

An Ethnographer Lured into Darkness.

Ned Barker, University College London, Knowledge Lab.

No matter the combination of methods ethnographers bring to their research design and to participant observation, our pursuit to log, interpret, analyse and present the lives of those we meet is never an entirely intellectual or objective one. Ethnographic fieldwork is intimately sensory (Pink, 2015), invokes our imagination (Sparkes, 2009) and requires us to actively navigate social landscapes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). There is a tendency for these elements to fade in terms of visibility and immediacy within the research process. For those in accord with Davies (2008), continuous reflexive labour becomes a core praxis to monitor the ways we observe and participate in this textured environment. Without this, we are left in the dark and are less able to see how we can (or should) respond to the nitty-gritty qualitative nature of ethnography. In this Chapter, two of methodological vignettes will act as entry points to unpack a set of tensions that commanded my attention during an eighteen month ethnography in Higher Education. 'You Look Like an Ivory Tower Student', for example, begins to troubleshoot ethnographic participation within educational environments. 'Going Dark', on the other hand, problematises the prioritisation of visual observations that are implicit in ethnographic tradition. Throughout these discussions a metaphor of *being lured into darkness* is offered as a productive orientation for ethnography.

Key words: sensory ethnography; darkness; examples of reflexivity; performing arts

Setting the Scene

“Taste, sight, sound, touch, smell, heat, body awareness, pain, anger, frustration, balance, weight, scope, acceleration, logic, instinct, hunger, belief. The senses we engage with when we conduct fieldwork are nodal points between our ethnographic environments and us. Through them, we become ethnographers. Through them, our bodies become our research instrument” (Choy et al., 2016, p.201)

How much of the environment and our senses do ethnographers habitually engage with when their bodies are engaged in participant observation? *An ethnographer lured into darkness* is a somewhat accurate way to represent my experiences of doing doctoral research whilst at the same time offering a metaphor for productively navigating the challenges implied by this question. This Chapter is therefore tasked with mapping out, and reflecting upon, some of the key elements of this process with a complimentary view to shine a light on methodological tensions that arose when doing educational ethnography. In this introductory section the scene is set in terms of contextualising the origins of the research because this history cannot be detached from how the ethnography was conducted, and the contributions drawn from it. This leads into the a priori methodological refinements that aimed to account for the range of senses that I would attend to during the research. To do this guidance is drawn from sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), the Performing Arts (PAs), and embodiment scholarship more generally. Two selected excerpts from my reflexive diary entries will then be retold with a view to unpack

broader methodological considerations pertinent to educational ethnography. The intention is that these methodological vignettes may act as provocations, bringing to the fore tensions and possibilities of being lured into darkness whilst doing participant observation.

Before writing the proposal for my PhD research (Barker, 2018) I had never been particularly interested in the PAs. I knew very little about what it consisted of or what performing artists did, felt, or desired and so on. This does not mean, however, as an embodied being who is situated within wider cultures, I had no presumptions or insights that would unavoidably penetrate the ethnographic process. For example, applying a Bourdieusian lens (1993), I had a sense of my *tastes* as a consumer of admittedly bland/mainstream film and television et cetera. In most measurable ways I was (and remain) an outsider, far removed from inner circles and avant-garde practices. Despite this position I vividly remember a strong *sense* that these educational fields would occupy my attention for the foreseeable. The proposal was to set in motion an 18-month multi-sited ethnography (see Marcus, 1999; Pierides, 2010) where I followed PA students during their transitions into, and through, Higher Education (HE).

The confines of the (neoliberal) academy necessitated that, in part, my decision to focus on the above was also built upon rationales that stood a chance of attracting funding. Building a case within the competitive climate, where ethnographers must sell their value, I became strategically aware that proposing to study the transitional experiences of PA students would have the potential to produce timely contributions to educational issues that have high import for social justice. Previous research has identified that: progression rates for PA students through education and into employment are worrying low (Basis, 2011); the sector is unequally stratified along lines of class, gender, age, location and race (Creative SkillSet, 2012); and the PAs comprised a significant section of a fast-growing form of vocational education in the UK (BTEC qualifications). This oversupply of graduates will inevitably continue to congest an already crowded pipeline into the intended labour markets. Many converging factors such as these, and others, accumulate to a degree where according to Oakley (2009) the industry has been characterised by an almost unparalleled level of precarity.

Admittedly however, there were less strategic but far more powerful influences that underpinned the genesis of this research. The underlying contributory factors were entangled with my imagination of doing, and producing, ethnography. This included a range of senses that are difficult to articulate. Approximately, the lure of the PAs originated from its novelty to me where the immaterial, aesthetic, and performative nature of artistic labour represented some sort of

mystical land to explore¹. No doubt this fed into a vague anticipation that to study this terrain might nourish my forming theoretical and ethnographic appetites. These appetites were developing through my interest with ‘embodied sociology’ as Shilling (2008) coined it, a personal/political concern for social justice in education and society and being drawn to narrative forms of representation in ethnography (see Maanen, 2011). Reflecting back on this time, I *feel* that my expanding commitments and curiosities, in conversation with memorable references to the PAs in the theoretical literature that I was engaged (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993; Williams & Bendelow, 1998), guided me to this topic more so than the rationales cited in my funding application. More importantly, these senses and feelings informed the type of ethnography I aspired to do. It was the complex fusion of these embodied instincts that led me to actively pre-formulate a particular set of methodological orientations:

- (1) Working from the recognition that the ethnographers’ body is the research instrument (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) it was “especially important [for me] to incorporate into ethnographic works the sensuous body - it smells, tastes, textures, and sensations” (Stoller, 1997, p.xv). This led me to design and conduct a research project that was at its core a sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015).
- (2) Whilst I was attracted to narrative forms of representation, keeping in line with the realist traditions of ethnography (Hammersley, 1992) I wanted to place value on sustained attempts to depict phenomena as accurately as possible. Furthermore, on a theoretical level my framework was influenced by Shilling’s (2005, 2008, 2012) corporeal realism that takes the body as the main unit of sociological analysis. Therefore, the narratives of transition I produced, that foregrounded the embodied student, were to be ‘based on a true story’.
- (3) In order to capture rich data pertaining to the embodiment of the students it was vital that a range of methods complemented participant observation such as: interviews, videographic recordings, audio recordings and artefact collection. Visual methods (e.g. Degerbøl & Nielsen, 2015; Phoenix, 2010) became a productive and disruptive resource when documenting movement, aesthetics, and audiovisual landscapes. In relation to this, and adhering to Pink’s (2015) advice on being flexible when doing sensory ethnography, the cluster of techniques that I would employ emerged in response to the field.
- (4) Student ‘transitions’, by definition, cannot be confined to neat spatiotemporal boundaries (Colley, 2007) and as such I needed to be mobile enough to follow the object of study, students-in-transition, across multiple sites. This required a multi-sited ethnography that is necessary to “follow the people; follow the thing; follow the metaphor; follow the plot, story or analogy; follow the life or biography” (Pierides, 2010, p.186). And whilst this might reconfigure the traditional boundaries of ethnographic sites it was an obvious requirement to

¹ Indeed, the earliest anthropological/colonial missions, through which the practice of ethnography was formed, was predicated on a desire of the researcher to step beyond their native customs and better understand new exotic pastures (Davies, 2008). This might be less common or even possible within educational ethnography nowadays for a number of reasons (Hammersley, 2017). Whilst I guard against nostalgic visions of these early anthropological expeditions and repel the way in which they ingrained a damaging ‘ethics of the other’, I retain that there was, for me, a deeply embodied attractiveness to step into an unknown.

understanding transition because it “makes it possible to take into account the world that is on the move” (ibid p.187).

Reflecting upon the genesis of this project, in some detail, frames this Chapter because educational ethnographers seldom acknowledge, with real-life examples, the role of *these* senses in the research process, from its inception to dissemination. Against this backdrop, the primary purpose of this Chapter was to set the scene by stimulating reflections on how senses, like these (that are inclusive of ‘feelings’, ‘opinions’, ‘presumptions’, ‘expectations’, ‘prejudices’ and so on), penetrate every part of the ethnographic process - in preparing to enter the field, arriving and responding to the environment. Indeed, it is not new to acknowledge that ethnographers, equipped with their living bodies as instruments of data collection and analysis, cannot ‘turn off’ certain senses or feelings, nor can they turn on others (see for example Pink, 2015 & Choy et al., 2016). Instead of remaking this obvious case, this Chapter seeks to explicate the role of the senses in this research, mostly in relation to a sense of darkness, while retelling a reflexive journey through which I sought to ‘productively harness’ the murky dynamics of doing fieldwork and being an ethnographer in the pursuit of novel/needed insights.

To refine and illustrate this central aim, communicating further some of the methodological paths trodden in this study, the next section begins to map out the wide net that was cast around the senses within this ethnography. Following this, two selected excerpts from my reflexive diary entries will be retold with a view to unpack broader methodological considerations, and orientations, that are pertinent to ethnography in HE and beyond. Finally, the discussion is concluded through an invitation to productively harness a full spectrum of senses and become an ethnographer lured into darkness.

Sensing the Scene, Feeling our Way

Traditionally much of ethnography has been based upon the ethnographers’ vision and hearing (Hockey & Forsey, 2012). The hegemony of focusing on audiovisual landscapes when ‘in the field’ have pushed other senses to the margins. Under the auspices of sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), and sensory scholarship and more broadly (Stoller, 1997), much progress has already been made to rebalance the privileges of sight and sound. Effort to redress sensory imbalances in research has resulted in innovative cross fertilisations of methodological approaches, for example, bringing multimodality into fruitful dialogue with sensory ethnography (e.g. Jewitt & Mackley, 2019). New approaches geared towards sensing social scenes calls for ways of doing ethnography that do not limit our awareness to the five sense model (sight,

hearing, smell, taste and touch) that dominates western thought (Pink, 2015; Sparkes, 2009). The selected vignettes unpacked in this Chapter seek to illustrate that for ethnographers this quest is as much about developing sensitising orientations, through reflexivity and praxis, as it is about innovating methods.

Drawing heavily Pink's (2015) seminal accounts on *Doing Sensory Ethnography* it is clear that researchers must seek to expand what senses they open themselves up to, and sit with, during their reflexive practice. In this expansion we must not stop after accommodating proprioception, balance, pain, temperature, hunger and other biophysical sensations. We must also increase our awareness of *other senses*, because as Morris (2017) eloquently stated sensation is more than biology interacting with environment, it is a social process. There are many scholarly traditions from which to capture, examine, and represent these senses from psychoanalytical thought to affect theory. For me, Bourdieu's (1977) notion of the social body contained a useful *starting point* from which to elaborate upon dominant categories of the senses, where all embodied actors, including educational ethnographers, have,

“tastes and distastes, [...] compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its *senses*, that is to say not only the traditional five senses... but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty ... and so on. (original emphasis p. 124)

For the purpose of the reflections foregrounded in this Chapter I would add that it is ethnographic duty to consider and calibrate our sense of *darkness* – a sense that will be show to take both metaphorical and actual forms. In probing and articulating rich ethnographic encounters a phenomenological approach provided an anchor for exploring the multifaceted ways in which a sense of darkness appeared during the research. Phenomenology is an approach that is central to sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), can be found at the core of Bourdieu's formation of the body (1977), and is compatible with Shilling's CR in so far as it allows for sociological descriptions of the experiential dimensions of the body (2012).

Whist this view of the body leaves potential sites of reflection intentionally open, there are some defined edges to the net I cast over the senses. With the sole task of collecting and processing the empirical world ethnographers would be advised to stop short of attuning oneself to extrasensory perceptions in the way that has been popularised in the 1999 film, *The Sixth Sense*. The mystic/magical/spiritual 'sixth sense' is of little relevance to realist commitments on which ethnography has been built (Hammersley, 1992). What is relevant, however, are the internal

(embodied) and external (environmental) landscapes that engulf every aspect of the research process. In precise terms then, ethnographers sense the scene(s) through interplay between their embodiment, the material surroundings and other bodies². Making sense of these senses is no easy task.

Recasting the role of the senses, to encompass what is 'other' to categorisable sensation, during the life of ethnography is an attempt to distance oneself from the sensory bias entrenched in the western model. It is a recognition that even before entering the site we have senses of 'what it is like', and these are important to reflect upon. Indeed, these senses are likely to be informed by patchwork of anecdotal and unreliable sources. These senses, left unchecked, will tacitly shape the research design even before framing our participation in, and observations of, that community. The danger is that 'realist accounts' of the field will become distorted in ways that damage the contribution of the ethnography. Reflexivity is held up as the tool to account for and mediate these biases (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Davies, 2008; Pink, 2015). It would however be naïve to ever assume that these senses can be rendered irrelevant to data collection, analysis and indeed research design (Hammersley, 1992). The argument here is not that ethnographers are neglectful of their reflexive duties, rather, an ethnographer's craft can better make visible very intimate/complex/nuanced expressions of the ways in which a myriad of senses shaped their research.

After establishing some abstract conceptual and methodological anchors, such as those outlined thus far, the next significant step in the research process is when the researcher strides into the field and meets their participants. New senses are added in during this empirical encounter yet it would be incorrect to perceive this as a completely separate and distinct phase of the research because as Geurts (2004) understood, "we do not enter the field, after all, having left our bodies at home" (p.368); it is through our lived bodies where the past, the unfolding present and anticipations of the future are connected (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In following my body into the field the forthcoming vignette is taken from diary entries during one of my first days visiting the HE site for the study. The remainder of this Chapter is dedicated to very early moments in my fieldwork where, through the act of reflexivity, the methodological orientations already outlined moved from the abstract to the real. Abundant methodological and ethical tensions arose from this process against which productive pathways forward were discovered.

² This recognition has additional millage beyond typical theoretical grounds for sensory and embodied scholarship that is usually heavily influenced by phenomenology. For example, Latour (2005) suggested that 'the social' only becomes *visible* when associations are being made (by humans). The full repertoire of these connections pass through the sensory domain outlined here, inclusive of the *other senses*.

Entering the Scene: Plotting movements towards participation

A researcher must physically enter a site (except perhaps in digital ethnography) in order to become an active participant and surely first impressions count in ethnography as they do in other socially situated endeavours. It is conceivable that the legacy of the encounter will go toward setting the limits and possibilities for participation within that context. This is not to say that by getting this meeting 'wrong' brings about irreversible damage to future participation, impression management as Goffman (1968) showed us is a continuous activity that infuses any social scene. Likewise getting it 'right' will not necessarily result in conducive field relations because maintaining these is a continual and complex task (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Instead the contention is that through first contact with the participants impressions are made, barriers can be established, and the positionality of the researcher becomes more than just an abstract concept. As soon as a fieldworker enters the site the concept of positionality becomes something that needs to be navigated *in situ*. But how do ethnographers do this? An answer is by 'feel' and (hopefully) through reflexivity.

The methodological vignette that follows is taken from my forth visit to City University to introduce myself, and my research, to a new group of first year BA (Hons) PA students. From contentious beginnings over time I was able to establish enough of a rapport with this group that made more ethnographically productive forms of participation possible.

“You look like an Ivory Tower Student”. 2nd of October 2014: Having mulled over the previous day's fieldwork I awoke this morning with a subtly revised approach. Dark colours and chequered shirts seemed to be a very common clothing choice for the students I met yesterday. So, opening up my wardrobe I gravitated towards a black/white checkered shirt - one that I seldom wear. Today I will make strides towards becoming an insider I thought as I buttoned up my shirt.

I feel comfortable yet different as I jump onto the early morning train, coffee in hand. On one level I think that my appearance is *authentic*; these are *my* clothes, they fit *my* body, they have *my* smell. The shirt even has a signature coffee stain, as so many of my possessions do. Equally, however, I notice a sense of anxiety that this choice of clothing may be nothing more than an attempt to camouflage my researcher identity. I record these ethical tensions in my diary: 'is presenting myself in this way merely a fabrication to *exploit* rich data? is this a soft method of misleading participants moving towards a *covert and unethical* operation? The sense of unease had not evaporated as I stepped off the train to make my way to 'the hut' where I am to meet a new group of PA students.

I arrive early and wait outside. I strike up casual conversation with a student (who coincidentally also came on the same train) and 'the technician' George (who is having a quick smoke before the students arrive). After a while, around six animated young adults turn into the street - they are laughing, nudging each other, and talking loudly. So buoyant are the bunch that George commented jokingly "they look like some young eager PA students!". The moment the group get into range the

girl in the centre of the group, Gabby, asks if they are allowed in yet - “not yet there is a class going on at the moment” replies George. Acknowledging this, the group stop in the road and continue their animated conversations. We go back to ours.

Unexpectedly, a large male student calls out to me directly “what course are you doing?”. A sense of unease sharply returned as I explain clearly “I am actually a researcher...” providing the crowd with an exhaustive explanation of my presence here and other important information. Instantly I became the centre of everyone’s attention. I am aware however that, for now at least, there is little interest in the nature of the research and their possible roles within it. Instead students are looking at me analysing what they see. Responding to me introducing myself as ‘a researcher’ the large male student said, “Ahh, I thought as much when I saw you. You look too posh to be a student here”. In agreement another girl added “Yeah I was thinking that you look like an Ivory Tower Student³”. I notice a few nods of agreement.

Despite conscious efforts to work towards becoming and ‘insider’, I was clearly ill-prepared, there were aspects of my identity and appearance that stood out from the crowd. There were bodily signs that could not cover up my difference, or the attempts to do so were amateurish. There is little new about students questioning the researcher’s presence in educational ethnography, yet what this encounter demonstrates is that entering a site can be an intense social moment with heightened scrutiny. Reflecting upon this event I realised that I had been forewarned of this likelihood by Jachyra *et al.*, (2015) when the lead author entered the field to a student abruptly questioning, “who are you, and what are you doing here?” (p.242). I over confidently had a sense that this would not happen to me within this HE environment however, because of my comparable age and calculated efforts to blend in. This moment, along with others, ruptured what I thought I knew about the PAs world and my presence within it as an ethnographer. Moreover, the suspicion of my presence speaks to a broader notion of positioning oneself within the field and navigating the insider-outsider dynamics of our methodology. These have long been reflected in educational ethnography. Nevertheless, this reflection highlights one way in which I was feeling around in the dark in my attempts to actively navigate the social environment. In this encounter there are also indications that the participants were momentarily in the dark and perhaps left in the shadows in relation to my presence and motivations, and while this might not necessarily be unethical or problematic in this case, it highlights an important area to become sensitive to when managing productive and ethical field relations. Reflecting on moments like this were vital in casting new light over the field and for feeling how to participate moving forward.

³ Ivory Tower was a highly prestigious Russell Group University within miles of this site, City University.

As made apparent in this section, during the nitty-gritty unfolding of ethnographic encounters the researcher can never be in full control of the nature and effects of their participation. This first encounter makes explicit some of these tensions while bringing into focus my limited agency that continued to varying degrees throughout the research. These intricacies provided a constant thread to reflect upon. It was, however, rare to receive direct and explicit feedback from the participants on my participatory status. Therefore, for the most part, these reflections frequently slipped into the domain of the senses. Although my ability to subtly alter my personal appearance (amongst other aspects of impression management) was inadequate at the beginning and beyond my control, over time my dexterity in sensing my way through these moments improved. My reflexive quest allowed me to respond, in action, and position myself within the physical and social milieu to better effect. To get 'closer to the action', or in other words to leave less of the field in darkness.

The ethical, practical and social terrain exposed within this short narrative only begin to map out the complexities of ethnographic participation - in this case specifically within HE. There is little room here to elaborate further (for a richer account see Barker, 2018). And whilst all ethnography, particularly in HE are bounded by limits to participation⁴, the argument made here is that it becomes increasingly difficult to actively navigate social landscapes without attending to this sense of participation. Because participation and observation are coupled together in the activity of 'being there' (Pink, 2015) any sense of participation is conjoined with what one can *see*; in doing so framing how the ethnographers' body observes, regardless of whether their surroundings are cast in ocular light or dark.

Being Lured: A Rejection of Night Vision Ethnography

'Going Dark'. 22nd October 2014: The educational environments that I have become used to tend to be flooded with artificial lighting. When in the field (across the multiple sites) where these PA students were being educated, I frequently found myself plunged into darkness, or into an estrange assortment of colours. Architecturally speaking, the main rooms had no natural lighting. Other rooms that were used had thick blackout material that could be drawn to stop light from entering through the windows. Someone would always shout "going dark", as is the custom, before the house lights were switched off. It would become so black that even faint silhouettes would disappear - our eyes would be rendered useless⁵.

⁴ Clear examples of this include: a researcher will never have the same stakes invested in the activities; and ethically it is problematic to participate in group work that funnels towards formal assessments.

⁵ Typically our eyes have approximately 126 million light sensitive cells but this means little during a blackout. Given the correct architecture and elimination of background artificial lighting (e.g. fire escape routes, mobile screen phones and so on) it seems impossible to see others, even as silhouettes. It is also true that when a room is full of bodies there can never no light at all because human bodies emit light.

While this is normal and expected practice for the students, it was strange and unfamiliar ethnographic territory to me. How do I collect data? More fundamentally what does data consist of? I can't see what is going on. I cannot be sure who is talking, and who they are talking to; my senses are impaired; my window into the field diminished; my fieldnotes unconfident. But just because I can't see what is going on doesn't mean that nothing noteworthy is happening.

Darkness certainly raises difficulties for traditional emphasises implicit within “classic participant observation” (Pink, 2015, p.95). In these scenarios the visual environment was manipulated to literally show the social scene in a different light. There would often be dark spaces for students to retreat to, outside of my visual awareness. But also lighting could act as a frame, providing a centre for my attention to naturally fall. More than this, ‘moods’ or ‘atmospheres’ (as the students in City University described it) were created. These were central to the learning experiences and social dynamics that unfolded in that space. My sense is that these should be taken seriously in my methodological reflections, the holistic landscapes that are created/manipulated/distorted surely mean something to the participants artistic imaginary. As a response to lighting conditions my awareness to ‘soundscapes’ and other senses were enhanced.

Just for a moment, the movement of a curtain, the tone of a voice, the positioning of an object, and the feeling of the cold all became meaningful sensory dimensions that added to the landscape of experience. Whilst these awareness slipped away like any thought or imagination, remnants will remain in these ethnographic reflections. What remains, documented here in my growing fieldnotes, is an awareness that the learning environment is a rich and layered landscape despite often appearing empty and dark. Recently I have begun to take these awarenesses, that do not rely exclusively on sight, into other settings where the artificial lights shone bright. In fact on occasions, I have found myself closing my eyes to help me see.

Continuing to reflect on the ethnography long after it was ‘completed’ I shared this vignette at a research seminar. As we discussed this reflection, a colleague from Science Education offered a simple and eloquent solution, “*why didn't you use night vision goggles so that at least you can see what was going on?*”. Notwithstanding, clear ethical obstacles to watching students in moments when they might be less aware of being visible there is an obvious appeal to this. On a visual plane this neatly overcomes the problem of darkness and increases potentials for accurate observations within this environment. Whilst there might be benefits in exploring the dark with technological aid there are drawbacks. At least two problems with this approach devalue the proposed methodology of ‘night vision ethnography’. In elaborating upon these rejections my orientations and senses towards fieldwork are refined.

The first problem is epistemological in nature and is based on the risk of deforming *sensory realism*. Therefore, in doing so moving enterprises away from reasonable aspirations that ethnographers (Pink, 2015) and PAs alike (Garner, 2007) might hold dear. This criticism

Bodies however shine at a level far below visual perception - yet a portion developed through this Chapter is that if one *observes* closely (with all their senses) they will not be blind.

reduces down to the artificial way in which night vision goggles propose to explore darkness. It is incontestable that the ethnographers' eye, that is incorporated into their living bodies, is in many ways a limited instrument. For example, the human eye can only perceive a small range of wave lengths (400-700nm) and this data is 'stored' unreliably in memory and not in incorruptible digital repositories. Considering this, it is easy to contrast the ethnographer's body in inferior terms to the accuracy and functionality of technologies at their disposal. But it would be a mistake to place too much value in technological solutions, especially in night vision goggles as a portal into darkness.

A nuanced critique of videographic methods in sensory ethnography can be applied to flesh out the basis for skepticism and ultimately rejection. Degerbøl et al., (2015) understood that whilst there are obvious benefits in taking visual recordings during fieldwork, watching the film back always 'felt different' not least because "some impressions simply cannot be captured with the camera, such as temperature, odours and atmosphere" (p.65). Following this logic, in the case of the proposed night vision ethnography the technological intervention would not actually increase what is observable unproblematically, without sensory bias or distortion. Not only would tensions arise due to the restrictive capacities of the device, more so, it would afford the ethnographer experiences that distance them from those of participants. The argument here is not that capturing visual landscapes through various technological methods can not be useful in sensory ethnography only that we must recognise that they are prone to distort sensory realities.

Further to this point, there are advantages of human sensory capacities to access these otherwise dark spaces. Living bodies unlike robots, and other technologies, have advanced active sensing capabilities. Lepora (2018) recognised that this is a major challenge for even the most advanced automata stating that the difference is "we do more than touch, we feel. We do not just see, we look... we do more than hear, we listen" (p.154). The activeness of the ethnographers' senses are a source of potential and production rather than a feature that sabotages efforts to gain 'realist' accounts. These active qualities connect biophysical inputs with the other senses (as previously outlined) in the operationalisation of the ethnographic gaze (Kakavoulia, 2008). This highly active, if not always consciously focused, gaze involves looking through useful lenses and exercising academic freedom to explore our surrounding with intent, scrutiny, creativity and integrity. Practically speaking however when confronted with a very visual type of darkness, like discussed in the above vignette, there are two options: (1) pause to write up fieldnotes, listen to what you hear, and record what you feel; or (2) step into the darkness.

Both actions have merit. The second, however, is not just a matter of *being there*⁶, a notion that overlays 'classic' participant observation within sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015). It reflects an orientation of not being satisfied of being where you are, but of being lured into the unknown - a metaphor that is stretchable beyond this visualist analysis. Similarly, it represents a mobile dynamic to Sparkes' (2009) advocacy of 'deep listening' to soundscapes in symphony with other sensorium rather than just jotting down audible exchanges. A *luring* of the ethnographers' body into darkness is predicated on a liminal active-passive embodied orientation towards exploring the field. It involves a dualist interplay of seeking lures (searching out something to 'observe' and 'analyse') and being lured (being drawn to something through embodied senses). In the endeavour the researchers' activeness is not disembodied, controlled by a rational and separate mind, nor is it dismissive of the limited agencies afforded to the emplaced ethnographer (as previously illustrated). It therefore requires attentiveness to all of the senses, not just those dominant in Western enlightenment, in all phases of the ethnographic process whether in-situ or in-reflection. For me its value was claimed as a productive avenue to navigate the times where I, too often, had a sense of tension at being a moth to the flame or becoming a shadow in the dark during participant observation.

Committed as I was to sensory ethnography, the reflexive journeys shared in this Chapter, begin to demonstrate the ease in which ethnographic accounts inevitably centre on a very small cross-section of the audiovisual possibilities. It is too natural to be drawn to what is loudest, most visible, closest or speaks with clarity to our sensibilities and gaze. A marked orientation to explore unseen/unseeable worlds began when confronted by visual darkness but spread out in other aspects of my practice. In the context of this ethnography, at least, I argue that being lured into darkness was far more aligned to (sensory) realist commitments than what night vision goggles could ever afford. The productive potentials of being lured into darkness start to appear against these criteria.

The second objection does not derive from these epistemological and methodological concerns but it is not unrelated. Opposition can be mounted from a sense of malnutrition with the current diet of educational ethnography that we prepare and digest. Sight is the sense of science

⁶ Being there resonates with the concept of presence that "has become a primary focus for many contemporary artists" (p.82) and ethnographers alike. In discussing "the presence not the absence of the ethnographer" Stoller (1997) argued that "ethnographers open themselves up to others and absorb their worlds." (p.23). Also, presence was a powerful guiding concept for at least one student, Gabby, who in interviews was keen to teach me about Rodenburg's 'three circles of presence' and how this is key to unlocking her potential as a PA.

(Welton, 2007); indeed, it is often through measurable visual observations that our empirical knowledge of the world is constructed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Not surprisingly then the visual dominates what is published/publishable in educational research. Ethnography is not exempt from a skewing of the senses, as noted by Hockey and Forsey's (2012) statement that "observation is usually meant as a cover-all term for much of what is sensed in the field... but the visual so dominates Western thought that it neglects the other senses to a lower value, filtering their representations through a visualise framework" (pp.71-2)⁷. Sensory ethnographic approaches enlarge this critique. For example, Morris's (2017) study of visual impairment in education illustrated the primacy of sight in modern culture and normative educational environments. This critique is extended still further through autoethnographic accounts of dark spaces where Edensor (2013) understood that in research darkness has "been sidelined in the quest for bright space" (p.443).

In contrast to much of educational and ethnographic research, the PAs has been shaped through a long and rich history of working in, with, and through darkness, in both physical and dramaturgical spaces (see Palmer, 2017). It is not surprising then that I had the sense that to neglect unlit spaces would have been a detriment to this ethnography. I found that darkness was often, in reality, bursting with activity and meaning. Further to this, the metaphor being lured into darkness became more productive when extended beyond the exploration of audial and visual blindspots – encapsulated in this vignette through the question 'what does data consist of?'. Returning to this question throughout the ethnography I became evermore sensitive to the tangibility of both loud and quiet data. The former were things and conditions that grabbed my attention whereas the later consisted of easily observable encounters that failed to grip me in an immediate way. Furthermore, there were abundant data to organise within a five-sense model, but there were also equally plentiful sources of data that could not be accounted for with reference to these categories. I found whist these experiences or phenomena did not appear in categorisable forms, they could be logged under, and accessed through, the *other senses*.

To bring this Chapter to a conclusion I continue to draw inspiration directly from the field to lay down some guiding lights into darkness. To do this, three concepts derived from the PAs are offered: dark matter (Sofer, 2013); blank spaces (Zarrilli, 2007); and seeing nothing (Welton, 2007). Two of these continue to flesh out what *darkness* might consist of in both metaphorical and

⁷ Howes and Classen (2013) attribute this to scholastic traditions that build upon the en-light-enment of Western rationality. This, they argue, has seen researchers taking artefacts and placing them in museums of ethnography, suspending them for visual gaze in the light of the gallery.

actual manifestations. The third starts to bridge these ideas with ethnographic orientations. Afterall, Jewitt, Xambo and Price (2016) documented a range of productive outcomes when arts-based methods and sensibilities are appropriated into the social sciences.

Going Dark: Some Guidance for Ethnographers

“Dark matter is, quite literally, the secret ingredient whose mass holds our visible world together, although scientists do not yet know what it is” (Sofer, 2013 .p3)

The scientific concept of *dark matter*, a non-luminous and unobservable substance that might constitute somewhere between 80 and 95 percent of the universe, inspired Sofer (2013) to investigate the ‘invisible presence’ of things that are ‘not there’ but ‘not not there’ in theatre. Attempting to trace or plot the dark matter of ethnographic spaces might act as a productive probe in accounting for those important forces that are hard to see/grasp/make sense of. An interest in dark matter involves imaginative sensory commitments to shine light on invisible matters framing them as potential resources in (social) performances. There is, however, more to going dark than being lured by this concept of darkness.

Blank spaces are those that sensory voids often characterised by a perceived nothingness (e.g. silence, white noise, black/white space) but actually constitute theatrical form, “thereby creating the possibility of experience and meaning for the audience” (Zarrilli, 2007, p.47). Being inquisitive of blank spaces therefore rests on an understanding that, for example, stories are told as much as they are by silence as they are by speech. There are methodological potentials on every sensory plane here, because, where there is an absence a presence (of meaning and experience) can emerge. When gazing at blank spaces the ethnographer is straining to become familiar with textures of absence that are relational to the substances of observable ‘data’. To engage with both forms of darkness requires new ways of doing and seeing.

Welton’s (2007) experiences of *seeing nothing* took form through his autoethnographic reflections of spectating a ‘theatre in the dark’ performance⁸. Theatre in the dark represents just one avant-gard experimental movement in the PAs that has been offered as an antithesis to modernist conventions of casting stories in light (Palmer, 2017). As a member of the audience, Welton (2018) felt that this experiment was powerfully disruptive on a number of levels. On one level,

⁸ An excerpt of Welton’s experiences: “The actors move us. At some point I feel someone brush my shoulder, and the effect is chilling. Far from feeling safe, cocooned in the darkness, I suddenly feel afraid. I am now conscious not just of the soundscapes, or the unfolding story, but also the extent to which we are surrounded by action” (2007. p.148).

the removal of sight had the affect of manipulating distance and intimacy, bringing objects, stories, and people close or further away. On another, it heightened his sensory experiences redressing the dominance of sight whilst also invoking a sense of fear, imagination and strangeness. There are clear productive ethnographic opportunities for stepping into the blackness that “is so strange, so unpredictable” (p.148) because strangeness, especially in familiarity, is often cited as a critical resource to our methodology; actively seeing nothing is one way to arrive in unfamiliar and baffling territories. In my ethnography one way I experimented to this end was ‘to close my eyes to help me see’. For these reasons, when plunged into darkness Welton maintained that “seeing nothing is still to some extent *seeing*” (p.150), it is not a lack of, but a different type of, vision. Insights such as these from the PAs add to the reflexive vignettes shared in this Chapter to illustrate the productive value of being lured into darkness for ethnographers in HE and beyond.

References

- Barker, E. (2018). *Bodies-in-Transition: an ethnography of the opportunities and constraints of BTEC performing arts students* (University of East Anglia). Retrieved from https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/67800/1/PhD_Thesis_Edmund_Barker_-_100033037.pdf
- Basis. (2011). *BTEC Progression Stage II Survey*.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Choy, T., Lieba, F., Hathaway, M., Satsuka, S., & Tsing, A. (2009). Strong Collaboration as a Method for Multi-sited Ethnography: On Mycorrhizal Relations. In M. Fanson (Ed.), *Multisited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research* (pp. 197–214). Bodmin: Mixed Sources.
- Colley, H. (2007). Understanding time in learning transitions through the lifecourse. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 17(4), 37–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210701667103>
- Creative SkillSet. (2012). *Employment Census of the Creative Media Industries*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejoc.201200111>
- Davies, C. (2008). *Reflexive ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others* (Second edd). New York: Routledge.
- Degerbøl, S., & Nielsen, C. S. (2015). Researching embodied learning by using videographic participation for data collection and audiovisual narratives for dissemination – illustrated by the encounter between two acrobats. *Ethnography and Education*, 10(1), 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2014.929018>
- Edensor, T. (2013). Reconnecting with darkness: gloomy landscapes, lightless places. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 14(4), 446–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2013.790992>
- Garner, S. (2007). Sensing Realism: Illusionism, actuality, and the theatrical sensorium. In S. Banes & A. Lepecki (Eds.), *The Senses in Performance* (pp. 115–122). New York: Routledge.
- Geurts, K. L. (2004). On Embodied Consciousness in Anlo-Ewe Worlds. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 363–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146613810343004>
- Goffman, E. (1968). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's Wrong With Ethnography? Methodological explorations*. London: Routledge.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). Field relations. In *Ethnography: principles in practice* (3rd ed., pp. 63–96). Stoodleigh: Routledge.
- Hockey, J., & Forsey, M. (2012). *Ethnography Is Not Participant Observation : Reflections on the Interview as Participatory Qualitative Research*. 69–88.

- Jachyra, P., Atkinson, M., & Washiya, Y. (2015). 'Who are you, and what are you doing here': methodological considerations in ethnographic Health and Physical Education research. *Ethnography and Education*, 10(2), 242–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2015.1018290>
- Jewitt, C., & Leder Mackley, K. (2019). Methodological dialogues across multimodality and sensory ethnography: digital touch communication. *Qualitative Research*, 19(1), 90–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118796992>
- Jewitt, C., Xambo, A., & Price, S. (2017). Exploring methodological innovation in the social sciences: the body in digital environments and the arts. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(1), 105–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2015.1129143>
- Kakavoulia, M. (2016). The Ethnographer's "Gaze": Some Notes on Visuality and Its Relation to the Reflexive Metalanguage of Anthropology. In G. E. Marcus & N. Panourgiá (Eds.), *Ethnographica Moralia: Experiments in Interpretive Anthropology* (pp. 213–216). Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1x76fs8.17>
- Lepora, N. (2018). Touch. In T. Prescott, N. Lepora, & P. Verschure (Eds.), *Living Machines: A Handbook of research in biomimetics and biohybrid systems* (pp. 154–159). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199674923.001.0001>
- Marcus, G. E. (1999). What Is At Stake—And Is Not—In The Idea And Practice Of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Canberra Anthropology*, 22(2), 6–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03149099909508344>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (A. J. Ayer, Ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Morris, C. (2017). Making sense of education: sensory ethnography and visual impairment. *Ethnography and Education*, 12(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2015.1130639>
- Oakley, K. (2009). 'Art Works' – cultural labour markets: a literature review. In *Creativity, Culture and Education Literature Reviews*. Retrieved from www.creativitycultureeducation.org/research-impact/literature-reviews/
- Palmer, S. (2017). Harnessing Shadows: A historical perspective on the role of darkness in the theatre. In A. Alston & M. Welton (Eds.), *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Phoenix, C. (2010). Seeing the world of physical culture: the potential of visual methods for qualitative research in sport and exercise. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 2(2), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19398441.2010.488017>
- Pierides, D. (2010). Multi-sited ethnography and the field of educational research. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(2), 179–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508481003731059>
- Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: Sage Publishers Ltd.
- Shilling, C. (2005). *The Body in Culture, Technology & Society*. London: Sage Publishers Ltd.
- Shilling, C. (2008). *Changing Bodies: Habit, Crisis and Creativity*. London: Sage Publications.

- Shilling, C. (2012). *The Body and Social Theory* (3rd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2009). Ethnography and the senses: challenges and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 1(1), 21–35.
- Stoller, P. (1997). *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Welton, M. (2007). Seeing Nothing: Now hear this... In S. Banes & A. Lepecki (Eds.), *The Senses in Performance* (pp. 146–155). New York: Routledge.
- Williams, S. J., & Bendelow, G. (1998). *The lived body: sociological themes, embodied issues*. London: Routledge.
- Zarrilli, P. B. (2007). Senses and Silence in Actor Training and Performance. In S. Banes & A. Lepecki (Eds.), *The Senses in Performance* (pp. 47–70). New York: Routledge.