Beads, Bodies, and Trash:
Public Sex, Global Labor, and the Disposability of Mardi Gras
By David Redmon

TABLE OF CONTENTS
Preface
Acknowledgments
Chapter 1: Introduction
Chapter 2. Mardi Gras: Made in China
Chapter 3: Elementary Forms of Sensual Life
Chapter 4: Mardi Gras: Made in New Orleans
Chapter 5. Sensory Sphere and Somatic Commodity Chains
Chapter 6: Becoming a Video Ethnographer
References
Index
Preface

Beads, Bodies, and Trash provides an ethnographic commodity chain analysis of the circulation of Mardi Gras beads, framed in the context of sensory studies, new materialism, and disposable consumerism. Encounters with beads occur at the intersection of lived experiences and the fabric of social life. This book accesses these encounters and merges them with sensory studies in an examination of “sensory experiences,” which I argue is a distinct type of aesthetic knowledge. Sensory experiences in this book include encounters inside a Chinese factory that employs teenage workers to manufacture beads; encounters on Bourbon Street in New Orleans where enchanted revelers exchange those same beads for nudity and sex; and encounters with Louisiana activists who recycle beads and invent new ways to promote ethical consumption outside of the current commodity chain in place.

Pedagogical Objectives and Content.

How do the concepts introduced in this book enhance pedagogical tactics and learning experiences for students? First, the language used in this book is deeply visual, aural, and descriptive yet it provides the theoretical and empirical rigor necessary to critically evaluate how social life develops into forms, patterns, and assemblages. Students engage with the vivid behaviors of bead exchange described in this book through several theoretical frameworks, while also gaining an appreciation for the bead’s conceptual, political, and economic relationship to the labor required to manufacture them in the Chinese factory.

Second, the visual language of the bead’s trajectory increases students’ capacity to think critically about and question everyday objects that circulate through several international countries: where do objects come from, how do they emerge, where do they end up, what is
distinctly sensual about them, what are their properties, and what are the consequences (both beneficial and harmful) of those properties on the environment and human bodies?

Third, the theoretical frameworks introduce beads as inseparable from their surroundings (i.e., gender, inequalities, leisure, the environment, the body). This unique approach positions beads as non-isolated objects that form a series of perplexing relationships with those who encounter them. It shows how beads, and other objects, can contradictorily be enmeshed in pleasurable, sexist, unequal, disciplinary, and toxic relationships of production, consumption, and disposal.

Fourth, today’s students utilize ubiquitous digital technologies to record everyday life. This book introduces these recording technologies as possible research tools to investigate sociological questions – and asks students to question their own relationship with these devices and the images and sounds they record.

Courses

Beads, Bodies, and Trash emerged out of the making of the documentary Mardi Gras: Made in China. The documentary has been integrated into numerous courses on gender and sexuality; research methods pertaining to qualitative, ethnographic, or visual practices; deviance, crime, and social control; social movements; globalization; and popular culture courses. Beads, Bodies, and Trash can equally be integrated into similar courses given its thorough cross-cultural examination of gender and sexuality on Bourbon Street and inside the factory-compound where beads are made. The book is truly interdisciplinary. It can also be used in ethnographic and qualitative methods courses. It is suitable for classes on social control, deviance, or crime given its focus on behaviors some will consider deviant or criminal – from sex in public, punishment in a factory, to chemical hazards – and how these behaviors are socially controlled
and socially encouraged. The book will work extremely well in globalization and popular culture classes given how it depicts and forges unexpected global relationships between production, consumption, and disposal economies as I trace beads across several transnational locations.

Yet, I think Beads, Bodies, and Trash offers the greatest potential contribution in Introduction to Sociology and Social Problems. Why? Students in these courses are often exposed to sociology for the first time; the books they read in these courses represent their first encounter with the sociological imagination. Beads, Bodies, and Trash visualizes, auralizes, and provides texture, taste, touch, and smell to the sociological imagination. The subject matter in this book is culturally provocative and is certain to stimulate, enliven, and develop students’ own imagination, dialogue, and critical literacy skills as it introduces key sociological concepts through critical engagement.

**Approach to writing Beads, Bodies, and Trash**

Beads, Bodies, and Trash evokes behaviors in the factory, on Bourbon Street, and during alternative social movements while also describing the materiality of the sensory experiences in my personal voice. My approach is not distant or detached; rather, my intimate presence as an ethnographer with a video camera is woven into the fabric of the encounters to render an experiential form of participation based on inter-sensual relationships. As I situate myself in the interstices of these sensory experiences, I try to write in a way that allows the scenes to unfold as though the reader is immersed in a non-fiction movie playing out over the course of reading the book.

However, as an academic ethnographer and a professional documentary storyteller, I also move back and forth from visual and aural *description* to analytical and conceptual *explanation* of the sensory experiences. My explanations serve as a type of written narration – an insertion of
my ethnographer’s voice – that renders the scenes sociologically intelligible. I attempt to show the reader what I’ve observed, the spatiotemporal location of my observation, how I observed it, and then describe how I make sense of it as a professional sociologist. My open-ended approach, of course, encourages readers to disagree and offer their own explanations.

This approach has two benefits. First, it renders sensory experiences on their own terms and thus respects the reader’s intelligence, imagination, and creative ability to interpret the encounter in open-ended through the lenses of gender, deviance, production, consumption, and globalization. Second, it provides an opportunity to step away and offer readers brief explanations of my interpretation. This dualistic approach therefore allows direct communication with readers in open-ended ways without foreclosing other interpretations or explanations.

Audiovisual Sociology

As an audiovisual sociologist, one of my intentions in writing this book has been to illustrate how video ethnography is a research practice that students can utilize in a variety of sociology courses. Specifically, the final chapter of the book is dedicated to guiding readers through the video ethnographic process I develop while making my documentary *Mardi Gras: Made in China*. I attempt to illustrate how an audiovisual approach to recording, reconstructing, and framing living experiences in the form of image, movement, and sound can advance the emerging field of sensory knowledge in sociology and enliven the imagination and curiosity of students in a variety of classes.

While not often recognized as fully legitimate sociological research tools, video cameras and sound recorders are starting to slowly trickle into the nooks and crannies of sociology classes, resulting in the creation of video ethnographies that materialize as an important source of sociological knowledge. The use of video in sociology has extended beyond watching it, to
making video ethnography, and the making of video ethnographies provides a particular type of empirical knowledge embedded in the senses.

Today, video ethnography is becoming more recognized and valued as a form of research within the discipline of sociology and anthropology. Douglas Harper, an integral founder of Visual Sociology who teaches at Duquesne University, has recently transitioned his research into inflecting moving images with sound; Wesley Shrum has founded the Video Ethnography Lab at Louisiana State University’s Department of Sociology; and Anna-Liisa Anuio’s sociology students at Dawson College in Montreal make video ethnographies to illustrate sociological concepts.

**Beads, Bodies, and Trash** provides a thoroughly researched prospectus for students curious about the practice of video ethnography. It also provides teachers with an empirical source to instruct students in the practice of video ethnography. Teachers and students can access my peer-reviewed documentary, **Mardi Gras: Made in China** (and several other videos), on the webpage: [www.beadsbodiesandtrash.com](http://www.beadsbodiesandtrash.com) as a companion to this book.

**Additional Interactive Resources**

The compendium website supporting this book ([www.beadsbodiesandtrash.com](http://www.beadsbodiesandtrash.com)), embedded in the Innovative Ethnographies webpage, ([http://www.innovativeethnographies.net/](http://www.innovativeethnographies.net/)), contains several free videos from the award-winning documentary **Mardi Gras: Made in China**. Teachers can use these videos as pedagogical devices in their classes to illustrate key concepts introduced in this book. The webpage also contains additional interactive resources (audio, visual and written) that expand on each chapter in this book. Several academic articles are located on the webpage along with a diary written by a worker in the factory, interviews with visual sociologists, photography, and links to other video ethnographies. Finally, the website
provides teachers with a basic pedagogical outline on how to introduce each chapter to students with small group activities. These invaluable resources are designed to engage today’s technologically savvy student beyond the black ink printed on white paper in this book and encourage them to become independent, critical thinkers.