

Canadian History through the Senses

*Sensing Changes: Technologies,
Environments, and the Everyday,
1953–2003*, by Joy Parr

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Historian and geographer Joy Parr has written an extraordinary book. *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953–2003* provides a compelling analysis of five megaprojects and one case of contamination of a local water supply – all of which took place in Canada – and the individuals, communities, and life ways they distorted, disrupted, and in some cases destroyed. The megaprojects were undertaken during the third quarter of the twentieth century – the height of modernist technological excess in North America; the water contamination case, which occurred in 2001, brings the narrative into the twenty-first century. Most of the locations profiled in the book are in the province of Ontario:

the widening of the St Lawrence Seaway at the site of the town of Iroquois; a heavy-water chemical plant on the Bruce peninsula; a nuclear facility at Douglas Point, on the eastern shore of Lake Huron; and the tainted water tragedy in the town of Walkerton. Also included are a New Brunswick location – Gagetown, the site of a NATO military base – and one in British Columbia – the Arrow Lakes region where the Columbia River was dammed to form a reservoir. Each case is examined in depth to consider the ways in which the affected communities responded to the extreme changes to their environments and life ways entailed by these projects.

For readers of this journal, however, the most intriguing feature of the work will most likely be the means through which Parr analyzes and interprets these historical technologies and their effects. That is, as the title *Sensing Changes* indicates, there is an emphasis on the sensory experience of those who underwent the drastic social and environmental changes that accompanied the technological upheavals examined in the book. Furthermore, in her exploration of sensory experience, Parr recognizes not only sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, but also proprioception (bodily knowing in space), kinesthetics (gait, pace, and posture), and proxemics (emotional comfort with nearness and distance). Thus place, movement, and time are imbued with sensory significance, as well.

Parr highlights the sensory aspects of the analysis by categorizing her chapters according to the mode of perception that predominates in each. While each chapter has a title and subtitle that is descriptive of the subject matter – the megaproject and something about its location and/or environmental features (e.g., “Woodlands, Meadows, and a Military Training Ground: The NATO Base at Gagetown” for Chapter 2; “Uncertainty along a Great Lakes Shoreline: Hydrogen Sulphide and the Production of Heavy Water” for Chapter 6) – that chapter is also categorized by a succinct phrase that explicitly indicates the sensory, embodied experience most closely associated with the event being profiled. For example, the sensory/embodied category for Chapter 2 is “Place and Citizenship,” and in it we learn how Gagetown residents, reminiscing about life prior to their forced relocation to make room for the NATO military base, describe “places of pleasure for their mingling of sensual satisfactions and prudent stewardship” (p. 31) – places irrevocably lost as a result of that relocation. Chapter 6, under the sensory heading “Smell and Risk,” explores the experience of summer cottagers and year-round pastoralists in the vicinity of a chemical plant (producing heavy water for nuclear power plants) who came to know their beloved landscape through “the presence of [an] olfactory sensation – the rotten egg smell of hydrogen sulphide released from the plants into the air of their living space” (p. 140), fouling the formerly clean air and creating uncertainty as to its safety.

The remaining chapters appear under the following sensory categories: “Safety and Sight” (Chapter 3, on the Point Douglas

power plant); “Movement and Sound” (Chapter 4, on the widening of the St Lawrence Seaway); “Time and Scale” (Chapter 5, on the damming of the Columbia River to form a reservoir); and “Taste and Expertise” (Chapter 7, on the contaminated Walkerton municipal water supply). It is important to note that in categorizing each chapter according to a particular sensory experience, Parr does not reduce the experiences of those profiled in the case study to that one mode of perception; rather, she highlights the specified sense while at the same time showing interconnections with other modes of perception. The theme that weaves these two layers – the technologies themselves, and the experience of those technologies – into a coherent whole, and that links the chapters together as a continuous narrative, is the notion of the *materiality of everyday life*.

As she states in her introduction, Parr seeks to move beyond “representations . . . in language . . . , to open interpretive space in which to study the robust materiality of technologies, environments, and the everyday, to encounter them as directly and as fleshly as possible” (p. 9). The resulting interpretive space allows for a rich variety of physical entities and associated processes to come to the fore, providing multifaceted illumination of the dialectical relationship between individual (sensing) bodies and larger historical (environmental, technological) forces. This theme is taken up most explicitly in the introductory chapter, “Embodied Histories,” and the conclusion, “Historically Specific Bodies,” in which she thoughtfully unpacks the many implications of these “mutual reworking[s]” (p. 2).

While Parr deftly threads theoretical insights throughout the book, she does so with a light hand, not allowing conceptual formulations to overwhelm the compelling human stories that lie at the heart of the case studies she examines. The result is a supremely readable book in which the changes – always dramatic and often heartbreaking – wrought by technologies of modernity are rendered through the experience of those who endured them. We do not find voiceless victims in these chapters; rather, we hear the voices of local people as they struggle to make sense of their radically altered environments. History is thus brought to life as specific events, places, and times are encountered in all their visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory – i.e., their embodied – reality. Furthermore, Parr has taken an additional, and quite innovative, step in her efforts to reclaim “more thoroughly . . . the embodied ‘lostscapes’ residents mourned” (p. 3). That is, in collaboration with Jon van der Veen, she has created a companion website titled “The Megaprojects New Media Series” (<http://megaprojects.uwo.ca/>), which provides a wide variety of videos, audio recordings, virtual simulations, and other such sensorially rich resources.

Sensory studies is an inherently multi- and interdisciplinary endeavor. Joy Parr exemplifies this with her own dual positioning as historian and geographer, and the multiple perspectives and unconventional insights to be gleaned throughout *Sensing Changes* bear

testimony to the benefits of breaking through disciplinary constraints. In my own case, as someone relatively new to sensory studies, I bring to it my disciplinary background in cultural anthropology, as well as more recent forays into environmental and Canadian studies. The stimulating effect of Parr's vibrant description and cogent analysis on my thinking is amply evidenced by the scribbled notes that fill the margins of my copy of her book. Of the several writing projects I have currently underway at various stages of development, each will be enriched by insights I have gleaned through reading this unique book. I have no doubt that *Sensing Changes* will make important contributions to the field of sensory studies and that other readers, approaching their own topics in diverse locations and from various disciplinary backgrounds, will, like this reviewer, find edification and inspiration in the pages of this remarkable book.

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