

Review

Sensuous Scholarship

Paul Stoller

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997

159 pp.

Ken Rubin

Paul Stoller's *Sensuous Scholarship* critiques conventional, disembodied ethnographic practice and, in turn, offers an alternative that lifts anthropology out of an ocular epistemology in favor of more embodied or sensual ways of knowing and experiencing the world. Stoller's call for an awakening of the scholar's body and a reconnection with the entirety of our corporeal sensorium is a reaction to human scholarship that affords little attention to the smells, tastes, sounds, and textures of lived experience. He argues that a return to our senses, or a "a mixing of head and heart"—an epistemological realignment away from Cartesian dichotomies that separates and privileges the mind over the body—can bring anthropologists to a richer and more thorough understanding of the diverse metaphoric organization of human experience (xvii-vviii).

In Part One, "Embodied Practices," Stoller uses long narratives and textured ethnographic description to demonstrate that experience for the Songhay people of west Africa is essentially linked to the body and the lower senses, not to sight. Songhay sorcerers devise and construct knowledge about power and history through "eating" smells, tastes, sound, and touch. Similarly, the Songhay griot (an oral archivist, considered a master of words) embodies the tensions inherent in articulating knowledge of the past. "Griots are at the center of discordant voices, which they use creatively to craft their tale" (35). The griot's use of performative polyvocality to demonstrate how the past is at once consuming and consumed further demonstrates Stoller's case for a more embodied sensual awareness of our connection with others.

This demands that ethnography be adapted accordingly, so that the ethnographer is fully present and they “open themselves to others and absorb their worlds” and acknowledge that “ethnographic things capture us through our bodies” (23).

Part Two, “Body and Memory,” explores notions of embodiment and memory through an analysis of how material objects, movements through space, and sound incite memory of the past. The Songhay formulation of history “from below” is indirectly referential and is expressed and perceived through the corporeal medium. In contrast, official or recorded history is profoundly removed from the sensual and existential realities of the past. This distinction is especially useful in devising a view of history that includes emotion, feeling, and vivid descriptions of the real, lived effects of power on bodies.

Part Three, “Embodied Representations” explores the need for sensuous scholarship in describing and thinking critically about the hybrid and transnational cultural forms that characterize much contemporary ethnographic work. In the discussion of the African market in Harlem, Stoller charts the embodiment of the social and political forces that circulate in this contested space. In this section, he moves towards more experimental modalities of understanding that create the time and space for feeling and being in a world haunted by the fragmentation of society and self.

In weaving together stories, sensual description, and personal reflection with post-structural and feminist interpretive analysis of epistemology and practice among the Songhay, Stoller clearly demonstrates that the “tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument” is especially useful in providing anthropologists with an engaged and somatically grounded approach to ethnographic practice appropriate for the next century (xv).

Paul Stoller presents a provocative and eloquent critique of contemporary ethnography, and provides a new, sensual modality with which to engage this scholarly endeavor and invigorate it with creativity and feeling. He states, “The most important and difficult lesson that a sensuous scholarship provides is that of humility” (136). Because his writing is accessible, poetic, and assumes less authority than objective ethnography, Stoller succeeds in making small steps toward a conception of ethnographic practice grounded in morality and humanity.