



# BEADS, BODIES, AND TRASH:

A Global Ethnography  
of Public Sex, Labor,  
and the Disposability  
of Mardi Gras

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Scene One: *Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras*

“Hey, you!” a young woman shouts over the swelling noises on Bourbon Street. “Why don’t you have beads? You need beads!”

“Why do I need beads?” I ask. I’m 20 years old and the frantic chaos of Mardi Gras, while energizing, also leaves me with an uncomfortable feeling of entering a scene I’m not entirely prepared to experience. “So you can trade them for kissing, sex and other kinds of fun,” she states plainly. Of course this seems entirely logical on this day of revelry in New Orleans.

She introduces herself as Catherine, a college student like myself, and immediately wraps beads around my neck yelling, “Give me a kiss!” Before I can respond, she clumsily

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leans over and forces her wet tongue into my dry mouth. I instantly taste the rawness of her cigarette-laden saliva laced with whisky, lemon, and crawdads.

As she suctions my tongue and squeezes my hand, I try to break free, but she won't let go. She pushes harder and I struggle, wiggling my neck this way and that. Her friends laugh, snapping photos. When she finally pulls back seconds later, it seems like minutes have passed. Her friends continue snapping away, as if the spectacle is a visual token. As Catherine walks off, her arms wrapped around a friend's shoulders, she yells, "Goodbye! You're lucky number 24!"

Bemused, my friend Shelly, with whom I had traveled to New Orleans, says, "Congratulations! You just made out with twenty-three other people."

Just a few moments later, a young man in a college T-shirt waddles up to Shelly with his pants unzipped. He starts a lively negotiation for beads and leans over to whisper in Shelly's ear. Shelly lets out a laugh and exclaims in her Southern drawl, "Oh my gawd!" The giggly crowd eggs her on.

Laughing nervously, Shelly takes a shot of tequila from the man, then begins to masturbate him in plain sight. As her hand moves back and forth, he raises his arms into the air, indicating some kind of masculine triumph, and smiles to his friends as they repeatedly chant, "Go, Mike, go!"

Mike is clearly drunk. He can barely stand upright as his penis lies limp like a sock in Shelly's hand. She pulls and jerks as his friends pour beer over the act. Mike raises his head toward the heavens as Shelly laughs uncomfortably and exclaims, "Is that enough? Is that enough?" Shelly stops jerking as soon as Mike's friends intervene and say, "Okay, that's enough." They then place beads around her neck, all the while chanting and gesturing to another member of their group, shouting, "Scott, you're next!"

As we walk away, Shelly proudly displays her new set of green plastic beads. It is her first acquisition in what would become an all-you-can-earn ritualized gift exchange in which there is no money transaction at all,<sup>1</sup> aside from the initial purchase of the beads. By

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<sup>1</sup> Shrum and Kilburne, 1995.

now, my sociological sensibilities are fully engaged. An environment that encourages free-market excess of exchanging saliva, nudity, and beads for seemingly mutual pleasure! I want to know more about this ritual and what it all means to the revelers who participate in it. I remove my sound recorder, grab my still camera, and immediately start interviewing revelers on Bourbon Street.

Over the course of six days, I meet hundreds of revelers and observe thousands of beads exchanged for kisses and sexual acts. The nudity and sex acts, however, remain confined to Bourbon Street and rarely, if ever, occur in the parade routes outside of the French Quarter, where the more innocent, if still chaotic, role of the plastic beads is one of gifts tossed by krewes to hundreds of thousands revelers who catch them eagerly.<sup>2</sup>



On our final day, Shelly and I leave the French Quarter to find her parked car. Trash surrounds us everywhere. Beads are strung across trees and the wind tosses around abandoned plastic cups. Dump trucks and trash machines busily buzz back and forth, vacuuming beads strewn across streets.

Shelly has accumulated several hundred beads of her own and, collectively, they weigh about 20 pounds. To my surprise, she approaches a trashcan, removes her beads, and drops them inside. Discarding the beads is not unusual during Mardi Gras. It conforms to a ritual of disposability performed by numerous revelers just before they return home. As for myself, I return home with nearly twelve hours of recorded interviews, a notebook full of observations, dozens of photos, and a severe case of strep throat. I also have my own bead collection from participating in the exchange of beads for kisses—although only for kisses, as flashing others, let alone all the acts that could follow, was too far outside my comfort zone.

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<sup>2</sup> A krewe is a social organization that celebrates carnival by developing a parade and a ball and costume party where trinkets such as beads are purchased and tossed to crowds.

**Scene Two: A Mardi Gras Bead Factory in Fuzhou, China**

I am inside a factory in rural China where Mardi Gras beads are made. Here, I meet Ling Ling, an 18-year-old woman who works 15-hour shifts repeating the same task on the production line.



“I use my left hand to put the beads in the machine, my right hand to pull out the beads. Then I close the door, pull out the beads, close the door, pull out the beads, close the door—and repeat it all day. After I pull out the beads, I put them into two bags,” she tells me with the help of my translator, Ms. Zheng.

Ling Ling says she and others at Tai Kuen’s factory work long hours six to seven days a week but earn very little in return for their contribution.

“Too little. It’s incredibly little,” she says. “Take me, as an example. The most I’ve made this year is 500 yuan [US \$62] per month, not yet 600 yuan [US \$75].”

Asked why she works at the factory, Ling Ling says she has few other options.

“Those of us who are not well-educated and don’t have a good family background have no choice but to work hard and support ourselves,” she says. “It’s very hard. A whole day of work is very tiring, and the time for rest is very short. Everyone is exhausted, and the salary is very low. To tell you the truth, everyone here... well, there’s a saying, ‘It’s really tiring to make a living.’”

Ling Ling sits uncomfortably on a wooden stool as she stares into a large metal machine, surrounded by fans that blow hot air around the factory. She is working toward her fifteenth hour on her shift, and has pulled some 400 pounds of beads out of the machine—roughly the same amount of time it would take a reveler to collect half as many beads during Mardi Gras. Producing four hundred pounds of beads earns a Chinese worker roughly the

equivalent of US \$2.00, about the same as the cost of one cheap bead in New Orleans.

The factory workers must meet production quotas listed on a chalkboard. Meet the quota, and they get Sunday off. Exceed the quotas, and they get a bonus. Fail to meet the quota, and their pay is docked.

“If you get less than this quantity, there is a 5-percent punishment,” says factory owner Roger Wong, who makes \$2 million per year. “Otherwise, they will go to toilet too much.”

“We have a regulation,” Roger says. “No woman is allowed to go to the men’s room, and no man is allowed to go to the women’s room. When we catch people who don’t want to listen to our regulations, then we punish them. Well, how do we punish them? We punish them by stopping pay for one month.”

Wong touts his management skills and his factory as “A-grade.”

“It means we are one of the top ten factories in this town,” he says.

But the long hours and the numerous punishments leave workers like Ling Ling clinging to what they have, never mind dreaming of more.



“The quality of living is low and poor. I have to work overtime every day, which makes me exhausted,” she says. “And when the products do not meet the quality standard, he will also deduct money from us. It’s never easy here. I feel really sad when they deduct 100 yuan [US \$12.50]. It’s hard to let go of it

One week! It takes one week for us to earn up to 100 yuan.”

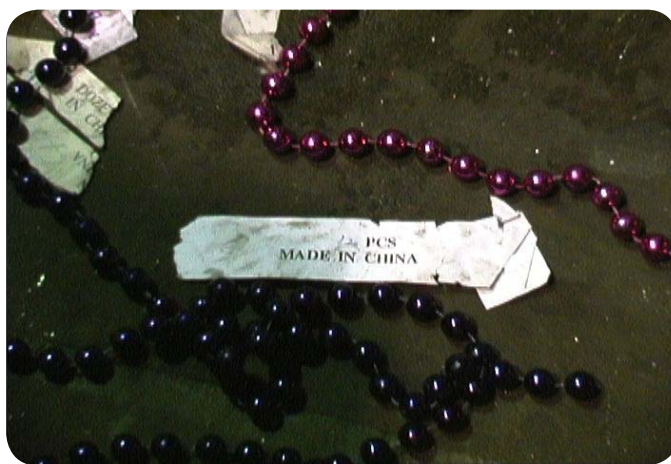
Ling Ling’s extremely regimented life is a world away from Mardi Gras’ hedonistic atmosphere. Inside the factory, the heavy dullness of strict regimens is palpable; there is no room for excess or reckless abandon. Enforced conformity, docking of pay, punishment

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through isolation and shaming, and control of intricate details of workers' lives are the characteristics of this total institution. And unlike the reveler's body, a sensuous symbol of care-free celebration at Mardi Gras, the laborer's body is treated as an extension of the machine, moving according to the rhythm and pace of the machine's needs, not its own.

**Scene Three:** *The VerdiGras Movement*

Holly Groh, a retired medical doctor who worked the emergency room in New Orleans, shows me a handful of plastic beads. "I'm not sure how these plastic beads became so coveted. They certainly were not around when I was a kid. But in the last few years I've seen them everywhere. They're a part of our city, but there's a downside to the plastic beads." Holly spearheaded the organization VerdiGras, a local New Orleans organization that encourages sustainable, ecologically safe beads. "Our organization is about the show, not the throw. There's too much excess, too much plastic involved with Mardi Gras." Holly's husband, Kirk, agrees. "Our goal is to get back to what made Mardi Gras special. It's about the livelihood, sharing of food, community spirit, and love of life. It's not about accumulating as many plastic beads as you can. It's not about the oil or the polyethylene."



Holly and Kirk insist that their goal to focus on the toxicity in plastic beads is not to demonize China. "The beads mirror a much greater problem," Kirk and Holly tell me. "When businesses invest in Chinese factories, it removes money from New Orleans. It lessens the opportunities for employment in Louisiana.

It's common knowledge now that numerous jobs have been exported overseas. And when those jobs go, the money that's reinvested in downtown districts is gone, too. That's why we're hoping that what we're trying to do will focus on more local and sustainable jobs

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in origin. It's a key way to create local jobs, and the benefits aren't just economic. There's a lot of positives to being outside with your neighbors and meeting new people. It's not just about the stuff."

Holly and Kirk discuss possible solutions, such as incentives and tax breaks, for businesses that manufacture products in New Orleans or in Louisiana. "We live in a creative city and we think artists and entrepreneurs here can solve this problem. Currently, plastic beads are made in China and then those beads are shipped to New Orleans. The majority of them end up in landfills. Less than three percent are recycled. We're talking about millions and millions of beads. That's a big problem. We want to educate children about these problems. They are the future of New Orleans."

Collectively, VerdiGras and all the related organizations within it are transforming the symbolism of the plastic bead into a sensual stigma by making it corporeally and ecologically problematic, thereby locally changing the collective consciousness about the community's aesthetic relationship to plastic beads. In other words, the VerdiGras activists are creating a new sensual orientation, moral order, and collective conscience based on how they believe carnival could be structured. Holly and Kirk are not the only ones who believe plastic beads are a problem. One reveler based in New Orleans told me,

"I avoid those plastic beads when I can. We're getting smarter and we know what's going on. We need to send a message that we don't want those plastic products here anymore. But we do want to maintain our creative ways to celebrate and have fun. Buying plastic beads made in China is not fun or creative. If you go to Bourbon Street, everyone will be wearing beads because they are enamored by what the beads represent. But we are far from what the beads represent."

I ask what the beads represent,

"Trash, oil, exploitation – everything we don't want."

Another reveler told me,

"It's just a lot of trash. People reuse them, but I don't want them. There's a recent

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conference called *Greening the Gras*, about greening Mardi Gras. It involves not only recycling Mardi Gras beads but creating hand-made throws. It's sponsored by VerdiGras. They do wonderful things, so it's a great way to show what more we can do not only to make Mardi Gras more artistic but to keep the beads out of the landfill, etc. And if you do catch beads,



rather than throw them away, there are several organizations that will collect them and resell them for nonprofit organizations.... You'll find great ways to find recycled and handmade throws that will bring the industry and also local manufacturing.”

## A MULTI-SITE ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

An examination of these contrasting worlds of the festival and the factory formed the basis of my documentary, *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, the release of which preceded this book. The third organization of focus, VerdiGras, emerged in New Orleans shortly after I released *Mardi Gras: Made in China* at the Sundance Film Festival, and I continued to film and ethnographically document the organization and others that developed as I followed their story of discovering the toxic chemicals in the properties of beads. This book expands on the ethnographic journey of the film in which I trace the plastic Mardi Gras beads from a factory in China—where they're made by workers who have little to celebrate or give up—to Bourbon Street, where they are celebrated, derided, abandoned, and sometimes given new life, and to the landfills, recycling organizations, and the groups who are creating alternatives to plastic beads.

A central thesis threads together the chapters in this book. I argue that the senses shape, form, and govern the commodity chain of Mardi Gras beads. I approach this argument by foregrounding the sensual relations of touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell as cor-

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poreal experiences that organize and give shape to social relations. I focus, in particular, on how the material of sensualities—taste, mouths, tongues, eyes, ears, hands, textures of tactility, and physical movements of bodies—intertwine with the political economy to produce a commodity chain. Tracing the social relations of sensuality by following Mardi Gras beads identifies how seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting these connections creates and establishes patterns of social order. In this framework, my argument advances the literature on sensuality by demonstrating that a commodity chain is a corporeal association of as-



sembled senses that fuses with the economy as a seemingly reified sensual object that, in turn, governs and reproduces what has recently been labeled a sensual sphere.<sup>3</sup>

Conceptually, I aim to understand the beads as sensory objects that both unite and divide people through their experiences connected to these objects. To do so, I follow the international circulation of beads to outline a sociological

mapping of the patterns of sensory experiences that beads provide. The book begins with the birth of a bead and then ricochets outward, as if you, the reader, are inside the bead as it travels across the globe, being molded, grabbed, groped, exchanged, dumped, saved, or phased out. In this sense, my global ethnographic approach partially utilizes a “drift and encounter” technique, a research practice in sociology that involves a shift towards producing knowledge rather than representing it.<sup>4</sup> I use immersive visual and aural elements to examine the physical landscape—its sounds, its surroundings, and the interaction between machines, bodies, and space, thereby ethnographically documenting a present history of environmental and material senses through the use of multimedia equipment.

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<sup>3</sup> Tucker, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ferrell, 2013.

## OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE APPROACHES

Objectively, a global picture emerges through my research, providing a political-economic context for the beads, which embody elements of both pleasure and pain. Subjectively, I provide a sensory analysis of the people who interact with the beads. Combining these two approaches—an objective understanding of how the senses shape the political economy of objects and the subjective aestheticization of beads as sensuous objects—forms a written ethnography that complements the documentary mentioned above.

As it is impossible to determine the exact origin of the beads found in the streets of New Orleans, I arbitrarily trace their roots to one Chinese factory resembling Erving Goffman’s total institutions and Michel Foucault’s austere institutions. The journey continues to Bourbon Street, with its atmosphere of raunchiness and rowdiness, and culminates with VerdiGras, a new social movement formed in New Orleans in response to the excesses embodied by the plastic beads.



Empirically, I explore the wide-ranging sensations that beads bring to the people they come across. The beads, after all, are the common thread among the disparate elements identified in this book. The beads coherently thread these experiential relations, events, institutions, and behaviors together into

a sensory tapestry of numerous patterns. The bead, therefore, functions as our tour guide, recording, absorbing, and guiding what we see, as well as who and what we hear—through a global commodity chain approach first put forth by Terrence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>5</sup>

Integrating global commodity chains with Appadurai<sup>6</sup> and Ferrell’s approach<sup>7</sup> to commodities, I extend Burawoy’s “global ethnographic” strategy<sup>8</sup> to study how the senses

<sup>5</sup> Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Appadurai, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Ferrell, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Burawoy, 2000.

impact political and economic globalization as I follow the beads. Sensualities, like globalization, cut and flow across spatial geographies to connect and separate bodies, link and divide commodities, and influence the global forces of the division of labor in local places.



In contrast, sociologists usually prioritize macro-social forces as an independent variable—the external event that impacts its surroundings. Instead, I propose sensualities as a social force that influences the political economy, materiality, and the global division of labor. After all, it’s the sensuousness of

human tastes, smells, sights, and touch during Mardi Gras that facilitates the market’s circulation of transnational beads. It’s these same forces of sensuality that bring into demand the fantasies of manufacturing a factory in China to make beads. It’s the sensuous labor of teenage workers, combined with the post-communist capital flows of the newly emerging capitalist market, that motivate them to leave their rural countryside to pursue pleasure, liberation, and financial security inside factories.

Sensualities may be culturally constructed and interpreted through distinct patterns and beliefs, but they are also motivators. This is my objective: to show how sensualities direct the flow of capital, discipline, pleasure, and resources; how sensualities organize, intermingle, and impact bead workers on the manufacturing floor; how sensualities involved in the display of flesh—penises and breasts—during Mardi Gras become the very material objects that motivate workers to leave their rural villages to assemble, paint, and sew; how sensualities stratify wealth and income. As Burawoy suggests, it is vital “to assemble a picture of the whole by recognizing diverse perspectives from the parts, from singular but connected sites.”<sup>9</sup>

Equally and inversely, I suggest it is vital to pay attention to the literature on “new

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<sup>9</sup> Burawoy, p. 5, 2000.

materialism” as it relates to beads and sensualities. New materialism varies in its approach to matter, but most scholars in this area agree that matter possesses “its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus is no longer simply passive or inert...”<sup>10</sup> Coole and Frost suggest that new materialisms relocate and place humans within an ecological environment that is constantly transforming in unexpected ways.<sup>11</sup> Mardi Gras beads and their relationship to people and a somatic order can be understood within this approach, an approach that will assist in identifying a diverse assembly of sensualities linked to commodities in local environments.

Linking new materialism with sensualities can facilitate a more nuanced sociological understanding of how objects form and emerge in relational fields, how people compose and organize objects in ways that are corporeally meaningful to them, and how matter has



potency that can simultaneously emerge seductively and hazardously.<sup>12</sup> This approach demonstrates how sensual matter shapes global political economic practices that reproduce and expand those same sensualities to the detriment of disciplining and controlling the sensualities of those who make the material

goods for a global economy. In this framework, the political economy “is not understood in any narrowly economic way but rather is treated as a detotalized totality that includes a multitude of interconnected phenomena and processes that sustain its unpredictable proliferation and unexpected crises, as well as its productivity and reproduction.”<sup>13</sup> Coole and Frost,<sup>14</sup> like Burawoy and Appadurai, suggest that a global ethnography focused on the production and consumption of goods is fertile ground for the study of sensual matter. I would add, as I do in the final chapter of this book, that video ethnography is also a fertile methodological approach to studying the sensual circulation of objects – and other sensory matter.

<sup>10</sup> Coole and Frost, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Coole and Frost, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Coole and Frost, p. 10, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 29.

## TOWARD VIDEO ETHNOGRAPHY IN SOCIOLOGY

During my initial five years of research, I ventured into studying the gift-exchange of beads for nudity and sex on Bourbon Street with total immersion using a camera, sound recorder, pencil, and notebook. During my sixth year of research – and to this day – I explore Mardi Gras with a camcorder to capture a fuller panorama of thoughts, sights, opinions, sounds, and sensations that beads encounter. I recorded the sights and sounds of beads falling on streets, dangling from balconies, sold by vendors, exchanged for nudity, and swept up by sanitation workers. Yet, I quickly realized that my approach to a video ethnography of Mardi Gras beads on Bourbon Street was limited and needed to expand. I wanted to widen my sociological frame by following the Mardi Gras bead to other destinations. One snowy evening in a library at SUNY-Albany, I came across Jeff Ferrell’s book *Crimes of Style* and Immanuel Wallerstein’s book *The Capitalist World Economy*.<sup>15</sup> These two books generated an idea to integrate video ethnography within a commodity chain approach to make a sociological documentary. I told a friend about my idea and he suggested I read Arjun Appadurai’s book, *The Social Life of Things*.<sup>16</sup>

“Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with... we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things.”<sup>17</sup>

Several thoughts raced through my mind concerning a trajectory of beads after reading these three books. *What if I could show who makes Mardi Gras beads and record the sounds of the factory? Is it possible to film where beads come from? Do the people who make the beads know where they go and how they’re used? Do the people who consume the beads know where they come from and how they’re made? What will happen if I follow the beads? Who will I meet along the way as I follow this commodity chain?*

Hundreds of burgeoning ideas raced from my body onto my notebook in the form of

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<sup>15</sup> Wallerstein, 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Appadurai, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Appadurai, p. 5, 1986.

messy words and incomplete sentences. C. Wright Mill's connection between private troubles and public issues entered my sociological imagination.<sup>18</sup> I could see and hear the connections between his explanation of public problems and the personal rituals of exchanging beads for nudity. I wanted to share with others the visual and aural connections that I could now see so clearly by combining audiovisual ethnography with a commodity chain analysis of “beads as things” with a life of their own.



My artificial beginning is juxtaposed with an artificial ending of this guided journey. I explain how *Mardi Gras: Made in China* demonstrates ways audiovisual elements can convey new forms of sensual knowledge previously underexplored in sociology. Video ethnography allows researchers to triangulate traditional methodologies with

new forms of audiovisual media and delve deeper into the visual and aural presentation of knowledge in ways that written findings cannot convey.

Throughout the book, I illustrate how multisite video ethnography can traverse distance and time to place everyday material objects in the context of the globalized conditions of their production and circulation. It is, therefore, an important practice-based research approach, especially when integrated with a commodity chain framework that connects commonplace objects in the political economy to larger structural conditions. Therefore, this book also serves as an emerging prospectus for the audiovisual form of video ethnography, which, as Shrum and colleagues<sup>19</sup> and Greg Scott<sup>20</sup> argue, generates distinct sociological and sensual knowledge.

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<sup>18</sup> Mills, 1959.

<sup>19</sup> Shrum et al. 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, 2011.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

Setting aside my argument for video ethnography, this book is, first and foremost, a story of the life cycle of Mardi Gras beads. Each chapter merges sociological theory with techniques of video ethnography and qualitative research to highlight the sensual relations and motivations of the different groups that interact with the beads. Together, these narrative chapters lay the groundwork for my final argument concerning the necessity of video ethnography in sociology.

Chapter 2 dives deeper into the accounts of Ling Ling and her co-workers who manufacture the beads at a factory in China. Evidence gathered inside the institution outline the harsh working and living conditions the workers face—a stark contrast to what I call ludic leisure, the gift-exchange ritual of trading beads for nudity and sex I explore at Mardi Gras in Chapter 3.

After the celebration ends, I follow the beads to the dumpsites in Chapter 4, where we encounter members of an organization called VerdiGras and I learn how the group, using scientific and artistic approaches, sensualizes the beads as a symbol of the deviant.

Chapter 5 provides a crucial transition in the book, as it shifts perspectives to re-evaluate what I've uncovered in order to set up an audiovisual approach to studying sensory phenomena. It attempts to accomplish three tasks. First, it examines the larger sociological picture of sensual relations among commodity chains. Second, it makes an historical argument on the emergence of a sensory sphere. Finally, it re-frames the gift exchanges as a transgressive social control. In this process, I introduce the basis of an argument for an alternative sociological spectacle that reflects an emergence of sensory knowledge.

I conclude in Chapter 6 by situating *Mardi Gras: Made in China* as a theoretical and concrete example of alternative sensory knowledge and then propose a pragmatic outline for using audiovisual methodologies as extensions of qualitative research to enable sociologists to conduct research as video ethnography. Ultimately, this book tells the story of globalization and inequality through merging materialist and sensory frameworks.

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