

Book Review

Elliot, D., Culhane, D. (Eds.). (2017). *A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*. University of Toronto Press. 147 pages. ISBN 978-I-4426-3661-3

Introduction

Even though book reviews are usually the most recent publications in the field, this case is exceptional.

With the recent attention across disciplines in sensory methods and embodied knowledge, the following book has received a renewed interest in the education field. Accordingly, CPI thought it timely to provide an updated review that included detailed information on each chapter, as well as explicitly, connecting the book's significance to research.

Kathleen Sitter

CPI Senior Book Review Editor

March 20, 2023

A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies is written by five authors from the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography (CIE), an independent and transnational research and creation collective with over 80 members from around the world. The book explores ethnography as a methodology for studying: what constitutes knowledge, who decides, and how this process occurs.

The book consists of six chapters. It begins with an introduction on the role of the imagination as both a process and a method of relationship building that produces “a knowing that is liberating in its potential and possibility” (Culhane, 2017, p. 15), and has the potential to make the unknown visible. The remaining five chapters discuss creative methodologies using writing, physical sensations, recording and editing, walking, and performing. Each chapter provides a series of exercises with prompts for the reader to practice the method discussed.

Chapter 2, *Writing*, written by Denielle Elliott, critically assesses how we approach writing and the topics we choose to write about. The author proposes that writing conceptualizes our understanding of the world and stresses that the way stories are written shapes how we relate with and understand the subject matter being discussed. Fiction is described as a method of writing that can encourage the reader to think about the world differently, thus disrupting norms and dominant perspectives of reality. The author describes the transformative potential of writing to represent voices that have been excluded or represented inaccurately. Poetry and other more descriptive methods of writing that incorporate symbolism and imagery are discussed as strategies for engaging the imagination to conjure futures that have yet to exist. Writing is also explored as a reflective process which when combined with a mindfulness of sensory experiences can generate deeper and more descriptive understanding.

Chapter 3, *Sensing*, written by Dara Culhane who describes sensory ethnography as the study of interrelationships among embodiment, affect, and imagination as forms of knowing and being. The author defines sensory knowledge as invisible, intuitive, emotional, and often difficult to express verbally or through written form. Culhane proposes that sensory ethnography, particularly embodied sensory reflexivity, a practice of consciously paying attention to sensory experiences and how we interpret these, can help us access and make meaning of the embodied.

In addition to physical sensations, the chapter describes affect as emotions generated within social environments which create energetic exchanges. Movement is also referenced as a way of perceiving, understanding, and as a source of knowledge of its own.

Culhane highlights the favoritism of some senses over others and places blame on elite Western European men for the prioritization of sight and sound, indicating that smell, taste, and touch are favored within Indigenous communities and among racialized people, particularly women and children. The chapter emphasizes the value of intersubjectivity and views the senses as a portal for personal reflection and consideration of how we are sensed by others. The topic of positionality is mentioned and explored as a way of knowing “ourselves and others as multisensory, embodied beings engaged in co-creating knowledge” (Culhane, 2017, p. 61).

Chapter 4, *Recording and Editing*, written by Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier describes how to record and interpret acoustics as an approach for understanding environments and our relationship to place. Capturing and arranging sound is described as a method for developing a narrative or telling a story. The author suggests that acoustics can reveal both our positionality and our interpretation of the world around us.

Chapter 5, *Walking*, written by Cristina Moretti, describes walking as a method for noticing our environments and how we relate within them. When used as a reflective tool, it can expose how the world has been designed and for what purposes. The author proposes walking exercises to consider the experiences of others and to make connections between people, places, and the stories associated with them. Public space is discussed as a subject of analysis for understanding how the world privileges and protects people differently. The author suggests that walking, when combined with other senses including smell and/or sound, can connect people to the more subtle and nuanced details of a place, thus creating deeper meaning.

The final chapter, *Performing*, written by Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston describes the role of performance as both an ethnographic representation and process. Performance is discussed as a method for translating research but also as a kinesthetic strategy for understanding a research topic. Fairy tales and improvised performances are explored as methods that encourage both the performers and the audience to imagine a different future or expose an experience that has been unknown or only told from one point of view.

The book was particularly relevant for me, as white and cis, with ancestral origins from Lancashire, England. My epistemological view of reality as fluid and formed through relationship to self, other, and earth, is consistent with the focus of contemporary ethnography outlined throughout this book. I agree with Culhane that physical sensations are a method for experiencing the intangible yet very real knowledge that can only be obtained and processed by the body. I understand the senses as a built-in alert system necessary to survival but equally relevant to

understanding what we need, value, and desire. As importantly, it is through our senses that we interact with the world in which we live.

I worked my way through the exercises provided in the third chapter, beginning with basic mindfulness of each sense and progressing into artistic options of drawing, speaking, and moving each sense, and finally experimenting with more imaginative approaches including what it would be like if different body parts could govern each sense. The last exercise explores the multisensory design of spaces to influence our purchases as consumers within systems of capitalism. This exercise might be even more powerful if it included a critical reflection regarding *who* multisensory experiences are designed for and who is excluded from these experiences. Doing so could reveal systematized exclusion.

I was inspired to incorporate some of the exercises in Chapter 3 and 4 to a soundscape research study with disabled adults. I had to make significant modifications to prioritize accessibility. Which made me reflect on how to consider and incorporate more diverse and complex ways of being, knowing, and doing into these exercises.

One of the criticisms I have of this book, is that although positionality is discussed, none of the authors locate themselves in relationship to the topic they are exploring or disclose their proximity to power and privilege. The book provides insight regarding the role of the sensorium in research practices however, it would have been valuable to consider perspectives that embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion. As the authors do not indicate their own social location it is difficult to determine whether voices from marginalized groups were included.

I wonder how sensory knowledge might act as a bridge for understanding lived experiences that are often excluded from traditional forms of knowledge translation. How might we know one another more deeply if we trusted our sensations as reliable systems of knowledge?

This book is a supportive resource for researchers and students interested in using arts-based methods and studying non-traditional forms of knowledge including the senses, emotions, movement, intuition, and place-based wisdom. While the book was published in 2017, the rising interest in art-based and sensory methods across disciplines means the content explored here remains relevant for post-secondary educators.

Scarlet Jaxen, BSW, RSW

Graduate Student, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

Creative Director & Coach, Scarlet Jaxen Consulting

www.scarletjaxen.com

Biography

Scarlet Jaxen is a graduate student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. She completed her Bachelor of Social Work at the University of Calgary in 2006. Jaxen spent over a decade working as a counsellor in government and non-profit organizations supporting youth and their families through complex mental health challenges and substance misuse. Scarlet is a white, cis, witch with ancestral origins from Lancashire, England; living on the unceded territory of the lək'wəŋən and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples. Her studies are concentrated on the intersections of power, leadership and the senses, exploring arts-based methods to translate lived experience and intuitive knowledge.