An Interrogation of Sensory Anthropology of and in Japan

Hannah Gould, The University of Melbourne
Richard Chenhall, The University of Melbourne
Tamara Kohn, The University of Melbourne
Carolyn S. Stevens, Monash University

ABSTRACT
Sensory anthropology has quickly become a dynamic and expansive field of contemporary scholarship, with ethnographers increasingly interested in diverse sensory cosmologies as indicative of a “sensory turn” in anthropology. However, there has also been a tendency for these scholars to work in a linguistic silo, and overlook the potential contributions of local knowledge and scholarship. In this article, we begin to address this gap by bringing Japanese and English language scholarship on the senses in Japan into conversation to interrogate linguistic and cultural divides. Critical examination of these intertwined academic traditions not only provides new intellectual resources, it challenges assumed categories of analysis and deepens our understanding of cultural sensory formations.

[Keywords: Sensory Anthropology, senses, Japan, local knowledge]
Introduction

Imada Tadahiko\(^1\) recounts how, at the beginning of summers during the early Shōwa period in Japan (1926–1989), people gathered to listen to the sound of lotus flowers blooming at Shinobazunoike Pond in Ueno Park, Tokyo (1994).\(^2\) The noise of a lotus bud blooming is outside the 20 to 20,000 Hz range that human ears can detect. Nonetheless, Imada suggests, people “loved and wanted to listen to that phantom sound. The experience was a kind of communal auditory hallucination” (1994:5). In this way, sensations slip between modes (such as sight, smell, and sound), and are modulated by collective imagination and memory. Moreover, sensory perception is not only a physical process but is also inflected by distinct cultural sensibilities, vocabularies, as well as academic traditions of study. This anecdote indicates the prominent position of the senses—and of sound in particular—within Japan’s cultural and literary history. Sound plays a significant role in constructing cultural contexts: from the sonic aesthetic of suikinkutsu water features in traditional Japanese gardens (Tanaka 1991), to the isolation and elevation of particular timbres in the tea ceremony (Kondo 1985); from the bustle of matsuri religious festivals (Yanagawa 1976), to the pachinko stores and pedestrian crossings that typify Japan’s bustling cityscapes today (Yoshimura 1990).

The cultural context of sound and hearing is an important topic in Japanese scholarship, with soundscape studies flourishing from the 1990s into a major interdisciplinary field, drawing contributions from anthropologists, architects, and musicology scholars. In Anglophone scholarship, sensory studies has become an established subfield in anthropology, and Western scholars have long looked out to the wider world, including Japan, to explore diverse sensory cosmologies. However, the history and structure of the sensory turn itself within other academic traditions is yet to be adequately explored. Porcello et al.’s insightful review article (2015:51–52) identifies three major genealogies for sensory anthropology: communication theories taken up by David Howes and Constance Classen; phenomenological studies advanced by Paul Stoller; and a focus on materialities as demonstrated in the work of Nadia Seremetakis. Another contribution comes from film studies, for example, the “Sensory Ethnography Lab” directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor at Harvard University. Together, these four genres of inquiry address sensory studies within only the Anglocentric anthropological tradition, when there is in fact a wealth of diverse sensory anthropologies elsewhere. A vital part of a given sensory culture is the
intellectual tradition of studying the senses within that society. Without engaging with these diverse scholarships, we perpetuate a troubling trend in anthropological history to dismiss local expertise (see Herzfeld 2010), and ignore how culturally embedded thinkers have critically reflected upon their own sensory formations.

We became interested in exploring the contrasting histories of sensory studies in Japan as part of our ongoing collaborative research project Sonic Japan. Through our work on sound, we have realized that the auditory can never exist in a sensory vacuum, and we have sought out other descriptive and theoretical analytics to embed sound in a range of experiential contexts. In this article, we review the Japanese scholarly literature of the senses in dialogue with its English counterpart, as the Japanese ideas have yet to be widely adapted by the English-speaking academic community (Taninaka 2009:35). In doing so, we seek to bring Japanese language material on sensory anthropology to a wider audience, to deepen an understanding of sensory studies through material outside its Anglocentric core, and to demonstrate the formation of, and occasional interactions between, two intellectual histories. This discussion serves as a case study to illustrate how sensory anthropology can be advanced through cross-cultural consideration, and to imagine a more global approach to its study.

Sensory Anthropology

Since the 1980s, proponents of the “sensorial turn” in the social sciences (Classen and Howes 2006) have argued for both “a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture” (Howes and Classen 2014:13). Such an orientation challenges the primacy of a universal bodily experience, and foregrounds a focus on the cultural construction of sensation. It further seeks to restore a more immediate and holistic quality to ethnographic writing (Seremetakis 1996, Stoller 1997). This points us in two potential directions: on the one hand, it offers a new subject and analytical framing of anthropological enquiry (as “the anthropology of the senses”), while on the other hand, it provides us with new tools or methods for gathering data (as “sensory anthropology”). Although it may draw from a variety of ethnographic sources, the sensory movement as we know it does not always draw on diverse intellectual traditions across multiple languages.
What might this sensorial turn mean in Japan(ese)? Howes has suggested that the sensory turn has arguably “become a force” within the contemporary Japanese academy (2013:6). He refers to a 2011 symposium on “Multisensory Aesthetics and the Cultural Life of the Senses” and the fact that two of Classen’s books were translated into Japanese before Portuguese or Greek, which “suggests that Japan is even more attuned to the senses than these two famously sensuous European societies” (2013:16). However, outside of this most recent translation into the Japanese academy, “sensory anthropology” or “sensory studies” is not a widely salient term or cohesive program of study in Japan, despite the senses often emerging as important themes within ethnography.

The Japanese academy is an important space of intellectual exchange between the West and East, but the flow of ideas has been decidedly unbalanced (Kuwayama 2004, Ryang 2004). This is the result of linguistic barriers, varied publication distribution circles, and uneven power relations. Kuwayama thus argues that “seen globally, Japan is placed on the periphery of the academic world system,” whereby the Japanese “resemble anthropologists’ ‘natives’ because they have long been objects of representation, but their voice hardly reaches the centre of the system” (2004:1). With notable exceptions, as Yamashita et al. state, “Japanese cultural anthropology, unlike the Japanese economy, imports too much and exports too little,” particularly when it comes to theory (2004:7; see also Matthews 2004).

Indeed, we find few direct or immediate equivalents to “the sensory turn” or “sensory studies” being used widely in the Japanese language literature. The terms kankaku and chikaku are both terms that refer to the “senses”; both terms employ the suffix -kaku which means consciousness, but the former is more tactile (kan- refers to feeling, both emotional and physical, while chi- means intellect. The subtle difference between the two would be consciousness of bodily sensations versus mindfulness of these phenomena). In Japanese, the slippage between physical sensation, emotion, and intellect is further complicated by the frequent use of terms kansei, which refers to “sensitivity,” and ishiki or “awareness.” This spectrum of Japanese lexemes speaks to prominent themes in the Japanese literature of inter-sensoriality, the intertwinement of mind and body, and how the senses are constitutive of one’s subjective position in the world.
We foreground these linguistic intricacies not as a quibble about terminology, nor as a clichéd reference to a unique untranslatability of Japanese, but to highlight how discussions of the senses always invoke questions of transmission and translation, and what is lost, gained, or transformed through these processes. A common but illustrative example is the Japanese term umami, the “pleasant savoury taste” or glutamate reception, discovered by chemist Ikeda Kikunae. Umami has been integrated into the English sensory vocabulary (Barbot et al. 2009), which begs the question: did the English language gain a word to describe a taste, or did English language speakers gain a taste?

Before moving on to the substantive analysis of the Japanese literature, a few words about definitions are in order. The distinction between “Japanese” and “English” (or “Western”), or “native” and “foreign” anthropologists, is, more frequently than not, blurred. This complexity derives not only from the large numbers of biracial or multiracial scholars, but also from an increasingly globalized academic workforce whose members teach, research, and publish outside their “home” locales and languages. Kuwayama offers clarification, by defining a native anthropologist as “a native of Japan not because he [sic] is a citizen of Japan, but because he [sic] writes in Japanese for Japanese readers from a Japanese viewpoint…[and] there is no single narrative point of view, for cultural experience is multiple” (2004:19). The key distinction here is audience; too often, Western scholars primarily write about Japan for other Western scholars. In this article, we approach the distinction between English and Japanese scholarship as prefaced on linguistic difference and publication industries that distribute research to different audiences. This distinction, although fraught, is useful precisely because it demonstrates how ideas circulate through global academic communities; that is, who gets read by whom.

Lastly, the discussion that follows in this article is not organized by groupings of discrete senses; rather, we have elected to sort the literature by research clusters or themes in order to acknowledge the inter-sensoriality of experience. Within each thematic cluster, we aim to bring into conversation English and Japanese language literature, and to highlight the differences and similarities in approach. Each cluster demonstrates the diverse pathways through which the senses have entered scholarship of Japan, and their varied theorization and deployment as research tools in each language.
Additionally, this article privileges sound and its interaction with other senses. We acknowledge a substantial corpus in visual anthropology, which has often developed independently of sensory studies (Pink 2006). These decisions will inevitably create some gaps, but our analysis is not intended as an exhaustive review of the literature. Instead, we hope to reveal the potentials for collaboration between distinct lineages of research on the senses.

**Theme 1: Foodways and the Senses**

The field notes of many scholars of Japan are literally spotted with food culture, recalling the ethnographer’s experience of the slurping sound of noodles, the crunch of pickles or rice crackers, or the bitter taste of tea. Given the complexity of Japanese food culture, it is no surprise then that food has received sustained and enthusiastic attention from both English and Japanese language scholars.

The topic of *washoku* (Japanese culinary culture) has drawn international attention as both Japanese and English speaking authors have published voluminously on the topic (see for example, Ishige 2001, Kamakura 2007, and the multi-volume set edited by Haga and Ishikawa 1996–1999), linking food to nationalist endeavours (see Cwiertka 2006, Surak 2013, Takeda 2008), including the recent successful campaign to have it classified as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage (Rath 2012). Writing in English, Japanese scholar Takeda describes contemporary food discourse in Japan as “a powerful biopolitical device...propagating the notion of ‘delicious food in a beautiful country’ around which Japanese people are expected to organize their everyday lives” (2008:5). Similarly, *bentō* (lunch boxes) have been analyzed as an ideological state apparatus indexing the labor of Japanese mothers (Allison 1991), and as marketable products of regional identity (Noguchi 1994). In Japan, food plays the role of a geographical marker, with the famous local specialities (*meibutsu*) fueling domestic tourism (Barbaro 2007:101). Across national borders, Japanese food also works as a kind of edible soft power (Bestor 2004).

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney’s work *Rice as Self* (1994)⁵ presents a central metaphor for food culture and Japanese culture as it argues that rice (specifically short-grain, Japanese-grown *japonica* rice) anchors Japanese identity in opposition to a “Westerners as meat” trope. Another common motif that links washoku to collective identity is a heightened awareness of
nature and the changing seasons in Japanese food, dictating ingredients used and informing the aesthetic of their presentation (Hayashi 1989:282).

While the above studies of Japanese food culture have provided crucial insights, they have also mostly approached food as a symbolic and discursive material object. Brembeck (2013:33) notes that the sensory turn has had little impact on the sub-discipline of food studies more broadly, despite notable exceptions (see Sutton 2010, Herzfeld 2011). With respect to the Japanese case, there are rich sensory experiences that are to be had in growing food; in the cooking, presenting, and eating of it; and in the clearing up and disposal of food in everyday life. Celebrated studies such as Bestor’s (2004) account of the globalization of sushi, however, privilege social and political factors over specific material and sensory properties of the foodstuff.

Some examples of where the sensory turn is being adopted include Higa Rima’s (2015a, 2015b) recent studies on Okinawan identity and pigs. Higa puts the smell, texture, and taste of pork at the center of her analysis of its commodification, positioning her work in direct response to sensory anthropologists like Stoller and Howes, but emphasizing the need for greater attention to sensory diversity within cultures and across time. In English, the publication The Essence of Japanese Cuisine (Ashkenazi and Jacob 2013) strikes a distinctly different tone to the authors’ previous work, Food Culture in Japan (2003), in its exploration of the subjective sensory and emotional experience of eating, interwoven through a social history of food production and consumption.

Another interesting example in Japanese language scholarship is the collaboration between anthropology and the food sciences, led by The Japanese Association for the Study of Taste and Smell. This sensory-driven research project has described the historical development of the national palate (see also Kondō 1983, Sato 1978). Furthermore, a vibrant research cluster has developed in Japan around the interrelation between sensation and language, for example, Oishii: kankaku to kotoba shokkan no sedai (Tasty: Sensation and Language, The Age of Food Texture) (Ōhashi 2010). Ōhashi describes a revolution in the perception of deliciousness in Japan, where flavor has been replaced by “mouthfeel” (shokkan) as the key determinant factor. This shift is reflected in the rise of texture-based onomatopoeic expressions used to describe pleasant tastes, from mochi-mochi (springy) and hokkori (warm and fluffy) to toro-toro (oily; fatty). Onomatopoeia (giongo) and mimetics (gitaigo) such as these are a
prominent feature of Japanese (Yaguchi 2011), and reveal synaesthetic crossings at the heart of how sensation is conceived and communicated. Indeed, the rich multivocality of these Japanese linguistic terms and the associated “critical spirit exerted in every register of feeling and sensibility” caught the attention of Claude Lévi-Strauss (2013:32), who wrote about this in his discussion of the place of Japanese culture in the world, reflecting on his visits to the country in the 1970s and 1980s.

While some of the anthropological literature on food in Japan lacks an engagement with the sensorial aspects of production and consumption, there are hints at more sensory turns, emerging from linguistics and food science. Rather than focusing on food as a socio-political discourse representative of identity, going forward, sensory studies of Japanese foodways should also include a phenomenological engagement with taste (and smell) as well as visuals.

**Theme 2: The Traditional Arts—Bodily Regimes and Sensory Affects**

Compared to the literature in food studies, studies of traditional arts (geidō) tend to put the sensory experience of the ethnographer front and center. Geidō includes budō (martial arts) and other leisure practices, such as flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and dance. Studies in this field provide some of the richest ethnographic description of sensory experience in Japan, offering up valuable seams of experiential sensory accounts to be mined. Work in this area reveals the interconnection between the phenomenological and sensory turns, in both Japanese and English literature, and how the former has primed scholars to attend to the sensory dimension.

Writing about traditional arts in Japan is often concerned with describing a specific aesthetic, as well as emphasizing the categorization of various art forms as “Japanese.” The term “aesthetic,” derived from the Greek *aisthesis*, references multi-modal sensory perception, rather than a particular idea of beauty (van Damme 1996:52–54). Japanese arts are often described in terms of their inter-sensoriality or synaesthetic affect. Howes describes kōdō or incense appreciation as a practice of “crossing sensory borders...the imbrication of the senses” (2013:16). The practice is described as “listening to the incense” (*kō wo kiku*), the types of incense are traditionally classified by taste (sweet, sour, hot, salty, bitter), and the
incense summons either literary (verbal) or scenic (visual) associations (2013:16, 78; see also Moeran 2007).

Secondly, the temporal ephemerality of the senses is central to the traditional arts aesthetic (Classen and Howes 2006:215). For example, Kondo depicts tea ceremony as a progressive revelation of individual sensory elements against a background of silence (1985:296–298), for example, the release of steam from the boiling iron kettle. This aesthetic associated with traditional Japanese arts has important consequences in terms of how the arts are preserved and displayed. For example, Classen and Howes (2006) suggest how, by extracting ritual implements from their performative context, the sequentiality of the sensory experience is disrupted. Frozen in a museum, “like a still, stuffed carcass in a nature display,” what was once a multi-sensory artifact becomes the object of sight alone (2006:215).

Contemporary English scholarly works on Japanese dance and the martial arts, and to a lesser extent Japanese language works on those practices, draw heavily on senses in conjunction with phenomenological theory to frame the research. For example, in her ethnography of Japanese dance, Hahn (2007) draws on this broader phenomenological framing of the relation between the body and the senses. She suggests that “the senses reside in a unique position as the interface between body, self and the world. They are beautiful transmission devices, through which we take in information, comprehend the experience, assign meaning, and often react to the stimuli” (2007:3). Put more simply, “we are situated by sensual orientations” (2007:3). Perhaps one of the most dedicated scholars of embodiment in Japanese is anthropologist Sugawara Kazuyoshi. His edited volume Shintaika no jinruigaku (The Anthropology of Embodiment) draws on theories of Merleau-Ponty and suggests from the start that embodiment refers to “how human life is grounded in the physical world via our bodies, just like other animals” (2013:i). Sugawara’s collection explores the boundaries of such embodiment, from the “super physicality” of the mathematician engaged in abstract thought, to the future-gazing of virtual reality without a body (2013).

Several scholars writing in Japanese have addressed the idea of a culturally-specific “Japanese embodiment.” For example, in their popular book Shintaichi (Embodied Knowledge), Uchida and Misago (2006) draw on a range of everyday ethnographic encounters with walking, dressing, and talking in Japan to meditate on the vast abilities of “body-specific intelligence,” to sense danger, read the atmosphere of a place, and practice
empathy. In a similar vein, in *Kindai Nihon no Shintaikankaku (Contemporary Japanese Bodily Sensations)*, editors Kuriyama and Kitazawa (2004) bring together the works of 12 scholars to consider how bodily sensations are constantly transformed by changes in society and culture. The text presents five interrelated phenomena which mark a turning point in the transformation of contemporary experiences of Japanese embodiment. Firstly, it describes shifts in how experiences have been conceptualized and treated within modern medicine over time. Secondly, it highlights the media-driven rise of contemporary beautification processes, against a historical background describing the “yellow race” inferiority complex and skin-tone based class stratification. Thirdly, contributors discuss how the sense of sight or mode of vision is increasingly emphasized in contemporary Japan, illustrated through the contemporary popularity of “visual lunch boxes (*bentō*),” which are consumed with attention to their riot of color as well as to their symbolic expression of motherly love. The fourth section concerns physicality and control in contemporary society seen through the phenomenon of “energy drinks” and “death from overwork (*karōshi*).” Finally, contributors discuss an ongoing commitment to the ideal of preserving the Japanese heart/spirit (*kokoro*) through structured aesthetic practices. Through this ambitious work spanning vast historical periods and geographical regions, Kuriyama and Kitazawa lavishly illustrate how superstructure changes in ideology and thought are dependent on substructure changes in sensory and physical experience.

English language studies of Japan and embodiment tend to cluster around the martial arts rather than everyday experience. They further tend towards reflexivity as well as a curiosity about how practitioners variously position themselves in the world through growing mastery in a deeply embodied craft (e.g., Cohen 2006 on karate, Kohn 2011 on aikido). Kondo (1990) suggests that the teaching of traditional arts primarily occurs through embodied observation, imitation, illustration, and performance. The ethnographer’s body thus becomes a key site of knowledge production and knowledge is passed on through set forms—known as *kata* or *temae*—which must be copied by the student and imprinted into the body through disciplined repetition and absorption before creativity becomes possible (Cox 2007, Keister 2004:146, Kohn 2008:102–104). Practitioners often use expressions such as *karada de oboeru* (to learn by the body), *gijutsu wo mi ni tsukeru* (to attach skills to self), or *ude wo migaku* (to polish one’s arm) (Kondo 1990). Learning new art forms can lead to enhanced
sensitivity to the position of the body in space, or proprioception (Moore 2014), as well as mental or social perception. The study of traditional Japanese drumming is a particularly good example of the learner’s body as a conduit for the acquisition of knowledge. As noted in the opening of Bender’s *Taiko Boom*, sound, vision, and bodily sensations are inextricably intertwined:

Hitting the rim and drum simultaneously, they drive the sound to an ear-splitting crescendo—TA-KA-TA-KA-TA-KA-TA-KA. Their flailing arms become a blur of vertical lines framed by their rigid bodies. Sound swirls around the interior of the hall, slicing like a knife at the planks supporting me. Overwhelmed, I cover my ears. Still, the sound reverberates through me… (2012:1–2)

Through the process of learning taiko, this “noise” transformed into intelligible sound, as simultaneously, Bender’s body grew strong enough to participate in drumming. However, students often encounter particular hierarchies and power structures in the arts, which can restrict as much as it awards sensory expression. van Ede’s (2014:156) sensuous analysis of Flamenco teaching in Japan describes the liberation that rhythmic stamping of feet provides in the context of Tokyo’s restrictions around noise and morals of proper female behavior. However, at public dance performances, only semi-professional practitioners were permitted to be heard, and the sound of their performance was amplified. By contrast, during the dance performances of the amateur housewives, microphones around the stage were switched off, and the teachers clapped to drown out the natural sounds of these performers. In this way, according to van Ede, only the feet of certain performers were allowed to express rhythmic sound to the public (2014:156–157).

Our own research in the Sonic Japan project has considered points of connection between embodied practice, discipline, and reflexive sensory/sonic experience. Kohn and Chenhall (2017), for example, have produced a comparative study of aikido and shakuhachi practice in Japan. Both practices were digitally recorded by the authors while they were themselves involved in the training, and their piece considers the felt differences between memories of actively being in sound (a publicly audible sound further augmented by the sounds of the body, vibrations, feelings, and other sensations) and passively listening to recorded sounds after the fact.
(that is, sound bereft of such embodied feeling but including sounds the ears blocked out in practice). The study of these Japanese arts calls for what Clifford has dubbed “the ethnographic ear” (1986:12), and in Kohn and Chenhall’s comparative case, this ethnographic ear learns through doing.

Historically, within Japan, the traditional arts have been linked to the civilizing project of the state, and the sensory disposition they foster can be described as a particularly Japanese perspective on the world. For example, there is an extended reflexive engagement in the Japanese language literature on seiza, a formal sitting position, where one kneels, sitting on the feet. Seiza is cultivated in martial arts and tea ceremony, as an expression of a formal Japanese comportment (Yatabe 2007, Tei 2009 also, Surak 2013:26–27 in English). Similarly, Uchida and Misago combine physical behavior and culture when they extol the virtues of the art and daily practice of kimono wearing, which they say “expands the sense [kankaku] of one's body beyond the boundary of the body,” to deepen one's awareness of their environment (2006:42). And in English, Hahn describes learning dance as “a cultural sensibility, a Japanese way of knowing” (2007:1). Notably, these bodily practices are proving difficult to maintain in contemporary Japan as kimono wearing in traditional modes is in decline (see Hall 2016) and furniture stores sell various cushions and supports to assist people in the position of seiza. And as Kohn (2011) has detailed, the embodiments cultivated in Japanese martial arts also travel beyond Japan, such that different national bodies meet one another on the mat, and find communality across linguistic and cultural boundaries through shared bodily histories of training.

One further relevant characteristic of the literature on the traditional arts is how notions of “mind” and “body” are not separated from one another. Writing on sport, Horne argues that “traditions of body cultivation in Japan reflect conceptions of mind-body and culture-nature relations which assume their basic harmony and not duality as in the Western tradition” (2000:77). In her ethnography of female amateur Noh students, Moore describes how advanced practitioners come to experience a mental state of mushin, a Zen Buddhist concept literally meaning “no-mind” (2014:77). Mushin arises from heightened awareness of bodily movement, relevant in all the Zen arts, as well as the sounds emanating from the Noh dancer as she chants (2014:78). Moore (1990) compares this state to Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow,” as an experience of focused
awareness. In this way, the ambiguity of the Japanese terms for “sense” (kanchi and ishiki), which include the morphemes for “knowledge” and “awareness,” appears quite appropriate.

**Theme 3: Sense and Sensibility in Religion and Healing**

The interconnection of the body, mind, and senses is also of central concern in sensory work relating to the practice of religion and healing. Research in these areas demonstrates the strength of (mostly Western) phenomenological theory in framing sensory approaches to Japan. What the following section reveals, however, is a failure to acknowledge and incorporate into such framing, various ideas surrounding sensory research produced in Japanese, which might extend or possibly challenge concepts of phenomenological and sensory experience in Anglophone anthropology.

Historically, English language studies of Japanese religion have been overwhelmingly concentrated around doctrinal debates, symbolic analysis, and art history. Their disregard for the senses is particularly entrenched given that the sacred is often defined in regard to transcendence over physical, visceral experience (Morgan 2010). One early Japanese scholar to analyse sensory dimensions was Yanagawa Keiichi, who wrote *Matsuri no Kankaku* (The Sensations of Religious Festivals, 1976). In it, Yanagawa gives an overview of prominent anthropological approaches to studying matsuri (festivals)—from symbolic, structural, and political perspectives—but finds greatest value in the rich sensory descriptions of scholars’ accounts. Sensory experiences include not only perceptions of color, sound, taste, and light, but also the authors’ visceral sensations of the organs after dancing, and the participants’ hunger and nausea. Yanagawa thus defines matsuri not as a “mere system of symbols,” but a ritual in which the senses are exploited as a tool to create a specific sensual state of consciousness, a “sentiment of the holy” (seinaru kanjō). Unfortunately, Yanagawa’s turn towards the senses appears to have had minor impact inside the Japanese academy, and is only infrequently cited in English studies of material religion outside Japan. Indeed, in English, Prohl (2015:11) suggests that until recently, the total sensory experience of matsuri, temples, pilgrimages, and other religious practices was largely forgotten by scholars.
One of the most productive lines of enquiry in studies of “sensational religion” has been the training of the bodily senses towards a higher state of morality or divinity. If religions are considered “venues where cognitive and sensuous perception is taking place” (Prohl 2015:11), then the body can be understood as a central site of mediation. Embodied religious practices, like Zen Buddhist meditation or zazen provide “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendent” (Meyer 2006:9).

Although not explicitly sensory in its focus, the importance of the body as conduit to higher spiritual states was recognized early on in Western anthropologists’ theorizing on Japan. For example, in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, Ruth Benedict argues that a “well-accepted principle of Japanese psychic economy” is that “the will should be supreme over the almost infinitely teachable body” (1946:230). Rather than act only upon the mind, zazen sharpens the senses, until one can “perceive soundless footsteps and be able to follow them accurately as they pass from one place to another” (1946:235). Thus, decades later, Prohl describes zazen as offering “cognitive as well as sensuous access to the transcendental sphere of Zen Buddhism” (2015:13).

The distinction between medicine and religion is often unclear and therapeutic practices often assert their explicit or implicit unity with spiritual beliefs. Naikan therapy (naikan literally means “looking inside” oneself) is a structured method of self-reflection that draws on the tradition of mishirabe (ascetic contrition), involving sensory deprivation. Ozawa de Silva’s (2006) work considers people undertaking naikan therapy, who sit for over 100 hours in a single week, confined to a space three square feet large and enclosed in a paper screen. Via sensory deprivation, prescribed rituals of bodily practice, and formalized ways of remembering the past, naikan is thought to trigger memories and vivid sensory experiences that help in healing (Ozawa de Silva 2006; see also Kondo and Kitanishi 2014 on a similar practice called Morita therapy). The importance of touch and visceral sensations also surfaces in studies of medicine and associated media and technologies. Stevens (2011), for example, describes the seal-type therapeutic robot “Paro,” developed by Shibata Takanori in the context of aged care for particularly frail patients, as evidence of the importance of touch—and generating the desire to touch—in therapeutic encounters.
Whilst sensory training often takes place via deprivation, Lobetti (2013) describes the opposite and equally powerful practice of *shugendō*, literally “the path of training and testing,” involving withstanding intense physical sensations. Lobetti describes shugendō as a collection of bodily hermeneutics—from crossing hot coals, to standing under a running waterfall, to hiking across mountains—that work on a model of “ontological progression” towards enlightenment, a bodily process called “corporis ascendus.” He also asks readers to reconsider an understanding of pain as “a disagreeable sensation to be avoided at all costs,” because this disregards humanity’s extreme capability to extract meaning beyond “mere” physical bodily sensations (Lobetti 2013:118).

In response to top-down sensory programs, in his sensory analysis of the Saigoku pilgrimage route, Barbaro demonstrates that “sensescapes” are not fixed entities, but “processes during which the pilgrim is simultaneously the creator and the user of the environment” (2007:88). The body plays a dual role as both a recipient of sensory experience and generator of sensations, and Barbaro emphasizes the agency of individual pilgrims as “architects of the experiential process” (2007:87). Contemporary pilgrims make a concerted effort to engage with sensescapes traditionally associated with walking the Saigoku route (such as extreme cold, physical exertion, and hunger). These individuals eschew readily available tour buses, which create a different sensory world that offers a vision-centered “tourist gaze.” Regardless of the paths chosen, the pilgrims’ sensescapes are both “imagined” and experienced; for example, pilgrims describe temple grounds as silent landscapes punctuated with bell strokes and incense, despite their often being located in densely populated city centers, filled with crowds and chatter (2007:101).

Alongside studies focusing on bodily experience, sensory approaches to Japanese religion have been motivated by the material culture turn from the 1980s, and the emerging subfield of “material religious studies” (Morgan 2010). Material culture scholars advocate for moving away from treating goods as signs, to recognizing “their most obvious property, their materiality. The weight, shape, flavor, odor, coarseness, or fineness of things that require us to interact with them in specific ways” (Colloredo-Mansfield 1999:38; see also Daniels 2010). In Buddhist studies, Faure argues that scholars must “free ourselves from the obsession with meaning... and form (style) in order to retrieve the affect, effectivity, and function” (1998:787). Not only do sacred objects produce sensory affects, but
people also use objects in sensory ways to engage with invisible spirit entities (Suzuki 2014:73, Mochizuki 2014). Suzuki’s historical study of the Heian period (794–1185) describes this realm as “fully saturated by multisensorial exchanges” between a network of spirits, things, and people, who perform apotropaic rituals in order to maintain a harmonious cosmic order and control malign spirits (2014:76).

Whilst the adoption of ascetic practices and the treatment of sacred idols appear to take place in more rarified cases, the intersection of the senses and morality also works on a more mundane level in Japan. Japanese classical folklorists have studied the concept of *kegare* (contamination) (Yanagita 1993:29) and the tripartite *kegare-hare-ke* structure, which corresponds roughly to “contaminated-transcendent-mundane” (Sakurai 1988:35–367), and focuses on links between the body and spiritual and affective wellbeing. In this way, by focusing on moral and medical systems for tuning the body towards divinity and health, sensory studies have made inroads into Japanese anthropology that are ripe for further analysis.

**A Focus on Soundscapes and Spatiality**

The previous sections have charted out a few predominant themes in sensory scholarship in and about Japan. This section, however, highlights one of the most active fields of sensory research in Japan today: the study of soundscapes and sonic practice. This field is characterized by theoretically and methodologically distinct strands of Japanese and English language scholarship, which are only beginning to converse, and to reveal tensions and potentials for collaboration. Taninaka (2009:35) suggests scholarship in both languages is fundamentally concerned with understanding how space—often thought to be a primarily visual entity—is constructed and experienced through sound, as well as the dynamic interplay between the soundscape and all five senses.

The Japanese interdisciplinary field of acoustic ecology (*oto no kankyō*) or soundscape studies (*saundosukēpugaku*) predates much of the sensory turn in Western academia. Founded in 1993, “The Soundscape Association of Japan” has promoted activities in acoustic ecology, and the 1994 edited collection *Nihon no oto no bunka* (*Japan’s Sound Culture*) (Kojima 1994), gives a multifaceted account of acoustics of Japanese culture, from the popularity of karaoke to the chirping of crickets in summer.
The soundscape movement was inspired by works of Canadian scholar Murray R. Schafer, particularly *The Tuning of the World* (1977), translated into Japanese in 1986 by Torigoe. In Taninaka’s words, the goal of this body of literature is “to encourage as many people as possible to listen to their sound environment with deeper critical awareness and attentiveness” (2009:36).

Soundscape studies were passed on from Schafer to leading Japanese scholars like Torigoe Keiko, author of *Saundosukēpu: sono shisō to jissen* (*Soundscapes: Theory and Practice*, 1997) and *Saundosukēpu no shigaku firudohen* (*The Poetics of Soundscapes Fieldbook*, 2008). Torigoe is also an experienced practitioner of sonic ecology design (Miyazawa 1998). Under Torigoe, soundscape studies moved away from Schafer’s model for describing sonic environments, and towards distinctly applied and interventionist “soundscape composition” or design approaches (Imada 1997, Taninaka 2009). Imada believes Schafer’s concept of soundscapes to be Western-centric (the term in Japanese, *saundosukēpu*, is a transliteration from English), and suggests that “the traditional way of listening in Japan involves a sort of amalgam of environmental sound, instrumental sound, and any other environmental facts” (2005:14). Torigoe’s design practice is emically oriented, defined as “not design from above or design from outside, but design from inside” (Taninaka 2009:36), and always begins with “learning how to listen” (*kikukoto wo manabu koto*). Torigoe introduces fieldwork methods for working in sound, which she calls, after Schafer, an “ear cleaning” and an “ear education.” This includes multisensory activities such as “drawing sound pictures” (*oto no oekaki*), “walking and listening” (*otokiki aruki*), and “sound walks” (*oto no sanpo*) (1997:107).

Anthropologists and social scientists have been joined by architects, artists, and urban designers in this interdisciplinary field, resulting in collaborations between academics, government bodies, and private companies. For example, between 1994 and 1997, the Japanese Ministry for the Environment undertook the “100 Soundscapes of Japan: Preserving Our Heritage” project, which collated public submissions of recordings of natural and cultural landscapes around Japan as “symbols of the richness and wide variety of Japanese nature culture” (Torigoe 2005:8). Torigoe, who assisted with the project, states that the submissions gave her “greater insights into the need for noise abatement, not only from the point of view of our health and wellbeing, but also from the point of being able to hear the proper soundscapes of our local environment” (2005:11).
Through this collaboration, Torigoe says that local people became more aware of the consequences of their sonic practices on others in the community (2005:12).\footnote{11}

One sort of environment that is consistently used as an example of Japanese cultural aesthetics in sound studies is the traditional temple, shrine, or residential Japanese garden. In these spaces, distinctions between natural sounds, constructed noise, and music are challenged, as is the difference between sensory modes (Fowler 2014, 2015). Fowler argues, for example, that sound functions as a design parameter in Japanese gardens, whereby the natural and constructed elements form a tightly woven conglomerate called “auditory scenery” (2015:312). Another example in traditional Japanese art is the suikinkutsu, a water feature constructed of a sunken pot through which water descends, producing a bell-like ringing that seems to emanate from the ground. Tanaka Naoko’s descriptive account of suikinkutsu suggests that the hidden source and unexpected timing of the sound serves to reawaken one’s conscious awareness of even the most familiar garden scenery (1991:121–123). Tanaka evocatively describes the suikinkutsu as a knife that “cuts through the atmosphere of the everyday with that of a different dimension” (1991:134).

More broadly, the distinction between music, noise, and silence is highly contested in research on Japan (Fowler 2014, Plourde 2008, Sasaki 2001, Yoshimura 1990). As a historical example, Imada notes that in the classic text Genji Monogatari (The Tale of Genji) “it seems that ancient Japanese people considered various sounds as the total ‘scenery,’ and being more imaginative than us, there was no border between sound and music in the ancient Japanese sound culture” (1994:2; for further discussion of sound in this text see Tanaka 1989, Fowler 2014:66). Nakagawa’s (2004) study, set in a similar time frame, elaborately reconstructs a historical sound cosmos in Heian Period Kyoto. Rather than just describing this landscape in audible terms, Nakagawa (2004) draws on classical texts that illuminate other spatial and social factors, such as the geographical position of temple bells, the suppression of public performances within the city after the death of elites, and the acoustic ranges of the Gion Festival, to construct a total sonic world that blends music and noise.

English language soundscape studies draw, as would be expected, from a somewhat different range of disciplinary knowledge and literature, honing in on how sound and spatiality together interact with structures of power. In Sound, Space and Sociality in Modern Japan, Hankins and
Stevens choose to deploy the term “sonic practice” over “soundscapes” to describe the active, embodied practices involved in making sound meaningful in Japan (2014:2). Recent publications on emplaced sonic environments include Imai (2008), Novak (2010), Plourde (2014), and Hagen (2014), who reflexively work with their own ethnographic “sense-ibilities” (pun intended) alongside other local knowledges to map these areas. In opposition to ocular, “top-down” perspectives of the city, these scholars take a distinctly de Certeau-inspired approach to discovering an on-the-ground urban landscape, where sensory dimensions shape everyday urban life as much as historic, economic, or social aspects of that place (Imai 2008:331). Hagen describes how sounds emplace listeners within the locality of Konohana, Osaka, through the inter-sensorial coordination of “listening,” including seeing (the sky), smelling (the saltwater), hearing (the bell and reed flute), and tasting (ramen and tofu). But this landscape depends on people learning the appropriate perceptual, cultural, and performative affordances of those sounds (Hagen 2014, Plourde 2014). As such, the ethnographer must undertake a kind of auditory apprenticeship to gain a “local ear.” With reference to training the ear, Plourde has written about onkyō, an extremely minimal, improvisatory style that focuses on “sound texture, gaps, and silences,” challenging the distinction between noise and music (2008:270). Plourde (2014) argues that repeated listening to onkyō allows individuals to experience and appreciate everyday auditory signals more deeply.

Ethnographies on Japan often emphasize inter-sensorality in constructions of space. Combining visual and auditory methods, Yoshimura Hiroshi’s publication Toshi no oto “borrows the lens of soundscapes” to sketch the diverse sound ecology of the city, “like peeking through the camera viewfinder, [I] capture snap photographic portraits that speak to the relationship between the people, city and environment, and to become one-shot ‘spectacles of sound’” (1990:ii). Yoshimura draws a distinction between two types of soundscape design: one found in Western European cities, which seeks to regain nature by creating a quiet (shizuka) environment; and the other found in “Asian cities,” which seeks to inject vigor via “noisy, boisterous, energetic, and festive” sounds (1990:ii).

Such a focus on sonic aesthetics and spatio-sensory association gives way in some English language studies to a focus on sound and control. Sound is often experienced as something to be controlled in order to preserve social harmony, and something that can actively impact its listening
publics. Hankins and Stevens (2014) describe how in Japan, some sounds act as directives for “proper” actions and attitudes. While the idea has become somewhat stereotyped over the years, some sociologists refer to Japan as a kanri shakai—a “managed society”—where shared ideas about “proper” social relations (termed as jōshiki, or common sense) guide and control people’s bodies in socially acceptable interactions (Lewis and Kogawa 1993). Sound is used to warn people to be mindful of jōshiki—for example, auditory signals over community loudspeakers have been used for decades to tell auditory residents about weather issues and traffic conditions.

Disagreements around sonic control have been met with practices of sonic resistance. Cox (2010) describes how ambient aircraft noise surrounding US bases in Okinawa has led to competing practices of listening and monitoring by locals, the government, and military. What might represent “the sound of freedom” for members of the US Air Force, is simultaneously a potential health hazard to residents. Numerous works on sonic disputes come from ethnomusicological studies of music in public space. For example, Manabe (2015) documents the struggles of alternative musicians to have anti-nuclear protest songs heard on mainstream media. Similarly, Abe (2016) describes how chindonya, an ostentatious musical advertisement practice for the streets, has become politicized as a sonic emblem of the post-3/11 anti-nuclear protest movement, but comes into tension with other forms of sonic expression in response to the disaster, including the socially mandated silence of jishuku (“self-restraint”).

Discussion
Our examination of the literature of sensory anthropology in Japan reveals strong roots in theories of communication, materiality, and phenomenology, which reflects work in the English literature (Porcello et al. 2010). The Japanese language literature reveals alternative entry points for sensory studies. To deepen our understanding of the Japanese view of sensory studies, it is helpful at this point to return to Howes and Classen’s description of the sensory turn as encompassing both “a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture” (2014:13). This distinction is a subtle but important one, which David Howes and Sarah Pink debate as the distinction between “anthropology of the senses” and “sensory anthropology” (2010). The former approach
seeks to map the sensory profile or way of sensing of a particular culture, and has been fruitful in providing examples that contest the universality of modern Western sense categories. The latter uses the senses to scrutinize all facets of human culture, and draws more heavily on phenomenological approaches (e.g., Ingold 2000, Grasseni 2007) and attends to the experiential aspects of doing sense-driven ethnography (Pink 2010:204). Of course, where sensorial ethnographic practice is aimed at the anthropologist tuning their senses to come closer and closer to the emic sensory model of their participants, the two branches converge.

We suggest that this distinction becomes salient in a broad comparison of the English and Japanese approaches to studying the senses in Japan. We suggest that whilst much of the English language literature has adopted a “sensory anthropology (of Japan)” approach, the Japanese literature has more frequently explored an “anthropology of (Japanese) senses.” On the one hand, the influence of the phenomenological turn on how English language scholars approach the senses can be seen in the proliferation of ethnographer-centered sensory explorations of Japanese urban life and artistic practice. On the other hand, there are a number of studies exploring “Japanese ears” (Ogura 1977), “Japanese palates” (Sato 1978), and Japanese ways of sitting (seiza) (Yatabe 2007, Tei 2009). The exception here appears to be soundscape studies, which has developed towards a more interventionist, design-based practice.

An “anthropology of the senses” approach facilitates reflection on the boundaries of what comprises a “sense” in Japan and the cross-cultural viability of this category. For instance, might we consider a “profound consciousness of impermanence” (Laplantine 2010), or the space between things (defined as ma in Japanese) (Di Mare 1990), or inter-personal touch or “skinship” (Tahhan 2014) as a kind of sense perception in Japan? The “anthropology of the senses” approach thus also invites us to consider how “the way of sensing is intimately bound up with the sense of self” (Howes and Classen 2014:20), such that certain sensory aesthetics become national or cultural ways of being. In describing these sensory dispositions, however, we should be wary not to fall into the traps of nihonjinron literature, which assumes an essential, exclusive, or naturally Japanese character. Rather, an anthropological study of Japanese senses is improved by recognizing, as with work on identity studies, the dynamic, multiple, contested nature of such phenomena.
In this critical review of sensory scholarship in and about Japan, we found a marked recognition of sensory phenomena as culturally significant by both Japanese and English speaking scholars, even if the authors were not explicitly working in sensory studies. We found that there was an uneven flow of ideas between the Anglophone and the Japanese academes, with North American and UK scholars having more influence on Japanese scholars than *vice versa*. This is due to a linguistic hegemony which privileges English language scholarship and means that books in English are much more likely to be translated into Japanese than the other way around.

Ultimately, all researchers are a product of particular histories of scholarship that take them through certain frames of understanding when analyzing their fieldwork data, while at the same time they often fail to recognize that in other places, within other academic circles, local scholars have developed their own historically located ways of thinking. Linguistic barriers are not easily dissolved, but even in cases when there is a high level of competency on the part of the researcher, there is often intellectual, emotional, and even sensory “baggage” which will invariably influence the production of scholarly work, as well as the way readers understand any text.

By extending our gaze beyond our scholarship siloes, we can re-evaluate our theoretical priorities and recontextualize our anthropological data to create a more comprehensive view. As anthropologists, we process our fieldwork experiences through our various senses and our diverse sensibilities, and the latter are only enriched by an expanded attentiveness to different histories of inquiry, styles of writing, and modes of experience.

Through our comparative study of the senses in and of Japan, we have traced a series of observations and a few significant “patterns of [academic] culture” (as per Benedict) that demonstrate how a more global anthropology of the senses might emerge. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his posthumously published essay on Japan, *The Other Face of the Moon* (2013), observed the way that late 19th century English and French scholars “domesticated” the “strangeness” of Japan, but what we have found in the discussion above is that most Japanese scholars have been much more adept at domesticating Anglophone literature in their own research on the senses, than English writers have been of their Japanese counterparts. Still, Lévi-Strauss’s suggestion that Orientalist treatises from 19th and 20th century Europe may teach us more about Europe than they do
about Japan gives us pause for thought. We should learn how to attend to a broader scholarship while simultaneously acknowledging the historical frames that have allowed for each anthropological written tradition to develop its own textures, flavors, aromas, and sounds.

Endnotes:

1 All names of authors writing in Japanese are presented according to Japanese convention: surname first, given name second. Translations from Japanese throughout this paper are by the authors, unless noted.

2 A fictional account of this can be found in Kawabata Yasunari’s classic short story The Hat Incident (1926).

3 The authorial team has experience studying and teaching at American, British, Australian, and Japanese universities. Language requirements in higher education vary greatly between institutions, but even in countries with a tradition of doctoral students learning multiple scholarly languages, there is a paucity of attention to what those different traditions reveal.

4 Through this project, we developed Sonic Japan (sonicjapan.clab.org.au), a new digital repository of sounds and images that communicate sonic life in Japan. See also Hankins and Stevens’s (2014) Sound, Space, and Sociality in Modern Japan, for more on the formation of this project.

5 Ohnuki-Tierney is a Japanese anthropologist working in the United States and publishing in English.

6 In Okinawan pork markets, buyers from different generations are likely to act on the basis of different senses: younger people make visual judgements of pig intestines based on color, while older people smell and touch the product to determine quality.

7 In the Japanese context, this term refers to the rise in the beauty industry and changing body aesthetics in 1990s (see Miller 2006).

8 It would be an interesting project for future research to compare the differences and commonalities between these relations of State and body practices in Japan versus those observed in other places, e.g., the mission civilisatrice in France (see Dobie 2004) or the civilizing discourse of “Siwilai” in late 19th/early 20th century Siam (Thongchai 2002).

9 Kegare refers to physical and spiritual pollution, hare refers to life-stimulating activities that cleanse kegare, and ke is the basic force animating everyday life. Notably, Namihara (1984) describes kegare as both a spiritual affliction of human debasement and a visceral contagion that can be transmitted through physical contact with the agents such as blood, sexual fluids, disease, and death.

10 Another major initiative in sound studies in Japan is the International Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) collaborative research cluster called “Otomimikai” (studies of sound and listening), chaired by Hosokawa Shūhei and comprised mainly of Japanese academics, active 2017–2020.

11 Similarly, the “Nagasaki City Sound Project,” established by the city’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry and led by artist Yoshioka Nobutaka, consisted of a large-scale survey of the citiescape’s sound environment, producing sound generators for specific locations (Taninaka 2009).

12 Although in this paper we have focused on sensory studies of or in Japan, it should be noted that many Japanese anthropologists increasingly apply the tools of sensory analysis to other fieldwork locales. This movement is nascent, and scholars tend to be influenced by theorists of the (English) “Sensory Turn” and Material Culture Studies. See, for example, the joint research project “Material Anthropology: Physicality, Sensorality and Ontology,” hosted at The National Museum of Ethnography in Osaka, available at http://www.minpaku.ac.jp/research/activity/project/iurp/11jr142.

References:


An Interrogation of Sensory Anthropology of and in Japan


**Foreign Language Translations:**

An Interrogation of Sensory Anthropology of and in Japan

[Keywords]: Sensory Anthropology, senses, Japan, local knowledge

对于日本本土感官人类学的审问

[关键词]: 感官人类学, 感官, 日本, 地方知识

Допрос сенсорной антропологии о Японии и в Японии

[Ключевые слова]: сенсорная антропология, чувства, Япония, локальные знания

Uma Interrogação de Antropologia Sensorial do e no Japão

[Palavras-chave]: Antropologia sensorial, sentidos, Japão, conhecimento local

استجواب الانتروپولوجيا الحسية في اليابان

كلمات البحث: الانتروپولوجيا الحسية، الحواس، اليابان، المعرفة المحلية