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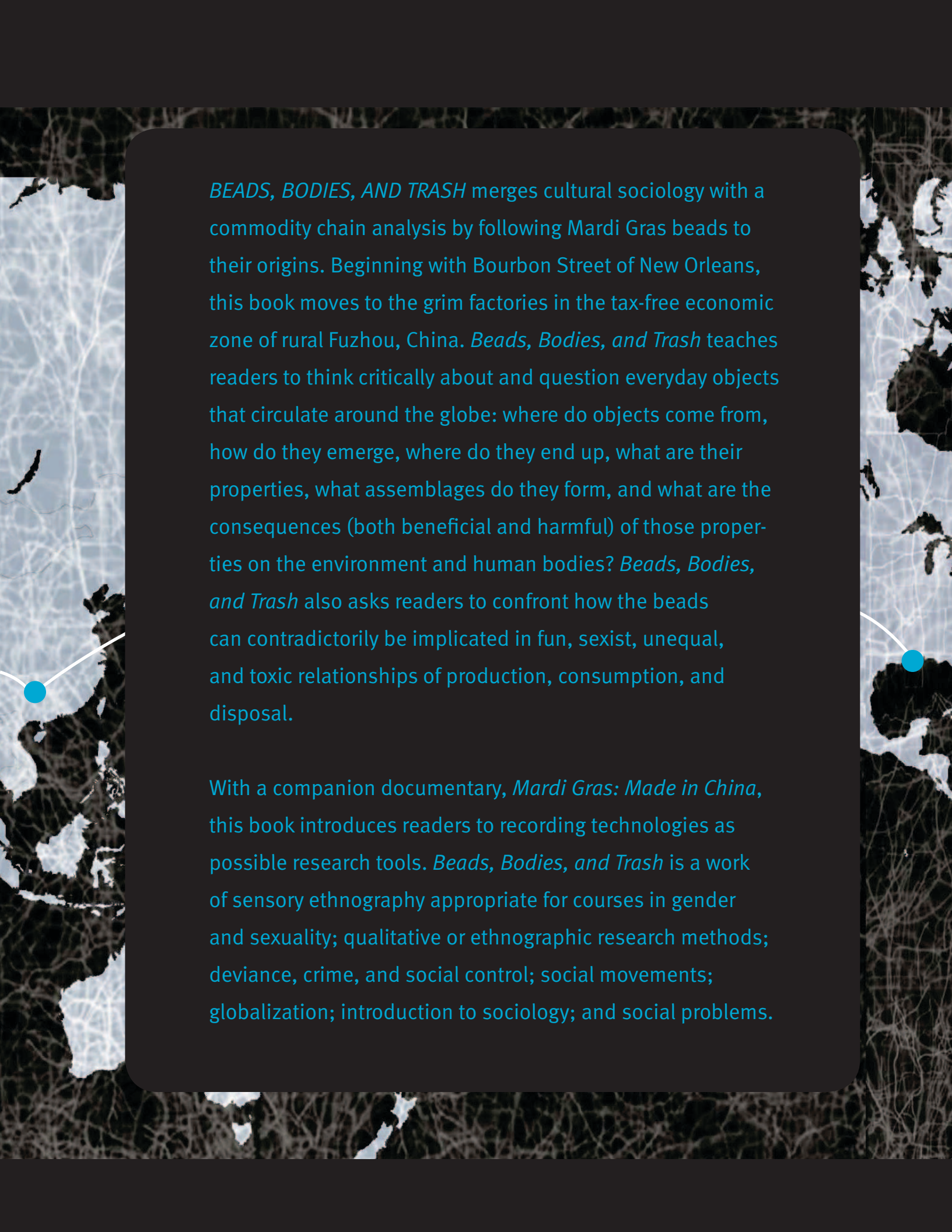
A Teaching Guide to:

BEADS, BODIES, and TRASH

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

David Redmon





BEADS, BODIES, AND TRASH merges cultural sociology with a commodity chain analysis by following Mardi Gras beads to their origins. Beginning with Bourbon Street of New Orleans, this book moves to the grim factories in the tax-free economic zone of rural Fuzhou, China. *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* teaches readers to think critically about and question everyday objects that circulate around the globe: where do objects come from, how do they emerge, where do they end up, what are their properties, what assemblages do they form, and what are the consequences (both beneficial and harmful) of those properties on the environment and human bodies? *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* also asks readers to confront how the beads can contradictorily be implicated in fun, sexist, unequal, and toxic relationships of production, consumption, and disposal.

With a companion documentary, *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, this book introduces readers to recording technologies as possible research tools. *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* is a work of sensory ethnography appropriate for courses in gender and sexuality; qualitative or ethnographic research methods; deviance, crime, and social control; social movements; globalization; introduction to sociology; and social problems.

MARDI GRAS: MADE IN CHINA

WINNER OF TWENTY-ONE national and international awards, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* follows the path of Mardi Gras beads from the streets of New Orleans during Carnival – where revelers party and exchange beads for nudity – to the disciplined factories in Fuzhou, China – where teenage girls live and sew beads together all day and night. Blending curiosity with comedy, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* is the only film to explore how the toxic products directly affect the people who both make and consume them.

Valuable links to sociologically critique *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* and *Mardi Gras: Made in China*:

<https://justdessertsblog.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/film-review-mardi-gras-made-in-china/>

<http://tvmultiversity.blogspot.ca/2012/02/mardi-gras-made-in-china.html>

<http://www.followthethings.com/mardigras.shtml>

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

INSTEAD OF PROVIDING a chapter-by-chapter critical summary of *Beads, Bodies, and Trash*, I have instead created a thematic outline to address specific concepts and questions that emerge in the book. My analysis of the book, and the questions derived from them, are suitable for first year to fourth year college students. In the spirit of C.W. Mills, I have made an effort to connect individual experiences with social structures while developing a series of questions to engage critical thinking and application exercises.

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1. SENSORY CULTURE AND TOTAL INSTITUTIONS



GOFFMAN'S FORMAL DEFINITION of a total institution is "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." According to Goffman, total institutions are places that control or govern residents' lives to a great extent. They are a place for work and life that accommodate a large number of individuals with a similar status who live together for an extended period of time in isolation from wider society. **How is the Tai Kuen bead factory an example of a total institu-**

tion? What function does this type of institution provide? Who does it benefit, how, and in what ways? Can you identify "mortification processes" (series of steps to strip identity, degradation ceremony) that occur in the Tai Kuen bead factory? What do you think are the consequences of reinforcing the repetition of sensory experiences and restricting movement for the workers?

In the total institution all aspects of life are conducted in the same place under the same single authority. Each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate com-

pany of a large batch of others. All phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled. The whole sequence of activities is imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings by a body of officials (an organization or group). **Understood within a global context, what is the purpose of segmenting factories as total institutions in unseen regions of the world's global economy?**

Beads, Bodies, and Trash suggests that Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras is arranged so that its participants can get wasted and pollute its environment as a way to consume 'experiential fun'. Visualizing the factory conditions during the Mardi Gras atmosphere would create an unwanted awareness in New Orleans that could spoil the somatic order. **Why do you think teenage laborers and their working conditions are relegated to unseen, highly monitored, remote regions inside special economic zones? What role do neoliberal practices contribute to arranging this total institutional order and affirming the economic arrangements in place? Do you think this neoliberal arrangement erases evidence of the workers' humanity and sensuality and hides their labor conditions? Why or why not? What is the incentive and who does it benefit? What is a counter argument?**

Last, *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* suggests that the Tai Kuen bead factory increases surplus labor by cheapening labor and de-skilling workers, and thus makes it easier to recruit, control, and discipline workers through their senses. Chapter Two, for example, illustrates how the arrangement of the architecture and its machinery sets the



pace of work in the factory and how they embody mechanisms of disciplinary control. Workers become alienated (or separated) from the product of their labor and thus their work offers little intrinsic satisfaction. Alienation occurs from other people, their families, and the community of revelers that receives the beads. **In *Beads, Bodies and Trash*, who benefits from these power arrangements and how? Can you identify elements of power differences and how the characteristics of total institutions play a fundamental role in shaping and reproducing power relations? What role does disposable consumption play in creating these arrangements of discipline and pleasure?**

2. DRAMATURGY AND FUNCTIONALISM



DRAMATURGY CONSISTS OF PERFORMANCES in everyday life. *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* presents nudity and sexual behaviors inside a sensory order of scripted embodied performances saturated with somatic props: noise, material goods, chanting crowds, and media technology that encourage and record the performances as digital content. **What function does the sensory order provide revelers in this atmosphere of scripts, props, settings, and action? How do Mardi Gras beads wield exceptional sensorial and interpretive power? What role do beads play during the performance of public sex and nudity as entertainment? How does the sensorial atmosphere and the beads encourage revelers to perform**

nudity or public sex who otherwise may not want to participate? And how do the revelers conceal these nude and sexual performances after they return home?

According to a dramaturgical approach, people create and project images that suit our purposes in various situational moments in life. **Can you identify dramaturgical performances in *Beads, Bodies, and Trash*? What are the characteristics of these performances? What function do they serve?**

Front stage is what's visible to an audience, whereas the back stage includes all that is not visible to an audience. A "front" is that part of our performance that regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted. Goffman suggests that the back region or back stage is kept closed from the audience and the entire region is meant to be kept hidden.

Where is the back region in *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* (or in the movie *Mardi Gras: Made in China*)? Why is it hidden from the participants? Does the Tai Kuen bead factory contain a back-space for workers?

Impression Management is the process of managing settings, words, nonverbal communication, and dress in an effort to create a particular image of individuals and situations. **How does the party atmosphere of Mardi Gras use impression management to entice revelers to behave in specific ways? How does Roger, owner of the Tai Kuen bead factory, try to manage the impressions of his factory through his language, words, and gestures? What's in his interest to manage a viewer or reader's impressions?**



3. SENSORY STUDIES



BEADS, BODIES, AND TRASH uses sensory studies to explain how touch, desire, smell, or the taste of bodies organizes social relations between revelers and workers. For example, revelers perform sensual actions with their bodies to acquire beads, whereas workers also perform sensual actions to make beads. **Can you provide examples of the various sensual actions that revelers and workers perform?**

Merging global ethnography with new materialisms and sensual matter allows sociologists to connect different assemblages in the political economy that involve products like Mardi Gras beads. These products are implicated in gender

and sexual relationships, shaped by somatic experiences, steeped in various forms of economic inequalities, and involved in distributing various hazardous chemicals to different regions of the world. The new approach to sensual materialism examines the in-deterministic formation of somatic assemblages. **Why does new materialism consider non-humans as part of public life and how does it foreground the interdependency of people, things, and nature? What's the methodological and phenomenological purpose of framing objects as porous and permanently changeable with indefinite beginnings and endings?**

Beads, Bodies, and Trash suggests that beads are containers for the senses and that beads perform corporeal or somatic work. According to Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk, somatic work focuses on people’s interactive lived experiences, emotional relationships, and embodied encounters with objects in the sensory sphere. **What is the sensory sphere and what are its characteristics? How is it different than Habermas’s notion of communicative rationality? Why does it focus on the body through tactile sensory interactions and materiality, but not the mind or reason? According to the author, where and when did the sensory sphere emerge?**



4. GLOBAL COMMODITY CHAINS



HOPKINS AND WALLERSTEIN developed the concept of global commodity chains to map the production, distribution, and consumption of goods. **What is the global commodity chain in *Beads, Bodies, and Trash*? How does it transform over the course of the book? What are the properties of beads? What are the consequences of their chemical properties on the environment and bodies?**

Global commodity chain refers to the entire range of activities involved in the design, production, marketing, and consumption of a product. **Can you describe the characteristics of these activi-**

ties in relation to beads? What is the process by which VerdiGras transforms the sacred status of a bead into a deviant status? Do you agree with their approach? Why or why not?

Focusing on global commodity chains allow researchers to trace the forward, backwards, and vertical movements that link the production, design, marketing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of products. **What other links can be included in this movement? Which links does the author in *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* omit or fail to highlight? Why are these neglected links important?**

Global commodity chains reveal how the structure of the global division of labor is organized and how it impacts ecology and bodies (e.g., chemicals in beads). **Is the division of labor equal or is it arranged so that some regions of the world benefit in ways that are detrimental to other regions? Which ones? How is it possible that your computer, iPhone or camera can become part of the making of the commodity chain of a Mardi Gras bead?**



Global commodity chains can be expanded to understand how senses are a crucial factor in examining objects. **Why? What is so important about the senses in understanding objects? What does the author mean when he suggests that objects have “vibrancy?”**



How does the materiality of sensuality intertwine with the political economy to lend shape and form to commodity chains such as penis and breast beads that resemble the breasts and penises exposed on Bourbon Street?

Last, what are the social, environmental, and embodied damages associated with the consumption of cheap merchandise such as Mardi Gras beads? Can you identify the benefits?



5. GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE BODY



SOCIOLOGISTS STUDY THE BODY as a source of social conflict, tension, and regulation. Sociologists are also interested in how gender influences the organization and division of labor. **In the book, *Beads, Bodies and Trash*, and in the movie *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, how is gender and sexuality revealed as part of the process of commodification of female bodies, female social control, and female ‘liberation’ in the factory and on Bourbon Street? How is masculinity positioned during Mardi Gras rituals and in the Mardi Gras bead factory?**

Social control is another concept sociologists use to understand the formation of gender roles. **Which bodies are more likely to encounter the toxic chemicals inside Mardi Gras beads? Why and how does gender influence this toxic arrangement? What role does VerdiGras play in creating a social movement to transform these chemical and sensual relationships?**

Teenagers and women in New Orleans and the factory both face differential opportunities and constraints in terms of access to and distribution of resources and wealth. They also have access to different lived sensory experiences. **What do you think organizes the opportunities and constraints to these resources, the ownership of property, and access to certain sensory experiences? What is the role of the senses in the formation of gender and sexuality? How does the book and the movie connect the disposability of beads with the disposability of pleasure, bodies, and trash?**



6. CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY



CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY FOCUSES on the lived experiences of erotic or seductive elements of crime. For example, a desire for entertainment might motivate people to pursue crime as a leisure event. Cultural criminologists might examine the foreground of pleasures or sensual immediacy of criminal behaviors to understand its sociological context.

In Chapter 5 of *Beads, Bodies, and Trash*, Mike Presdee discusses the emerging characteristics of the sensual sphere. He argues that the effervescence of carnival is the second life of the people and notes that effervescence has become woven into everyday culture through the global media circuits. Furthermore, Presdee treats efferves-

cence as a resource, like labor, beads, or water, and suggests that modern industries capture and commodify it as an experiential commodity. **How is commodifying transgression, deviance, and social control connected to the creation of fascination with crime? What are the individual, economic, toxic, and structural crimes that take place in *Beads, Bodies, and Trash*? Who is responsible and why? According to cultural criminology, how do these crimes emerge and how do sensations sustain and reproduce them as criminal images and sounds?**

Another area of interest for cultural criminologists is institutional structures of political and economic power that create domination. **Where in the book and/or movie is seduction of crime located? Where is the desire for criminal entertainment? Can you identify and explain their connection to political or economic power? Is it possible that revelers seek Mardi Gras as a way to resist everyday domination in their own lives? If avenues of public pleasure have been diminished, then is it possible that bead exchange for nudity and public sex is paradoxically exploitive and liberating? And if this explanation is legitimate, then how does contemporary recording devices commodity these behaviors and broadcast them as spectacle?**

According to Jeff Ferrell and Keith Hayward, cultural and sensual dynamics intertwine with the practices of crime control to create media spectacles. Cultural criminologists immerse themselves inside the lived experiences of the media spectacles to better understand transgression, deviance, and crime's sensuous qualities. **How can deviance, transgression, and crime be treated as entertaining commodities? How is transgression manufactured, distributed, purchased, and disposed? According to cultural criminologists, how is it possible to globally allocate stimulation and discipline so readily available as a resource as indicated in the book *Beads, Bodies, and Trash*?**

Last, what is synopticism and how is it different than panopticism?



7. VIDEO ETHNOGRAPHY

The image shows a screenshot of a YouTube video player. The video title is "Mardi Gras New Orleans 2008" by user "cahan", with 54 videos in the channel and a "Subscribe" button. The video player shows a scene from a Mardi Gras parade with people in colorful costumes and floats. Below the player, the video has 14,874 likes and was uploaded on February 07, 2008. There are 8 likes and 0 dislikes. The uploader comments section shows a comment from "teddy12290" dated 1 month ago, which reads: "New Orleans Mardi Gras has something for every type of person even animals. There's nothing wrong with 'American Gras' they all celebrate something ancient so don't be an 'International Hater'". A reply from "cahan" dated 1 month ago says: "@teddy12290 Thank you. This is perfectly said. New Orleans is my second home and I am there every three to four weeks." To the right of the video player is a "Suggestions" section with several video thumbnails and titles, including "Bewbs On Mardi Gras!! (2.13.10 - Day 289)", "2006 Mardi Gras Highlights", "MARDI GRAS 2009: Night of Fun", "Mardi Gras 2008 in New Orleans", "Bacardi and Cola 'Mardi Gras'", "'Mardi Gras 2009', Mardi Gras 2009, Mardi Gra 20...", "Mardi Gras 2008:: Impromptu Party on Bourbon St...", "Mardi Gras 07", and "WOLF Mardi Gras 2007".

VIDEO ETHNOGRAPHY is the practice of using audiovisual tools to observe, interpret, and record living experiences as images, sounds, and motion and then re-constitute it as experiential knowledge. The author of *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* suggests that video ethnography can more readily appeal to viewers' emotions and sensory knowledge by showing why and how beads are significant to those who use and dispose of them. Video ethnography, through audiovisual methods, can show and provide the 'material' of lived experience to concepts such as gender inequality or commodity chains.

What are the benefits to viewers who can see and hear aesthetic and sensory knowledge? How does video ethnography directly engage with sight, sound, and movement in ways that written knowledge cannot render?

The author also argues that Video Ethnography is an extension of qualitative and ethnographic research and that perception, motion, sound, and audio replace written words. Chapter 6 of *Beads, Bodies, and Trash* argues that video ethnography provides a theoretically informed, practice-based inflection on how to use audiovisual technologies to make ethnographies. **What are examples of sight, sound, and motion, and how are they an extension of written ethnography? In your opinion, does video ethnography help develop sociology as a discipline? How is it possible to integrate video ethnography with written ethnographies and what's the benefit of doing both? Is there a place for quantitative sociology in video ethnography? Why or why not?**



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