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Sensory Environmental Relationships: Between Memories of the Past and Imaginings of the Future, 2023



Liling Yan

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Sensory Environmental Relationships: Between Memories of the Past and Imaginings of the Future, edited by Dr Blaž Bajič and Dr Ana Svetel, Vernon Press, 2023, presents a collection of 10 essays that delve into the deep connections between our senses, the environments we inhabit, and the ways we perceive time. Originating from a panel at the IUAES in 2021, the volume brings together diverse ethnographic case studies to explore these intricate relationships. The editors, Bajič and Svetel, along with contributors from various European universities, position this work within the context of the “sensory revolution” in the humanities and social sciences. Understanding sensory environmental relationships is critically important in a time when environments are changing at an increasing pace. Anyone interested in human-environment relationships, senses, temporality, and ethnographic methods will find this material relevant.

A key theoretical contribution lies in the exploration of “sensory environmental relationships”, a concept borrowed from Helmi Järviluoma-Mäkelä, understood here as necessarily contingent, open, and disjunc-

tive. The book critically engages with the history of sensory-anthropological thinking, particularly its stance on language. The editors note that a significant turn towards studying human sensoria was partly fuelled by dissatisfaction with an overemphasis on text and language. However, they critique anti-dualist impulses within sensory anthropology that tend to conflate sensing with narrative-making, contending that a “recurring feature” has been the “rejection of language”. To avoid this and to fully understand sensory environmental relationships and concepts like “sensing the future”, the book advocates for maintaining the crucial “minimal difference between sense and sense” – the distinction between linguistic meaning and perceptive feeling. This (dis)junction is seen as necessary to recognise human autonomy and understand senses as dynamic and relational, interwoven with language and imagination.

The book is rooted in ethnographic case studies from across Europe, offering a compelling exploration of how sensory experiences shape environmental relations, temporal perceptions, and imaginaries of the future.

A key highlight of the book is its methodological emphasis on embodied and emplaced practices of sensing and moving through environments with walking-based approaches. This methodological thread underscores the idea that our sensory experiences are deeply intertwined with our physical engagement with the world. The relationship between memory and sensory experience is a recurring focus, with examples ranging from the surfacing of embodied memories in relation to a marsh environment by Lina Lapiņa to the role of sensory details in reconstructing urban pasts by Sandi Abram. The introduction and first chapter, by Svetel and Bajič, theoretically explore how to conceptually tackle sensorial experiences and the temporalities emerging from memories, practices, and visions. Heritage and its connection to future imaginings are also explored, as seen in Saša Poljak Istenič and Katja Hrobat Virloget's case study of the Mythical Park in Slovenia, where the revitalisation of intangible heritage is linked to local communities' self-reflection on their futures. Furthermore, the book examines urban sensory environments through various lenses, including sensobiographic walks with artists to understand changes in urban sense-scapes by Järviluoma et al., and the impact of the pandemic on sensory experiences of the seaside by Bethan Prosser. A particularly insightful chapter by Sara Nikolić investigates how olfactory perceptions in a New Belgrade housing estate contribute to the construction of social boundaries and "otherness" based on class and race. Finally, the book also considers the significance of material culture, with Veronika Zavratnik using footwear as an example to illustrate how everyday objects mediate our bodily engagements with the world and shape our sensory experiences and

identities. Collectively, these chapters offer rich, thematically varied, and ethnographically sound directions, demonstrating the experimental vitality of contemporary anthropological research approaches and highlighting the vital role senses play in understanding environmental relationships across time.

The book resonates strongly with Fiona Ross's article "Sense-Scapes: Senses and Emotion in the Making of Place" (2004) based on her fieldwork in a South African informal settlement. Like Ross, the contributors to this volume emphasize how sensory modalities other than vision can capture place-making, temporality, and the affective textures of everyday life more effectively than conventional visual representations. Demonstrating methodological inventiveness, this book provides a framework that invites future ethnographic research to test and refine these concepts across a wider cultural and geographic field.

