

BOOK REVIEW

## Sensory Anthropology: Culture and Experience in Asia

By Kelvin E. Y. Low. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023.  
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A proliferation of new sources in sensory studies has continued to be published over the last few years across the disciplines. However, there remains a bias towards European or North American contexts within the literature. For that reason alone this new book, *Sensory Anthropology: Culture and Experience in Asia* is a helpful addition to the literature, which will expand the horizons of those writing from all perspectives. If you have been wondering where to find a widely spanned description of the burgeoning literature about sensory Asia, then look no further. Here you have it.

Kelvin E.Y. Low is a scholar whose work has been evident on the cutting edge of sensory studies for many years, writing from Asian perspectives. Just to pick up on a few of his previous works, they include the monograph *Scents and Scent-sibilities: Smell and Everyday Life Experiences* (2009), as well as an edited collection with D. Kalekin-Fishman: *Senses in Cities: Experiences of Urban Settings* (2017), and *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses* (2016), published with the same co-editor. Additionally, he has published many articles that cross sensory studies including conceptualising the olfactory, the gastropolitical, and examining synaesthetic senses. Thus, he comes to the topic with a depth of experience and knowledge that spans diverse cultures, places, and sensescales.

This new book systematically explores culture and experience in Asia through an extensive literature review and via a sensory lens. It is a concise book at 165 pages in length (plus endnotes), but do not be fooled into thinking you will be able to browse it quickly. Low exemplifies in this book “thick text,” in his theoretical ponderings, expounding multifarious examples of sensory studies. Low is generous and expansive in his attention to the many interdisciplinary studies that touch on sensory methodologies and remains up-to-date. He is ambitious in the scope that he anticipates, while he comes through with a widening net that embraces the continent (and many islands constituting regions) of Asia.

Low begins by expounding on methodology, opening with his introduction: “How the Senses are Good to Think With.” He writes, “This book sets a new agenda to explore how the senses transpire across a variety of historical and cultural contexts” (3). He aims to examine works in history, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. He conceives of Asia as non-spatially fixed, but transcending boundaries, unconfined by an East–West polarity, but also including the South and North: transnational and interactive, reflecting the diaspora and migration processes (6). Within this, Low envisages a response to the Western five senses and therefore a new focus on epistemologies arising and transforming within Asia (11). By example, he raises olfaction whereby if “filth and stench signify otherness” (Huang 2016, p. 1099), colonising Western powers aimed to eradicate that stench as a part of a Western narrative of modernity.<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to our recent book that focused on aromas/

<sup>1</sup>Huang (2016).

odours in Asia, Hannah Gould and myself made a similar point, that Western ocularcentrism historically enacted sensory colonialism, by “aligning Asia and its peoples with more ‘debased’ or ‘primal’ senses.”<sup>2</sup> Low intends for his work to contribute to the “sociocultural history of the senses,” and he mentions scholars including Corbin who reads the senses in historical France, as well as sensory studies scholars Classen, Howes, and Smith.<sup>3</sup> Once again, these seminal works through the senses are mainly focused on Europe or alternatively northern America and they add to Low’s argument for more attention to the Asian context. Once Low begins to discuss examples, there is a tendency to brush quickly over the historically focused literature, such that he may move, for example, from early Chinese thought of the “Warring States era,” fifth to third century BCE, to discussing twenty-first-century ethnography in Sumatra, to mid-nineteenth-century Hindu traditions in the space of two pages (for this example, see pp. 26–27). Within this example, not only are the shifts in historical and geographical references considerable, but “Chinese” is referenced as if it is a unitary term, across varied time periods. Nevertheless, as a literature review focused on sensory experience that visits broad historical periods, there is much to learn from the discussion. We may also conclude that Low envisages future studies focused more closely on historically located experience with a sensory lens are to be encouraged.

The author follows the introduction with part 1, specifically challenging the dominance of that “five-senses model” that has been employed in Western contexts (13). Part 1 is split into “Sensory Models and Modalities” and “Sensory Moral Economies.” Here, Low questions the “hegemonic Romano-Grecian five-sense categorisation” (19) in Asian contexts. He begins with taste, describing, for example, a Hindu sensorium that comprises six tastes, as well as Sumatran and then South Asian tastes that differ from the English “flavour.” Within this discussion, the transregional is assumed as, for example, the concept of *rasa* (which changed over time, and also in differing locations) in Hindu tradition was transmitted from pre-colonial India to Java (20–21). By his discussion of nomenclature, sociocultural symbolism, and intersensorialities, Low describes how localised epistemologies of sense should be approached through understanding of their own terms and terminologies.

Part 2 of the book is titled “Responses and Restitutions,” and is broken into three diverse sections, “Sensory Transnationalism and Interfaces,” “Gastropolitical Encounters,” and “Extreme Sensescapes.”

The first of these sections discusses “sensory transnationalism,” picking up, for example, on travel writing, and how it reveals sensory colonialism. Low writes, “I also wish to turn the lens around by showing how local populations discern these colonial or foreign communities and their sensory faculties as counterpoint” (86). Perhaps because of his methodology of utilising travel writing to discern the “coloniser’s gaze” to illustrate sensory transnationalism, Low’s definition of the colonial–colonised relationship is limited and, despite his aim to show Asia as transcending boundaries, a dichotomy is evident in this chapter. However, allowing for the scope of this book, the more complex interplay of orientalism that can be both emic as well as etic can be expanded upon in the future.

Gastropolitical Encounters picks up on the politics of foods across Asia, a more contemporary discussion where he writes how he intends to extend on sensory exchanges to other aspects of political exchange such as “David Cameron treating Xi Jinping to beer and fish and chips in a traditional English pub in 2015, Teresa May’s awkward attempt to dance on her 2018 visit to South Africa and Kenya, or political leaders donning silk outfits at an APEC meeting held in Beijing in 2014” (122).

Towards the end of the book, in Extreme Sensescapes, Low raises sensescapes of conflict, war, and violence. For survivors of unimaginable events that are impossible to simply encapsulate they must rely on their senses to re-envisage. Picking up on survivor narratives of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for example, Low writes how “sensory recollections fill the pages of those memory genres” (128). Touch, sound, smell, and silence are significant aspects of such extreme sensescapes, in the memory of the POWs in Changi Camp in Singapore, in the trenches of the First World War, and in memory of Japanese assaults in the Pacific War. Framing his argument by a theory of

<sup>2</sup>Gould and McClelland (2023).

<sup>3</sup>Corbin (1986); Classen *et al.* (1994); Smith (2008).

ontological security, Low aims to consider social actors' relation of the senses in extreme circumstances, and to consider how the senses operate in leading towards both social order and disorder (130). This reminds me of the testimony of a *hibakusha* interviewee in my first project, Fukahori Joji, who explained in 2016 the "illogical" nature of his siblings' deaths due to the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Within his testimony, darkness, and discolouration of victims including his mother were some aspects of sensory recollections, while ultimately, Fukahori concluded that his memory is unable to be ordered.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Low draws heavily on oral histories within this section, examining at length Vanessa Hearman's important work on the Indonesian Anti-Communist Repression of the 1960s, to consider links between ontological security and such extreme sensescapes (150).<sup>5</sup> Low's conclusion is that the suggestion that the political connotes reason and the rational, whereas the sensible relates to the emotional/affective may be challenged by ongoing analysis of sensory studies in extreme sensescapes.

Lastly, Low offers "Thinking through the Senses" as conclusion, returning to the sensory approach that takes seriously Asian epistemologies of sense, and encouraging ongoing "inter- and intra-cultural" dialogue (161). He also returns here to his reconception of Asia, and notes that he intends to offer "Asia through historical sense perception as a newer perspective" (165).

This is a book that offers new insights, through its broad approach, that engages with and points to a wide and expanding literature. Drawing on cosmic, or religious threads is certainly relevant to thinking with the senses. Although sometimes the writing moves quickly, say from Islamic references to sonic morality, and then to Confucian-Chinese cosmologies of synaesthetic poetry, this is also its strength, as the author is open to and highly supportive of the breadth of scholarship in the developing area of Asian Sensory Studies. For this reader, a slow and thoughtful reading of Low's book certainly holds merit. And I am sure that I will continue to return to reappraise the depth of Low's scholarship in this incisive book, and in its consideration of sensory phenomenology again, and again in the future.

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<sup>4</sup>McClelland (2019).

<sup>5</sup>Hearman (2018).