned to Montreal from Oslo, Norway where she had been conducting field research among people living with agoraphobia.² Norway has the highest incidence of agoraphobia in the world. She purposely took up residence in the same quarter of Oslo as the painter Edvard Munch, the most famous agoraphobe of all time, who secluded himself in his studio for the last thirty years of his life. Does agoraphobia have to do with the quality of the light in Scandinavia, Lambert wondered aloud, since Norwegians tend to talk about light the same (obsessive) way that other people talk about the weather? What can be learned from studying the way agoraphobes attend to things, such as windows? One thing about which Lambert is (fairly) certain is that agoraphobia cannot be reduced to a spatial disorder, the way it is normally treated in the literature (Lambert 2020). I should add that Lambert is an award-winning poet (for *Les couleurs accidentelles*, 2018), as well as a student of anthropology. Her methodology is accordingly directed at opening up the terrain "between art and anthropology" (Schneider and Wright 2010), or what here in Quebec we call "research-creation/recherche-

création.” She will, accordingly, be committing her **experience**, and that of her research subjects, to poetry – the most sensuous form of writing. I can’t wait to read the first chapter of her thesis, which is due in one month’s time.

To sum up, what distinguishes next-generation sensory anthropology from that which has gone before is an interest in exploring nonnormative “perceptual paradigms” (Classen 1997). This has resulted in the foregrounding of a range of new objects of study – from the ephemeral (non-ontological) architecture of “light housing” to sketching the pixel-like flashes of light **experienced** by the blind person who has undergone a retinal implant – all of which stretch the bounds of sense in novel, uncharted directions. Sensory ethnography is booming, dazzling, contagious, perplexing - and deeply *intensive* and absorbing. As Michel Serres would say, and the contribution to this volume attest, “If a revolt [in scholarship] is to come, it will have to come from the five senses!” (quoted in Howes 2016)

Sensory Decolonization: The work of the Sensory Entanglements research team

The “Sensory Entanglements” project, is based in the Centre for Sensory Studies at Concordia University, Montreal. It is directed by Chris Salter, who holds the Concordia University Research Chair in New Media, Technology and the Senses. This project is grounded in the collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and scholars from Canada (Cheryl L’Hirondelle, David Garneau, and the present writer) and Australia (Brenda Cross, r e a. Jennifer Biddle). As Salter writes,

the team is attempting to explore the productive tension in how the ‘newness’ of emerging technologies (despite their colonial origins and structures) might enable an ‘Indigenizing’ of sensorial artistic experiences that disrupts historical boundaries, challenges entrenched borders, creates potential forms of culturally specific empathy, and potentially may de-colonize the representation of otherness (2018: 89)

I would like to discuss two works by members of the team that exemplify the kind of intercultural aesthetic environment that the Sensory Entanglements project is dedicated to creating.

Cheryl L’Hirondelle is a Cree-Irish musician and interdisciplinary artist. In December 2016, in collaboration with Cree Elder Joseph Naytowhow, she staged *Yahkâskwan Mikiwahp*, or “light tipi” (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZmcbEA1Q9Y>). The materials for this performance piece consisted of bundles of sage and flashlights. Participants were invited to convene at an open space near downtown Toronto in the falling dark. There they took up positions in a large circle around the smouldering sage bundles and were instructed to hold their flashlights up in the air in the form of the poles of a tipi. The ghostly image of a tipi took shape against the backdrop of the Toronto skyline (including the CN Tower). The non-Indigenous participants in this smudging ceremony were enveloped in the clouds of smoke and interpellated in an Indigenous architectural form. This created a rupture both in the conventional ordering of the senses and of space in the dominant society. The performance used the media of light, of smoke and of scent as well as proprioception to “fit” the audience for contemplation of a more inclusive society. It implicated them in the great work of reconciliation between Indigenous and

non-Indigenous peoples that is the most pressing challenge facing Canadian society today (Niezen 2017)

David Garneau is a Métis scholar, artist and art critic, based at the University of Saskatchewan. For the upcoming ISEA 2020 “Why Sentience?” conference, with the assistance of Garnet Willis, he has created an installation entitled “Heart Band.” It is an interactive sound installation that consists of eight hand drums which feature paintings in a Métis beaded style, arranged in a pattern that conforms to the infinity symbol of the Métis flag. While this installation displays Métis culture, the fact that drums are common to many musical traditions and that, in the instant case, their skins are of plastic (rather than hide) and electrified suggests that “beneath this [Métis surface] is a bond among peoples at the level of bodies, heart, music, relations with each other and with special things (Garneau personal communication). Hence, the installation is intercultural, just as the sensations it generates are cross-modal, intersensorial.¹⁹ In my presentation, I will describe the experience of this installation, in the flesh.

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Notes

1 This preface will be published in Sisa Calapi, Helma Korzybyska, Marie Mazzella di Bosco, & Pierre Peraldi-Mittelette (eds.) « Sensibles ethnographies. Decalages sensoriels et attentionnels dans la recherche anthropologique. » Paris : Éditions PÉTRA, 2020. « Univers sensoriels et sciences sociales » series under the direction of Marie-Luce Gélard.

2. When they were comfortable with the idea, Lambert would meet with her research subjects in person; otherwise, she would conduct interviews online – intimations of the self-isolation which would become *de rigueur* with the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic this past March. Agoraphobes are experts at confinement, she mused, and I responded that I think we could learn much from the study of their techniques of sensing and coping with the world within and without the walls and windows of our habitats (see further Schneider Gil n.d.; Fletcher 2005)

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