

## CHAPTER 25

# THE SENSES: Polysensoriality

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As Bryan Turner (1997: 16) has observed, one cannot take "the body" for granted as a "natural, fixed and historically universal datum of human societies." The classification of the body's senses is a case in point. "Sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch: that the senses should be enumerated in this way is not self-evident. The number and order of the senses are fixed by custom and tradition, not by nature" (Vinge 1975: 107). Plato, for example, apparently did not distinguish clearly between the senses and feelings. "In one enumeration of perceptions, he begins with sight, hearing and smell, leaves out taste, instead of touch mentions hot and cold, and adds sensations of pleasure, discomfort, desire and fear" (Classen 1993a: 2). It is largely thanks to the works of Aristotle that the notion of the senses being five in number, and of each sense as having its proper object (i.e. sight being concerned with color, hearing with sound, smell with odor, etc.) came to figure as a commonplace of Western culture. Even so, Aristotle classified taste as "a form of touch"; hence, it would be more accurate to speak of "the four senses" in his enumeration.

So, too, was there considerable diversity of opinion in antiquity regarding the order of the senses (i.e. sight as the most informative of the modalities, followed by hearing, smell, and so on down the scale). Diogenes, for example, apparently placed smell in first place followed by hearing, and other philosophers proposed other hierarchies; what would become the standard ranking was given its authority (once again) by Aristotle (Vinge 1975: 17–19). However, even he wavered on some counts; for example, while Aristotle portrayed sight as the most informative of the senses, he described touch as the primary sense and the basis of human intelligence. The preeminence of sight would become a commonplace of Western culture (more perhaps due to Plato's influence than Aristotle's), but the primacy of vision did not go unchallenged. For example, in the Middle Ages sight was trumped by hearing on account of the latter sense being considered the medium of divine communication (Classen 1993a: 3).<sup>1</sup> Another variation on the conventional ranking blossomed in the eighteenth century when taste came out from under the thrall of touch and enjoyed more license as a result of its metaphorization into the sense of distinction, of judgment (Howes 2009: 39 n. 27). No longer confined to taste in food, it was extended to taste in art, music and friendship, among other domains.<sup>2</sup>

When we look outside the Western tradition, the impression of the shifting character of the divisions of the sensorium becomes even more pronounced. For example, the Javanese "have five senses (seeing, hearing, *talking*, smelling and feeling), which do not coincide exactly with our five" (Dundes cited in Howes 2009: 2). The Cashinahua of Peru apparently distinguish six senses or "forms of sentience" (intelligences). These are localized in the skin, the hands, the eyes, ears, liver and genitals. "Skin intelligence" (*bichi una*) is the knowledge of the environment one acquires through one's skin - through the feel of the sun, the wind, and the forest. It is what enables one to find one's way through the jungle and to locate prey, and also includes knowledge of the behavior patterns of other people as well as animals. "Hand intelligence" (*meken una*) enables a man to chop down a tree or shoot an animal

with bow and arrow, while in the case of a woman the hands are the means by which knowledge of weaving, pottery-making and cooking skills enter the body. The eyes are the locus of the "eye spirit" which perceives the spiritual insides or substance of persons, animals and things as opposed to their surface. (Surfaces are the preserve of skin intelligence.) Social intelligence is "gained through and resides in the ears and therefore is called *pabinki una*, ear knowledge," reflecting the significance of oral-aural communication in Cashinahua social life (Kensinger 1995: 241). "Liver intelligence" refers to knowledge of emotions, since it is "in one's liver that one feels joy and sorrow, fear and hope, distrust and pleasure" (Kensinger 1995: 243). Finally, the Cashinahua conceive of the genitals, which are the seat of one's "life force," as the source of knowledge of one's mortality and (through the procreation of children) immortality. "Does [the] brain have knowledge?" the ethnographer Kenneth Kensinger asked, assuming that the Cashinahua must recognize some sort of cognitive processing centre or data bank. "'*Hamaki* (it doesn't),' they responded" (Kensinger 1995: 239), "the whole body knows."

The Javanese and Cashinahua cases bring out well how the bounds of sense and the senses (individually and as a totality) may differ across cultures. The mode of operation of the senses is also subject to variation historically and cross-culturally. For example, in the Western tradition the eyes were long believed to perceive by sending out rays which touched and mingled with the objects to which they were directed. A similar understanding would appear to underlie the notion of speech as a sense, such as found among the Javanese, and other peoples, as well as being a recurrent theme in the history of the Western sensorium (see Howes 2009: 4–5.) The thought of speech as a sense might seem odd, but the reasons for this are telling. As Constance Classen points out, the reason for the oddity is:

partly because we conceive of the senses as passive recipients of data, whereas speech is an active externalization of data. It is also because we think of the senses as natural faculties and speech as a learned acquirement. The ancients, however, [like the Javanese] ... were apt to think of the senses more as media of communication than as passive recipients of data (Classen 1993a: 2).

The implication of this observation is that in some (perhaps many) cultures the senses act outwardly as well as inwardly: the act of perceiving goes on *in the environment as much as in the brain*.<sup>3</sup> Put another way, the senses are *interactive*, they mingle with their objects, and are not merely reactive to external stimuli. The widespread belief in the power of the "evil eye" to adversely affect its object is one manifestation of this phenomenon, speech is another (as it involves both listening and talking), and so too is the "fact" which the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962) is commonly credited with having discovered about the sense of touch - namely, that every act of touching involves being touched at the same time.

It will already be apparent from the foregoing that the compartmentalized, hierarchized, pacified and privatized conception of how the senses function, which informs the contemporary Western psychology of perception, constitutes a serious impediment to the advancement of research in the anthropology and history of the senses. It must be "bracketed" if any headway is to be made in the investigation of the life of the senses in cultural context. The moment this is done, the moment we start exploring the *meanings* associated with various sensory faculties and sensations in different cultures, then, as Classen (1997: 402) avers, we discover

a cornucopia of potent sensory symbolism. Sight may be linked to reason or to witchcraft, taste may be used as a metaphor for aesthetic discrimination or for sexual experience, an odour may signify sanctity or sin, political power or social exclusion.

Classen continues, introducing the capital notion of the “sensory model”:

Together, these sensory meanings and values form the *sensory model* espoused by a society, according to which the members of that society “make sense” of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular “worldview.” There will likely be challenges to this model from within the society, persons and groups who differ on certain sensory values, yet this model will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or resisted (Classen 1997: 402).

Classen's statement – with its emphasis on uncovering indigenous models and techniques of the senses – is expressive of the theoretical approach to the study of the sensorium which crystallized in the cultural anthropology of the 1990s. However, anthropological interest in the senses goes back further, to the physical anthropology of the 1890s, as exemplified by the psychophysical research agenda of the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits of 1898 (Haddon 1901). That expedition, which also marked the invention of the fieldwork tradition in anthropology, was led by the biologist A.C. Haddon. He purposely recruited the physician–psychologist W.H.R. Rivers (an expert in visual perception), and two of the latter's protégés, Charles Myers and William MacDougall (both young physicians who would go on to shape the direction of experimental psychology). They took with them a formidable battery of tests to measure the sensory acuity of the natives, including: Haken's E, Lovibund's tintometer, the Müller–Lyer and other visual illusions, Politzer's Hörmesser (for measuring auditory sensitivity), Galton's whistle (for pitch discrimination), diverse musical instruments, Zwaardemaker's olfactometer, various taste solutions, a hand-grasp dynamometer, an algometer (for studying pain thresholds), marbles, and at least twenty other such apparatuses.

While the physical context of the expedition's research was tropical, the intellectual context was decidedly occidental, suffused by the emergent doctrine of psychophysics and the then-prevailing Spencerian hypothesis (Richards 1998). The latter hypothesis (or rather conceit) was grounded in a series of cultural assumptions concerning the relationship between the intellect or reason on the one hand and the body and senses on the other, and between the senses themselves in terms of higher vs. lower, and civilized vs. primitive (or animalistic). Various treatises dating from the eighteenth century already played up the supposedly superior sensory abilities and proclivities of “primitive” peoples, particularly in so far as the “lower,” “primitive” senses were concerned (smell and touch). These representations became commonplace in the nineteenth century, supported by the anecdotal observations of travelers and missionaries. The natural historian Lorenz Oken proposed a racial hierarchy of the senses as part of his sweeping theory of the “perfection” of the senses in the evolution of animals and humans. In his scheme, the European “eye-man” was at the top of the scale, followed by the Asian “ear-man,” the Native American “nose-man,” the Australian “tongue-man,” and, at the bottom, the African “skin-man” (Howes 2009: 10–11). All this fed into the Spencerian hypothesis, which held that “‘primitives’ surpassed ‘civilised’ people in psychophysical performance because more energy remained devoted to this level in the former instead of being diverted to ‘higher functions’” as among the latter (Richards 1998: 137).

It is interesting to note that Rivers and company introduced their experiments to the Torres Strait Islanders as follows:

The natives were told that some people had said that the black man could see and hear, etc., better than the white man and that we had come to find out how clever they were, and that their performances would all be described in a big book so that everyone would read about them. This appealed to the vanity of the people and put them on their mettle. (Rivers 1901: 3).

It will be appreciated that, given the supposed connection between sensory superiority and mental inferiority, to win at this contest was also to lose.

Rivers and Myers carried out very thorough eye and ear exams of the natives, noting the prevalence of color-blindness, deafness, etc. (so that the issues of pathology and acuity could be kept separate). They also gathered extensive data on sensory vocabularies (not just color terms, but taste and smell and hearing terms too), prompted by the supposition that there might be some association between extensiveness of nomenclature (e.g. the presence/absence of a word for blue) and degree of sensitiveness. They carried out their studies of psychophysical performance with remarkable resolve considering the deficiencies or outright failure of much of their test equipment, illness (which impaired their own sensory abilities), and native resistance (e.g. to having tubes stuck up their noses – understandably). For example, the hearing threshold tests were compromised by the pounding of the surf and rustle of the breeze in the palm trees – not very typical of laboratory conditions. Getting a result was difficult (Richards 1998). They also had to control for the problem of subjects responding to the tests based on inferences (which obviously involved some degree of intellection) as opposed to reporting “immediate sense impressions” (which is what they were after). Their difficulties in this connection ought to have prompted more reflection on the impossibilities of ever completely stripping the perceptual process of its cultural and personal lining, but they did not.

What did the team find? The results were mixed, as were their interpretations and McDougall appears to have differed from Rivers and Myers in the conclusions he drew. Thus, McDougall studied the Islanders’ tactile sensitivity using a compass to measure the threshold for the discrimination of two points on the skin and found this to be comparatively low: “about one half that of Englishmen” (McDougall 1901: 192). He used an algometer, which presses a point against the skin with varying levels of pressure to determine their sensibility to pain and found this to be comparatively high: “nearly double that of Englishmen” (McDougall 1901: 195). He concluded that the natives’ “delicacy of tactile discrimination constitutes a racial characteristic” and that the “oft-repeated statement that savages in general are less susceptible to pain than white men” was exact (McDougall 1901: 193–4). McDougall did not perceive any contradiction to the quite opposite results of these two tests, nor did he demonstrate the same methodological acumen (or experimental reflexivity) as his fellow team members (Richards 1998).

While McDougall found confirmation for the prevailing stereotypes of “primitive” man, Rivers and Myers found no definite racial differences in the acuity of the senses they studied (see Rivers 1905). For example, Myers (1901) found the average olfactory acuity to be slightly higher in Torres Straits than in Aberdeenshire and general auditory acuity to be inferior, but emphasized the limits of the test equipment he utilized (and incomparability of the data) more than anything, while Rivers concluded that

“the general average” in Torres Straits “do not exhibit that degree of superiority over the European in visual acuity proper which the accounts of travelers might have led one to expect” (Rivers 1901: 42). Rivers otherwise found that some visual illusions were experienced more strongly by native subjects than by British subjects, and others less strongly, but there was no “marked degree” of difference here either. This strike in favor of the psychophysical unity of humankind and incipient critique of the racist reasoning of the day was, however, tempered by Rivers and Myers resorting in the next sentences of their respective reports to relating anecdotes of native sensory virtuosity or extraordinary “powers of observation”. They simply could not get the Spencerian hypothesis out of their heads. The one difference from MacDougall is that they related these manifestations of extrasensitivity to “habits of life” – that is, to training and survival or custom rather than inheritance – but, then, because customs could be graded in terms of degree of civilization, this alternative explanation did nothing to unseat the Spencerian hypothesis. Thus, Rivers and Myers were both very modern in their use of statistics and the (experimental) evidence of the senses to challenge racist doctrines, and very Victorian in the way they persisted in employing evolutionary-style reasoning to interpret the scarcest indication of difference in the statistical tables their research generated.<sup>4</sup>

After World War I, as the racist (if not outright racist) assumptions which had informed the physical anthropology of the previous century came to be discredited and the attention of field anthropologists shifted from physiology to social morphology (the analysis of social organization), working on and with the senses ground to a halt. It was rekindled, however, in the 1950s by Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux – two very sensuously-minded scholars – this time with an emphasis on the meaning of the senses rather than their measurement. Mead and Métraux proposed that

Just as linguistics requires a special ear [so cultural analysis requires a special honing of all the senses, since people] not only hear and speak and communicate through words, but also use all their senses in ways that are equally systematic ... to taste and smell and to pattern their capacities to taste and smell, so that that the traditional cuisine of a people can be as distinctive and as organized as a language (Mead and Métraux 1953: 16).

This formulation inspired some first-rate work on the part of their students (e.g. Williams 1966 on the cultural patterning of tactile experience among the Dusun of Borneo), but it also contained the seeds of its own dissolution by virtue of the analogy to language. It would not be long before this analogy – whether it be to linguistics (Claude Lévi-Strauss), text (Clifford Geertz), discourse (Michel Foucault) or dialogue (Dennis Tedlock) – proliferated and completely dominated the anthropological imagination. Everything came to be structured (or approached) “like a language” (or text).

It bears underlining that not every anthropologist subscribed. Some managed to keep their senses about them, such as Edmund Carpenter. In company with Marshall McLuhan, he developed a theory of how the extension of any one sense by technology (e.g. radio as an extension of the ear, etc.) alters the way in which the other senses interact and thereby impacts the way in which people think and act (Carpenter 1973: 21–8). But for the most part cultures came to be regarded as texts to be read and the anthropological function was reduced to one of writing (as opposed to sensing). This development reached its climax in the mid 1980s with the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), wherein one scribe wrote: “Perception has nothing to do with [ethnography]” (Tyler 1986: 137; see further Howes 2003: 22–26).

Another anthropologist who, like Carpenter, resisted the linguistic-textual turn was Michael Jackson. The latter took exception not only to the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz (cultures as texts) but the corporeal anthropology of Mary Douglas (the body as model for and imprint of "society"). Jackson criticized Douglas for the way she viewed the body as "simply the passive ground on which forms of social organization are inscribed" – that is, as an "it" (quoted in Howes 2003: 28). He critiqued Geertz for "[positing] truth at the level of disembodied concepts and decontextualized sayings" (Jackson 1983: 341). Not all rituals are designed to "say something of something" (as Geertz would have it): rather, according to Jackson, their meaning resides in their doing, and somatization (knowledge of the body) may be emphasized to the exclusion of verbalization. Jackson gives the example of how the senses of the neophyte are trained in the context of Kuranko male initiation rituals:

the value of moderation is inculcated through taboos on calling for food or referring to food whilst in the initiation lodge ... Similarly, the importance placed on listening to elders during the period of sequestration is correlated with the virtue of respecting elders whose counsels guarantee social as well as physical life ... Other senses are developed too, so that keenness of smell is correlated with the quality of discrimination (newly-initiated boys often quite literally "turn up their noses" at the sight of uninitiated kids, remarking on their crude smell), and control of the eyes is connected with sexual proprieties, most notably mindfulness of those domains and secret objects associated with the other sex which one may not see except on pain of death (Jackson 1983: 337).

To elaborate, the purpose of Kuranko initiation rites is to teach the neophyte how to regulate perceptions in each of his senses. Through learning to use his senses in the approved manner, he develops a set of habitudes or dispositions which are consistent with the Kuranko moral order. It is through the cultivation of bodily awareness – the education of the senses – that moral awareness is evolved. However, the moral concepts are not propositions which come before the ways of sensing, they *are* the ways of sensing. In other words, Kuranko rituals are not texts to be read but rather ways of sensing the world, in which body and meaning, media and message, are intimately intertwined.

As mentioned previously, the cultural anthropology of the senses crystallized as a sub-field in the 1990s. It could be said to occupy a position at the juncture of media anthropology (Edmund Carpenter) and phenomenological anthropology (Michael Jackson) as well as medical anthropology (Robert Desjarlais, Carol Laderman) and ethnomusicology (Steve Feld, Marina Roseman), since it in large part grew out of the confluence of research in these four areas. It could otherwise be seen as a sub-field of the anthropology of the body,<sup>5</sup> although its take on "the body" is somewhat different. Whereas the anthropology of the body has traditionally been dedicated to overcoming the mind/body split by positing a "mindful body," sensory anthropology has tended to accentuate the differential elaboration of the senses and thus advocates a more divisive but always relational and in any event less unified understanding of embodiment. Within this approach, cultures are conceptualized as cultivating different ways of sensing, or "techniques of the senses," and the aim of ethnography is to describe the socio-logic which informs how the members of a given culture distinguish, value, relate and combine the senses in everyday life. Particular attention is paid to analyzing how the senses are gendered (Classen 1998), policed (Laplantine 2005), commodified (Howes 2004), subject to experimentation by means of drugs (Jackson, Phil 2004), emplaced (Fletcher 2004), and, most fundamentally, "experienced" (Howes 2009: 29–32). All this is summed up in the title of this chapter: polysensoriality – a term which highlights the multiple ways in which the senses are constructed and lived in cultural context.

Classic works of the 1990s include Constance Classen's fine-grained and rigorously comparative anthropology of the senses in *Worlds of Sense* (Classen 1993a). The eponymous chapter of that book presents a comparison of the thermal, olfactory and colorfully synaesthetic "sensory cosmologies" and daily and ritual practices of the Tzotzil, Onge and Desana respectively, showing that not all so-called oral societies are "dominated by the ear" (*pace* McLuhan and Carpenter). The first chapter, "The Odor of the Rose" documents the shifting cultural fortunes of the senses of smell and sight in the transition from premodernity to modernity in the Western tradition. The final chapter, "Literacy as Anti-Culture," examines the traumatic clash of Incan and European sensory orders in the context of the Spanish Conquest (see further Classen 1993b).

Another classic work is Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity*.<sup>6</sup> In a series of "somersaults" – between the Cuna shaman carving wooden figurines of "European types" for use in a healing ritual and the invention of "mimetically capacious machines" like the camera in the second half of the nineteenth century, and between Darwin marveling at the "mimetic powers" of the natives of Tierra del Fuego and the complete destabilization of identity (Western and non-western alike) at the present conjuncture through the "wonder of mimesis" – Taussig takes "the Academy" way outside its comfort zone – blowing up cherished truths like "the arbitrariness of the signifier" or the "socially constructed" character of everything – and confronts it (us) with the notion of the copy, through its "sensuous fidelity" to the original, affecting the latter to such a degree "that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented" (Taussig 1992: 47–48). Taussig's profoundly sensuous, apparently essentialist (but actually just materialist), postcolonialist assault on the ideology of representation would have many reverberations.

Perhaps the most sensational work of the 1990s is Paul Stoller's *Sensuous Scholarship* (Stoller 1997). In it and other monographs he recounts aspects of his apprenticeship as a sorcerer among the Songhay of Niger. Initiation as a sorcerer involves eating a bitter paste called *kusu* (food of power), and being "eaten" (consumed) by power in turn. (Gustatory metaphors abound in Songhay discourse.) Stoller relates how, subsequent to his initiation, he bore the brunt of diverse sorcery attacks. The symptoms of such attacks ranged from searing pains in the legs and gut to temporary paralysis. These bodily consequences, which had no rational explanation according to Stoller, convinced him to stop trying to "discover principles, patterns and hypotheses" which might "explain" (i.e. rationalize) witchcraft and sorcery beliefs among the Songhay (as Evans-Pritchard had attempted to do for the Azande) and start accepting the "tangled skein" of social relations and occult knowledges at face value (Stoller 1997: 22). It also persuaded him to stop thinking metaphorically and start thinking somatically about the gustatory idiom of Songhay sorcery, as well as to conceptualize the embodiment of the ethnographer in a new way:

For ethnographers embodiment is more than the realization that our bodily experience gives metaphorical meaning to our experience; it is rather the realization that, like Songhay sorcerers, we too are consumed by the sensual world, that ethnographic things capture us through our bodies, that profound lessons are learned when sharp pains streak up our legs in the middle of the night (Stoller 1997: 23)

Having starred some of the seminal works in sensory anthropology published during the final decade of the last century, in what follows I would like to highlight some of the key points of a series of works belonging to the first decade of the present millenium.

*Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* is an exemplary ethnography in which Kathryn Linn Geurts describes the sensory order of the Ewe-speaking Anlo of southeastern Ghana. The Anlo-Ewe are a migrant people whose sense of their own identity is intimately bound up with the ability to adapt to difficult circumstances. As one of their proverbs puts it: "If you visit the village of the toads and find them squatting you must squat too" (Geurts 2002: 96). This flexible disposition is instilled from birth: the newborn's limbs are massaged continuously in order to inculcate suppleness of body and mind. It even precedes birth, since the foetus in the womb is envisaged as seated on a "stool" (i.e. the placenta) already practising the Anlo-Ewe arts of posture and balance.

Significantly, the eponym "Anlo" refers to a posture as well as the people. Specifically, the term refers to the "rolled up" posture (or "fetal position") which was adopted by Togbui Whenya (the ancestor who led the Anlo-Ewe out of slavery some 300 years ago) when he collapsed from exhaustion upon reaching the spot which they now make their homeland. The somatics of the term Anlo (pronounced AHNG-low) amplify its semantics. As Geurts (2002: 117) notes, saying "Anlo" produces a sensation that is best understood in terms of synaesthesia and iconicity: the curling of the tongue duplicates the rolling up of the body of the ancestor in the migration myth, and the final vowel has a rounded feeling to it as well. Geurts further relates how this feeling came over her whole body when listening to the Anlo-Ewe migration myth being told and, at the climactic moment of the ancestor's collapse, finding herself curling her own body inward in concert with the other members of the audience. Where an earlier anthropology would have concentrated on analyzing how identity is symbolized, the focus of Geurts' research is on how identity is *sensed*;<sup>7</sup> and her focus is so fine that she even finds meaning in how *words* feel.<sup>8</sup>

Geurts asked one of her female informants what it felt like to be a part of a people whose name means "rolled up". "She said that rolling up in a fetal position is something you do when you feel sad, when you are crying, when you feel lonely or depressed. She said that being Anlo meant that you felt that way a lot, but you always had to unroll, or come out of it, and that gave you a feeling of strength" (Geurts 2002: 118).

The two poles of Anlo-Ewe compartment – rolling up/springing back – aptly condense the twin themes of "persecution and power" which they regard as the defining feature of their history as a people. The feeling of persecution stems from the oppressive way in which they were treated during the period of their servitude, and still haunts them due to the tense relations they maintain with their current neighbours. The sense of power comes from managing to survive in the face of such adversity and making the most of their lot. For example, the current Anlo-Ewe homeland is notoriously poor in natural resources (compared to that of the Asante, for example, who make-up the dominant ethnic group in Ghana) but they have compensated for this lack by emphasizing education. Educational achievement has in turn landed them a disproportionate number of jobs in the public sector, as well as a certain reputation. The Anlo-Ewe are respected for their industriousness, but resented for their success, which in turn makes them want to retreat into themselves, or "roll up."

Geurts (2002: 47–49) notes that the Anlo-Ewe word for "to hear" (*nusesese*) is used to denote "sensing" (or "experiencing") generally, as well as "understanding". This might be taken to suggest that their culture has an aural bias. But she was equally struck by the extent to which the interoceptive

senses (proprioception, balance and kinaesthesia) were elaborated. Being able to stand upright and move on two legs is considered the hallmark of humanity by the Anlo-Ewe, and their language contains over fifty terms for different "kinaesthetic styles." Each of these ways of walking is held to be expressive of a person's moral character: for example, an individual may stride like a lion (*kadzakadza*) or zigzag as if drunk (*lugulugu*) (Geurts 2002: 72–84). Plainly, the Anlo-Ewe are keenly attuned to the body in motion. This sensitivity to bodily movement is further refracted in the way Anlo-Ewe people "believed loss of hearing was the most grave impairment of sensory perception because with this loss would come a disruption to their sense of balance" and without balance they could not move (Geurts 2002: 50). Thus, hearing and balance are the twin pillars of the Anlo-Ewe sensory model.

In *Appetites*, Judith Farquhar begins her account of gustatory and amorous relations in post-socialist China with the famous line from the fourth century BCE philosopher Mencius: "appetite for food and sex is natural." She juxtaposes this quote with that equally famous line from the young Karl Marx: "The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present" (Farquhar 2002: 1, 7). Bringing these two lines together raises the question: Are the appetites only natural, or do they have a history? This question is at the core of Farquhar's ethnography, which is a study of the rise of non-collective appetites and the pleasures of the table and the bedroom in reform era China, where Maoist asceticism is decidedly in decline and capitalist sensualism (with a Chinese twist) is on the rise.

Farquhar (2002: 32) holds that the task of ethnography is to "expose a body totally imprinted by history" à la Foucault. The upshot of her ethnography accordingly takes the form of the following response to Mencius: "one can declare eating and sex to be natural, but little can be taken for granted about what eating and sex are in any particular time and place" (Farquhar 2002: 290). Farquhar fleshes out her theoretical position further in the following lines:

If bodies are capable of imagining, we should be able to carnally imagine other life worlds, or sensory realms, through an ethnographic description that attends to the concrete and the everyday ... Direct sensory experience, the material attributes of concrete things and mundane activities, can be invoked, and thereby imagined, but only by way of language and images and only in the context of times, places, and habitus that impose constraints on what can be experienced or imagined (Farquhar 2002: 57).

This notion of sensation as always already constrained and mediated by representation (language and images) is in keeping with the emphasis in other works in sensory anthropology (e.g. Laplantine 2005) on the dynamic, relational (intersensory, multimedia) and often conflicted nature of our everyday experience of the sensory world. It leads Farquhar in particular to interweave readings of various expressions of state propaganda and contemporary Chinese popular culture (films, novels, self-help books, surveys) with her own experiences of eating and talking about sex with her informants. By dispersing her authority as an ethnographer in this way (i.e. treating filmmakers and novelists as "partners" in the ethnographic enterprise), Farquhar is able to bring multiple perspectives to bear on a range of issues which thoroughly vexed her hosts, such as: "Which is preferable, scarce and bad food shared by all or civilized luxuries available only to a few?" or: "Should individual experiences and private memories of sexual encounters be of public concern?" (Farquhar 2002: 30). The pleasures of the bedroom as of the table are far from innocent for contemporary Chinese, most of whom have experienced state-controlled sexuality and the pangs of famine in the past, and still recall the Maoist

slogan: "Is eating and drinking a mere trifle? No. Class struggle exists even at the tips of your chopsticks" (Farquhar 2002: 80). The pleasurable thus remains ineluctably political for modern Chinese subjects.

Farquhar devotes one chapter of *Appetites* to a discussion of the theory of flavour causation in Chinese medicine. In China, medicines traditionally take the form of herbal concoctions and their power is held to reside in their flavour. The "five flavours" are pungent, sweet, sour, bitter, and salty, each of which is understood to have a different function. Sour, for example, has the function of "contracting and constricting," pungent that of "spreading and disseminating," sweet has the function of "replenishing and supplementing," and so forth (Farquhar 2002: 64–65). But how can the (subjective) experience of a flavour produce (objective) bodily changes of this nature? The Western mind balks at this suggestion for, as Farquhar points out:

English does not offer a language for whole-body responses to tastes or a theory of flavor causation of this kind. Perhaps the closest we come is the notion of "heavy" or "light" meals affecting our alertness, or learning that certain foods "disagree" with our stomachs. The idea that flavor could have powerful physiological efficacies is odd enough to have been politely ignored by most of the English-language literature on Chinese herbal medicine. In North American nutritional lore, we tend to relegate tastes to that domain in which the (relatively isolated) human subject receives sensory input, registering pleasure or revulsion in response to food. We think of those forces and entities that actually alter our bodies as properties of the food that are quantifiable (e.g. fat, vitamin, or protein content) and inhere in the food whether we eat it or not. (Farquhar 2002; 66)

Flavours may be "secondary qualities" or subjective pleasures in Western psychology, but they are primary qualities and objective forces in Chinese ontology and medicine: "sweet herbals build up ... overworked spleens and pungent drugs mobilize energies that steady ... fluttering hearts," etc. (Farquhar 2002: 75). In this way the body becomes a "flavourful temporal formation," very different from the body image in (Western) biomedicine. Above all, the body is interpellated as the *subject* of experience. Farquhar avers that coming to appreciate how the apparently ephemeral (e.g. flavour) is actually essential proved crucial to her subsequent understanding of the "experiential" dimensions of Chinese medicine: "This experiential side to Chinese medicine encourages a personal micropolitics, as patients [in concert with their physicians] seek to govern themselves and their immediate environment using techniques that fuse thinking and feeling, forming habits that make sense to their own senses" (Farquhar 2002: 66).

Consider the following statement issued by the Beijing meeting of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioners in 2001:

There is sufficient evidence of Western medicine's effectiveness to expand its use into TCM and to encourage further studies of its physiology and clinical value. Western medicine shows promise as adjunctive treatment to TCM. As a stand-alone medicine, however, its efficacy is mainly in the areas of acute and catastrophic care that comprise a relatively minor percentage of total patient complaints (cited in Barcan, in press).

A Western physician could well be astounded to see biomedicine represented in this way, though his or her situation is actually no different than that of the TCM practitioner who has to face much the same representations being made of TCM by, say, the American Medical Association.

However, it is no longer solely *between* East and West that such debates take place, for there has been an explosion *within Western society itself* of so-called Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM), some of which are inspired by Eastern philosophies, but many of which are homespun. As Ruth Barcan brings out well in “The Body Therapeutic: Alternative Therapies as Sensory Encounters” (forthcoming from Berg), alternative diagnostic procedures from iridology to medical clairvoyance challenge biomedicine’s claim to provide the best modes of seeing and knowing the body currently available. And alternative treatments from aromatherapy and music therapy to Reiki and Zero Balancing – to mention but a few – address parts (or dimensions) of the patient’s being which do not register on the “scale of the gaze” or figure whatsoever in the (sensorially sterile) treatment regimens of biomedicine. The role of the senses in alternative therapies presents a fine example of contestation of the (dominant) sensory model “from within” (Classen 1997 – see above), as practitioners and their patients invest the senses with values and uses that are contrary to those of the dominant society. Barcan expresses the rationale for her adoption of a sensory studies approach to the cultural analysis of alternative medicine as follows:

The major tenets underpinning contemporary cultural approaches to the senses are the historical separation and hierarchisation of the senses; the phenomenological interdependence of the senses; the variation and cultural specificity of sensory understanding, valuation and experience; and the connection between the senses and social values, including the gender, class and racial meanings associated with different sensory orders. These precepts are appropriate to an analysis that hopes to highlight why alternative therapies are both attractive and plausible to so many Westerners, what implications this has for bodily understanding and experience, and how particular sensory practices are implicated in the market. The senses are also a useful lens through which to consider how in alternative medicine bodily experiences are linked not only to pleasure, but also to information. For not only do alternative therapies offer up particular forms of experience that aren’t available in biomedicine (such as lying down being caressed by waves of sound made by crystal bowls; or the sensuous touch and smells of aromatherapy massage), these are also linked to the offering of information or new ways of knowing the body. In alternative therapies, then, the senses act as diagnostic tools, as therapeutic modes, and as different modes of knowing the body (Barcan in press).

With the many insights it contains into other ways of thinking, living (and healing) through the senses, Barcan’s “The Body Therapeutic” opens up a fascinating new chapter in the literature on the anthropology of medicines and embodiments.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter opened with an exploration of the diverse ways in which the senses are enumerated and ordered in different societies and periods. It went on to document the shift from measurement to meaning, and experiment to experience in the anthropology of the senses of the late 19th century compared to that of the late 20th-early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It concluded with a survey of some groundbreaking anthropological contributions to the emergent field of sensory studies.<sup>10</sup>

One final point needs to be made regarding what could be called the double role of the senses in anthropology. It concerns the senses as object of study *and* means of inquiry, for as Classen (1997: 409) observed in her landmark “Foundations” essay: “The broad range of applications for a sensory analysis of culture indicates that the anthropology of the senses need not only be a ‘sub-field’ within anthropology, but may provide a fruitful perspective from which to examine many different anthropological concerns.” This point was picked up on and developed by Michael Herzfeld, whose

discussion in turn inspired the editors of *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader* to include a section on “Sensorial Fieldwork” in their anthology.<sup>11</sup> As they put it: “Herzfeld encourages sensorial fieldworkers to make the study of the entire sensorium indispensable to other domains of ethnographic inquiry, such as economics or politics ... Just as attention to gender and reflexivity is now part and parcel of most ethnographic work, so the entire range of senses should become of similar concern” (Robben and Sluka 2007: 388).

In this way, good ethnography has come increasingly to spell not just “writing culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) but sensing cultures.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hearing displaces sight as first among the senses in the work of Aquinas (Vinge 1975: 59). The last echo of this inversion is to be found in the work of the Christian mystic Swedenborg (Schmidt 2009). Boman (1960) provides some insight into the roots of this struggle for supremacy between seeing and hearing in the Christian tradition by tracing the ocularcentrism and verbocentrism of the West back to their respective sources in Classical Hellenic and Hebrew thought and culture.

<sup>2</sup> This florescence of taste probably contributed to the growing sense of individualism – *chacun à son goût*. Formerly social status was determined by birth and enforced by means of sumptuary laws. Henceforth, personal identity would be shaped by other factors – most notably consumption patterns; that is, “taste cultures” (Howes and Lalonde 1991). The subjectivization of the individual through taste may be seen as complementing the objectification of the individual through the gaze during the period of the Enlightenment.

<sup>3</sup> Put another way, perception is not confined to the neural pathways between receptor organ and brain but also unfolds in the pathways or channels between receptor organ and object. The latter construction is consistent with the Aristotelian notion that every act of perception involves the conjunction of an organ, an object and a medium, though Aristotle did not himself subscribe to the extramission theory of vision and perception. (Howes 2009: 16–20). The idea of medium is lacking from the doctrine of psychophysics (replaced by “energy” or “stimulus”), as appears from the following quotation:

The events that culminate in perception begin with specialized receptor cells that convert a particular form of physical energy into bioelectric currents. Different sensors are sensitive to different types of energy, so the properties of the receptor cells determine the modality of a sensory system. Ionic currents are the currency of neural information processing, and current flows that begin in the receptors are transmitted through complex networks of interconnected neurons and, in the end result in a pattern of brain activity we call perception (Hughes 2001: 7)

<sup>4</sup> For the consummate expression of this pseudo-evolutionary psychology see e.g. Rivers 1905. For a cultural history of parallel developments in the French physical anthropology of the late nineteenth century see Dias (2004). For a highly sophisticated and culturally informed reprise of the comparative study of sensory vocabularies and discriminations which Rivers and company pioneered see the

forthcoming special issue of *The Senses and Society* on “The Senses in Language and Culture” (Majid and Levinson in press)

<sup>5</sup> The anthropology of the senses cannot, however, be seen as a sub-field of psychological anthropology due to its insistence on attending to the *social* life of the senses (not just their mental life), its critique of the privileging of cognition over perception, and its rejection of unimodal approaches to the study of sensory processes (see Howes 2003: 8–10).

<sup>6</sup> Taussig's subtitle, "a particular history of the senses," could well be a veiled critique of *A Natural History of the Senses* (Ackerman 1991). No book has done more to forestall a properly *cultural* account of the senses than Ackerman's best-seller, with its personal reminiscences, fawning interviews, scientific tidbits and obliviousness to the politics of perception.

<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, when Geurts discusses handedness she describes in detail how, for example, it *feels* to hold a calabash the Anlo-Ewe way (see Geurts and Adikah 2006), whereas an earlier anthropology ignored touch and concentrated exclusively on the symbolism of right- and left-handedness (see Needham 1973; compare Classen 2005). This elision of the sensuous was also characteristic of the anthropology of food prior to the sensorial revolution of the 1990s when the question of taste was finally put on the table (see Korsmeyer 2005).

<sup>8</sup> This attention to the sensory properties of language is new. To the idea of words as categorizing sensations has been added the recognition that words not only express but *embody* sensation in culturally peculiar ways. “Of course, onomatopoeia,” one might think. But the matter is more complex (and multisensory) than that (see Majid and Levinson in press).

<sup>9</sup> As a cultural studies scholar who also practices Reiki (non-professionally) and is an avid consumer of CAM, Barcan is ideally positioned to (as she expresses her goal) “bring some much needed critical interrogation to alternative medicine, but also ... open possible avenues where Cultural Studies’ conception of embodiment might be enriched through openness to some aspects of alternative thought and practice” (Barcan in press)

<sup>10</sup> Sensory Studies is defined as “aris[ing] at the juncture and within the fields of anthropology, sociology, design, history, geography, performance, philosophy, literature, art history,” etc. (see [www.sensorystudies.org](http://www.sensorystudies.org)). Conspicuously absent from this list are the disciplines of psychology and neuroscience. This is part protest against their hegemonic status in the domain of perception and part insistence on the importance of attending to the social life of the senses.

<sup>11</sup> As a case in point, in a contribution to a recent book on neo-nationalism in Europe; Ulf Hannerz (2006: 278) remarked: “Political anthropology ... becomes an anthropology of the senses, an anthropology of emotion, an anthropology of the body.”

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Search the history of over 357 billion web pages on the Internet. search [Search the Wayback Machine](#).<sup>Â</sup> Senses. Audio Preview. remove-circle. Share or Embed This Item. EMBED. The Radiation Senses. 1. Sense of light and sight, including polarized light. 2. Sense of seeing without eyes such as heliotropism or the sun sense of plants. 3. Sense of color. 4. Sense of moods and identities attached to colors.