

## Culture



**David HOWES (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991. 336 pages, \$19.95 (paper), \$45.00 (cloth)**

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David HOWES (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991. 336 pages, \$19.95 (paper), \$45.00 (cloth).

By Alan Aycock

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When I was invited to write this review, I had just ordered the book for use as a text in my senior-level course on the anthropology of the body. The coincidence seemed too delightful to discount; thus I accepted with alacrity. I have relied, therefore, on assessments made by the senior students who participated in this course (Anthropology 4023, Summer Session III 1992), as well as those faculty from other disciplines who attended. It is their review as well as mine that I now report.

Howes has made it his task, on the basis of an SSHRCC grant and in partnership with his colleagues of the Concordia Sensoria Project, to lend direction to a new field of anthropology, that of the senses. In so doing, he has exposed himself to challenges that accompany any attempt to legitimize a new approach or perspective. Yet the care with which Howes frames this collection is wholly admirable: he has presented extensive accountings which lay out the dimensions of study, the objectives of the volume, and the relationships of these interventions to other important trends in anthropology, particularly those involving the "writing cultures" debate and a variety of post-structuralist, postmodern concerns. In effect, Howes' work entertains the deconstruction, and reconstruction of Enlightenment-bound, empirically-centred verities.

The initial section of the book addresses classical statements, such as those of Ong and Wober, which attend to the fundamental tensions between Culture and Nature, summoned into awareness by ethnographic undertakings (I am a little surprised that Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* and *Cru et le Cruit* do not play a more prominent role at this juncture). Two subsequent sections present a carefully selected range of articles which implicate the senses, taken first singly, then collectively read against one another, as contested discourses. As Howes notes, his editorship

has ensured not only a wide range of sensory themes, but also a superb geographical dispersal as well, encouraging comparative ventures. The concluding essay, by Howes and Classen, sets forth a practical guide to cultural sensoria that my students found valuable and enlightening.

One difficulty with the collection (my students mentioned this also) is that the work privileges the five "official" styles of sensation, pressing to its margin less celebrated modes of experience as proprio-centric, intuitive, psychic, or mystical insight (the last of these is indeed treated, but only in its visionary form). Another weakness, again noted in class, is that the essays all represent scholarly discourse and positions, which sets a curiously disembodied, highly focussed tone that seems not entirely appropriate in a work on "the varieties of sensory experience" (emphases mine). In this regard, the volume might have expanded its scope. For instance, haiku, other poetry, or short fictional accounts of the senses, feminist critiques of the senses, and commentary by first peoples, practicing mystics (such as dowsers or charismatics), drug users (e.g., marijuana, alcohol) or the differently abled might well have invigorated the purposes of the volume. Notwithstanding such issues, Howes has done us a service by bringing forward a focus that is complementary with the more familiar directions of critical theory, cultural studies, and performance studies that now intersect with anthropology. This work could readily function in a course (in addition to the body) on ethnopscyhology, ethnophilosophy, ritual, fieldwork methods, or many other areas in upper-level undergraduate anthropology. In addition, the multidisciplinary nature of the inquiry suggests the broader relevance of the text, as such, for the human sciences in general. Finally, scholars will wish to refresh their own empirical project by recourse to this excellent collection.