

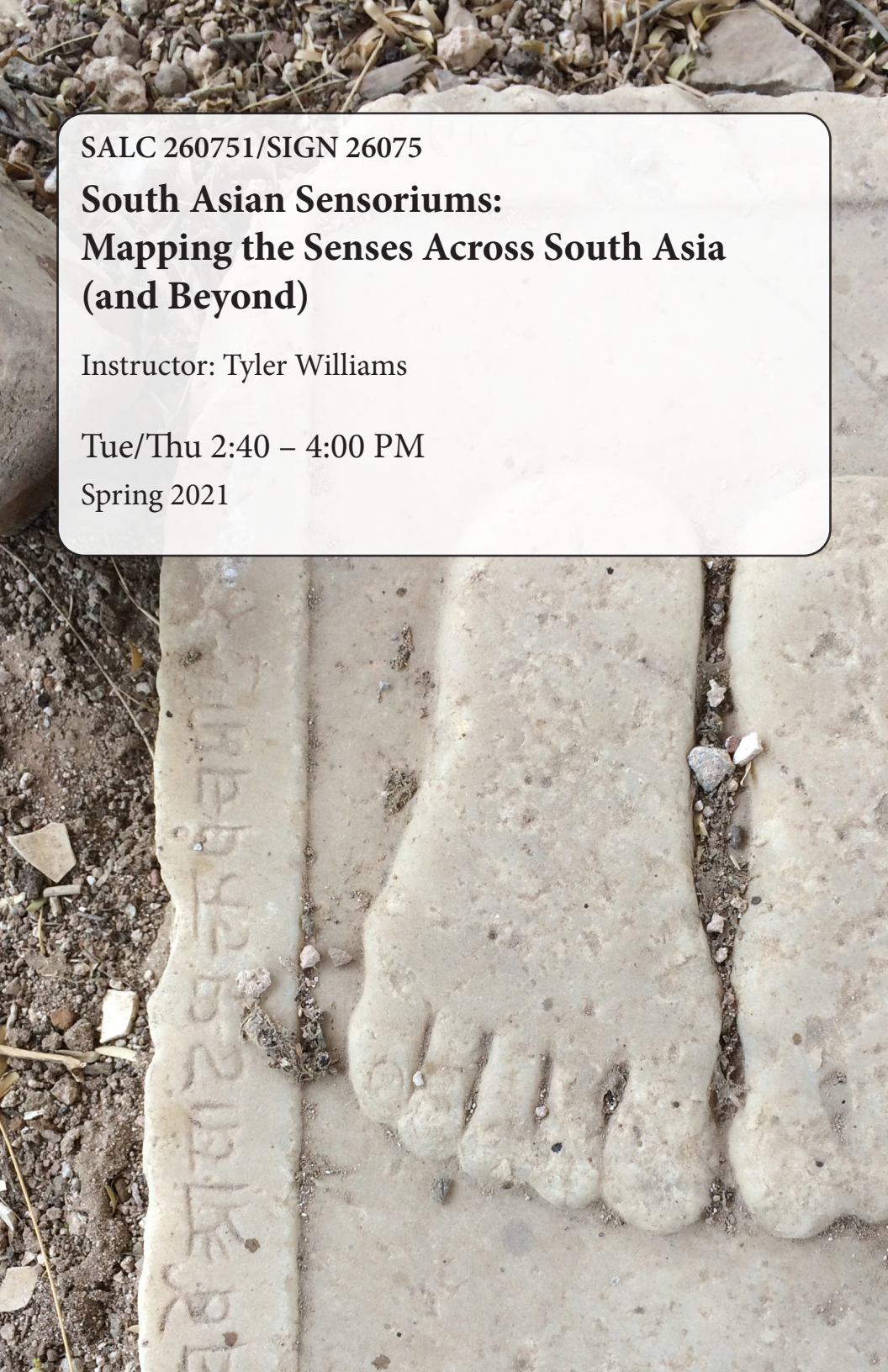
SALC 260751/SIGN 26075

**South Asian Sensoriums:
Mapping the Senses Across South Asia
(and Beyond)**

Instructor: Tyler Williams

Tue/Thu 2:40 – 4:00 PM

Spring 2021



Course Description

What is a 'sense'? How do we attune, organize, coordinate, and interpret our senses and the information that we receive through them? Is a sense an objective, 'natural', unmediated perception of the world around us or can it be trained, developed, shaped, and refigured? Is sense merely perception or does it have an emotional dimension as well? This course invites students to dive into the multi-sensory world of South Asia—a region that includes the modern-day states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka—by learning about how peoples of the region have both theorized and employed the senses to order their aesthetic, social, and religious worlds. You will notice that the title of the course refers to South Asian sensoriums in the plural—this is because there is no single or default way of organizing the senses and sensory experience in the myriad cultural, linguistic, and intellectual traditions of the region.

We will combine the examination of objects—including visual art, sculpture, sound recordings, literary works, architecture, and even fragrances—with close readings of scholarly and literary works from and about South Asia in order to better understand the following fields of human experience and creative endeavor: the visual, the aural, the textual (if that can indeed be considered a 'sense'), the gustatory, the olfactory, and the tactile. (We will also briefly discuss proprioception.) Students will receive an introduction to major South Asian theories of sense, cognition, art, and aesthetics and apply these theories to works of fine art, music, and literature. They will also be introduced to concepts from contemporary anthropological, sociological, and critical writings that explore how sensory regimes structure the individual's experience of everyday life. A recurring theme of the course will be whether and how our sensory experiences of aesthetic objects and everyday objects overlap and inform one another. As some scholars have recently suggested, there may be reason to consider the senses and aesthetics as a single object of enquiry.

Primary readings will be drawn from pre-colonial as well as post-colonial South Asia and include lyric poems, excerpts from the epics, and selections from scholarly treatises in the languages of Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Bengali. All primary readings will be in translation. Secondary readings will be taken from the fields of anthropology, sociology, literary theory, art history, visual studies, sound studies, and religious studies.

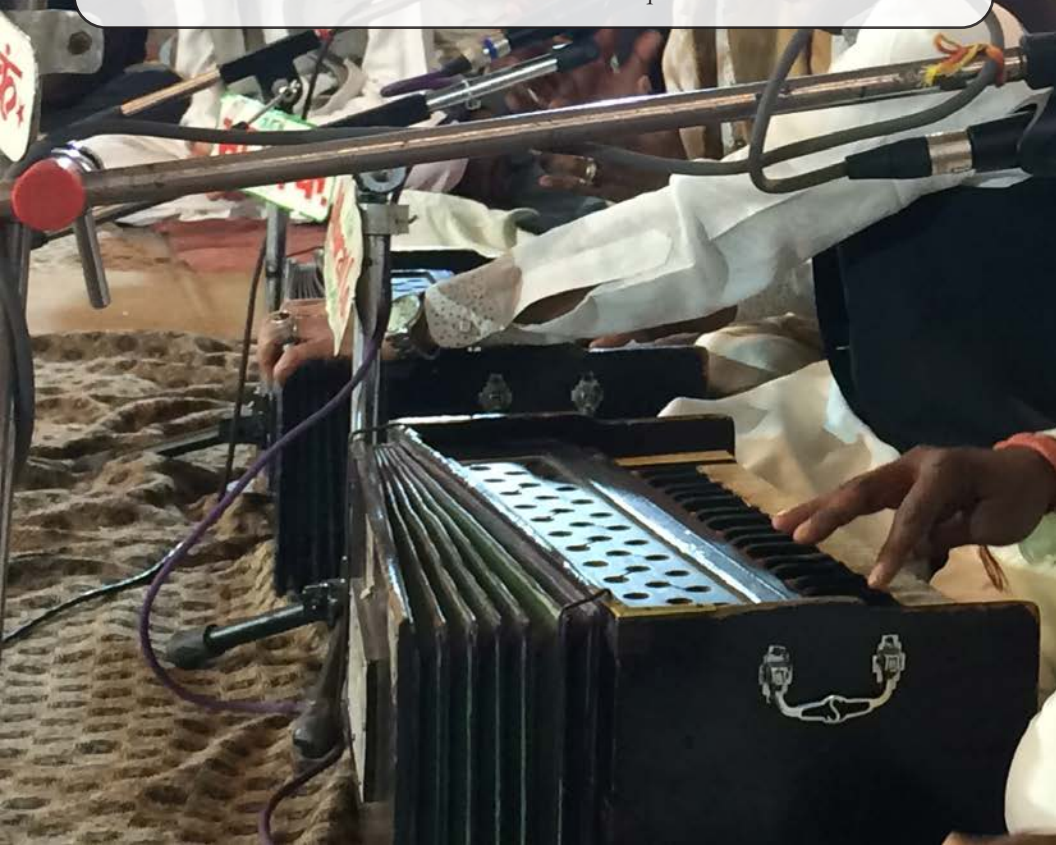
Course Format

- The course will consist of two lecture sessions and one section meeting per week.
- Before each lecture session, you will need to read short texts taken from primary sources (for example, musical treatises, plays, poems, cookbooks, advertisements) and secondary sources (scholarly articles and book chapters). You will also need to view a mini-lecture on Canvas/Youtube (approximately 1 hour in length).
- Lecture sessions will be one hour and twenty minute in length and will involve demonstrations and presentations by musicians, ritual specialists, actors, performers, researchers, and faculty, as well as question and answer sessions with these guests.
- Section meetings will be fifty minutes long and will involve activities such as tasting spices, smelling fragrances, listening to music, watching clips of dramatic performances, and discussing these experiences as a group. (Students will decide section timings in consultation with the Teaching Assistant.)



Assessment

- Each week you will be asked to write a brief (350-word) response to the course readings and lectures; we will post our responses on Canvas the evening prior to the section meeting. Before coming to the section meeting, be sure to read your classmate's responses so as to prepare for the discussion.
- Each student will be asked to introduce one of the course materials during the quarter. This means speaking for one to two minutes about an author or work that we will read; you need only present general background details to help your classmates contextualize that particular reading. We will schedule these presentations during the first week of the quarter so that you will have time to prepare.
- Midterm: There will be a midterm exam during the fifth week of classes. You will be asked to provide definitions for terms and concepts that we have learned, explain how certain theories of sense work, and analyze an image, poem, or song of your choice.
- Final exam: The final exam will have the same structure as the midterm exam but will cover the material of the entire quarter.





Grading

- 30% Class participation (asking questions, sharing ideas, participating in activities)
- 30% Reading responses (making solid and detailed observations about the readings)
- 20% Midterm exam
- 20% Final exam

Course Materials

- All readings will be made available in digital form via Canvas.
- All audio and visual materials will be made available on Canvas.
- Mini-lectures will be available via Panopto (Canvas) and YouTube.
- Students registered in the course will be mailed a sensory exercise packet containing spices, food stuffs, and fragrances to be used during class activities and homework assignments. If you have any allergies to foods or fragrances, please inform the instructor and/or the teaching assistant.

Week 1: Making sense of senses

Session 01: What is a sense? What is a sensorium?

In our first meeting we will begin with a deceptively simple question: what is a 'sense'? Is it simply an organ? A neurological phenomenon? A cognitive event? An intellectual construction? Building on these questions, we will explore the elements that constitute a 'sensorium,' a concept defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the "centre within the brain in which sensations are united" but that includes embodied and behavioral practices as that possesses social and cultural dimensions. We will also briefly discuss two questions that frame the material of the course: to what extent are the senses historically and culturally constructed?

Readings:

Rotter, Andrew Jon. *Empires of the Senses: Bodily Encounters in Imperial India and the Philippines*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Introduction and Chapter 1: The Senses and Civilization.

Activity

During class we will we will conduct several experiments to ascertain 1) whether we can actually isolate individual sensory perceptions, 2) whether we all 'perceive' the same object with our senses, and 3) whether our senses convey more than cognitive information (e.g. emotional or psychological impressions).

Session 02: Orders of sense and sensory regimes.

In this session we will ask why we privilege certain senses over others, either epistemologically or aesthetically. In other words, why do we say 'believe what you see, not what you hear' or that 'she has a taste for good music'? Our focus will be on the linguistic construction of sense and the conceptual logics underlying the way that cultures 'order' the senses. We will also find out why taste has historically been the most privileged sense in South Asian philosophy and art.

Readings:

King, Richard. "Chapter 7. Perception: Do We See Things as They Are?" *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999. 147-165.

Week 2: Taste

Session 03: What is taste?

We begin our journey through the senses with the most celebrated sense in South Asia: taste! What is ‘taste’? Does it lie in the object that we eat or drink, or does it lie in our subjective experience of that object? How many tastes are there? What does it mean to have ‘good taste’?

Readings:

Seneviratne, H.L. “Food Essence and the Essence of Experience.” In Khare, R. S. (ed.) *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.

Gutiérrez, Andrea. “Modes of betel consumption in early India: Bhoga and Abhoga.” *Religion and Food, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 26 (2015), pp. 114–34

Ghassem-Fachandi, Parvis. “On the political use of disgust in Gujarat.” *South Asian History and Culture*, 1 (no. 4), 557-576.

Session 04: Refining taste

In this session we will investigate classical works of literary and dramatic theory as well as philosophy and religion in order to understand how peoples of South Asia have used gustatory concepts to understand our experience of art, literature, performance, and God. We will reflect on what it means to ‘train’ one’s tongue, to appreciate complexity, and to have ‘refined’ taste.

Readings:

Kabir. *Lyrics*.

Awliya, Nizamuddin. *Morals for the Heart (Fawa'id al-fu'ad)*. Translated by Bruce Lawrence. New York: Mahwah, 1992. Selections.

Jamal Elias. “Chapter Five: Beauty, Goodness, and Wonder.” *Aisha’s Cushion*.

Pollock, Sheldon. *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. “1.1. The Basis of Rasa Theory in Drama.” pp. 47-55.

Activity

We will taste several types of South Asian spices and foodstuffs and discuss the relationships these various flavors (and their combinations) have to pleasure.

Week 3: Smell

Session 05: What and where is smell?

In this session we will chase after the most elusive of the senses: smell. What is a 'smell'? What makes it good or bad? How does one describe a smell? And how does smell activate memory so effectively? We will survey how philosophers and litterateurs have conceptualized smell in South Asia from antiquity to the present and discuss what is 'at stake' with smell.

Readings:

McHugh, James. "Chapter Two: Earth, wind, foul and fragrant: the theory of smelling and odors in medieval South Asia." Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Biharilal. Poems from the Satsai. Translated by Rupert Snell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021. Selected poems.

Session 06: The smell-scape

Without us realizing it, smell orients us within our physical and social world. In this session we will explore how peoples in South Asia have used smell to make distinctions of caste and class, to characterize immaterial objects, and to engineer their social and spatial worlds.

Readings:

Flatt, Emma. "Social Stimulants: Perfuming Practices in Sultanate India." In Kavita Singh (ed.) Scent Upon a Southern Breeze: The Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan. Mumbai: Marg, 2018.

Lee, Joel. "Odor and Order: How Caste Is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria." Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East 37, no. 3 (December 2017): 470–90.

Activity

This week we will smell various fragrances (ittar) from South Asia, including musk, jasmine, sandalwood, and rose, and discuss their imputed properties and associations.

Week 4: Sound

Session 07: What is sound, actually?

What is ‘sound’? What makes a sound pleasant or unpleasant? How does sound carry meaning? In the absence of sound—for example, for someone who is deaf or hearing impaired—what does sound ‘mean’ conceptually, socially, aesthetically? How does one navigate the ‘soundscape’?

Readings:

Wilke, Annette, and Oliver Moebus. *Sound and Communication : An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011. Introduction, pp. 1-11.

Rowell, Lewis Eugene. “Chapter Three: Theory of Sound.” *Music and Musical Thought in Early India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Doniger, Wendy. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. Hymn 10.71, *The Origins of Sacred Speech*, pp 61-2.

Graif, Peter. “Chapter One. Arjun: The Sense of Things.” *Being and Hearing: Making Intelligible Worlds in Deaf Kathmandu*. Chicago: Hau Books, 2018.

Session 08: Hearing and listening

What is the difference between ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’? What does it mean to ‘have an ear’ for something? Can one ‘refine’ their ear like they do their ‘taste’?

Readings:

Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak. *The Ain-i Akbari*. Translated by H. Blochmann. Calcutta: Rouse, 1873. “The Imperial Musicians.” pp. 611-13.

Kabir, Namdev. *Lyrics*.

Sarngadeva, Sangita-Ratnakara of Sarngadeva: *Sanskrit Text and English Translation with Comments and Notes*. Translated and edited by R. K.

Shringy and Prem Lata Sharma. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978. pp 2-13.

Schofield, Katherine Butler. “Learning to Taste the Emotions: The Mughal Rasika.” In Orsini, Francesca, and Katherine Butler Schofield. *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015. 407-421.

Activity

This week we will listen to examples of classical Hindustani, Karnatak, and folk music genres and speak to a Hindustani musician and ethnomusicologist.

Week 5: Sight

Session 09: What does it mean ‘to see’?

How does sight work? Is it possible to see without being seen? Is there a realm of visibility or imagery that does not require the physical organ of the eyes? In this session we will map the conceptual terrain of ocularity and imagery.

Readings:

Antal, and Archana Venkatesan. *The Secret Garland: Antal's Tiruppavai and Nacciya Tirumoli*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 22. pp 72-73.

Eck, Diana L. *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Chapter One: Seeing the Sacred, pp. 3-22.

Hawley, John Stratton. “Why Did Surdas Go Blind?” *Three Bhakti Voices*, 248-263.

Activity

This week we will go on a virtual ‘tour’ of the Art Institute of Chicago and view various objects of artistic, ritual, and religious significance.

Session 10: What do images ‘do’?

How do visual images (be they two-dimensional or three-dimensional, representative or abstract) convey meaning? Can images sometimes do something more than convey meaning, such as compel us to perform certain acts? What is the difference between visual and aural language? We will explore these questions by closely studying a number of different objects from South Asia—including paintings, carvings, statues, and graffiti—in the context of primary and secondary readings on the nature of sight and visual perception.

Exercise: We will visit the Smart Museum Study Room for some ‘hands-on’ exercises with objects from South Asia in its collection.

Readings:

Minissale, Gregory. *Images of Thought: Visuality in Islamic India 1550-1750*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2006. “Chapter 4: Reading Reflexivity.” pp 204-58.

Graif, Peter. “Language as a thing seen,” *Being and Hearing: Making Intelligible Worlds in Deaf Kathmandu*. 85-96.

Week 6: Touch

Session 11: The haptic

What does it mean to know something through touch? And is our experience of 'images' only through sight, or do we use other senses and means to perceive, comprehend, and interact with them? In many South Asian traditions of thought, the visual and the haptic (the sense of touch) are closely intertwined and both play a role in an individual's perception of space and their position within it (proprioception).

Readings:

Guru, Gopal. "Aesthetic of Touch and the Skin: An Essay in Contemporary Indian Political Phenomenology." In Arindam Chakrabarti (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Pinney, Christopher. "Piercing the Skin of the Idol." In Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas (ed.), *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment*. Oxford: Berg, 2001.

Session 12: Touch, transformation, and transubstantiation

Is it possible to touch without being touched? What does it mean to 'share in the substance' of something? In this session we will explore these questions in the context of religion, caste, and philosophy.

Readings:

Kakar, Sudhir. "Radhasoami: The Healing Offer." In J.S. Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan, *The Life of Hinduism*.

Jaaware, Aniket. "Chapter Six: (Un)touchability of Things and People." *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. 149-168.



Week 7: Synesthesia

Session 13: Sensory cross-over

Can you hear colors? Can you see tastes? At this point in the course we have seen multiple cases in which one sense is intimately linked to another or in which one sense 'stands in for' another. In this session we will explore how artists and thinkers have deliberately explored these 'sensory cross-overs.'

Readings:

Masselos, Jim, Jackie Menzies, Pratapaditya Pal, and Flora Reis Wenger. *Dancing to the Flute: Music and Dance in Indian Art*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997.

Singh, Kavita. "Scent upon a Southern Breeze: The Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan." In *Scent upon a Southern Breeze: The Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan*. Mumbai: Marg, 2018. 8-23.

Activity

This week we will undertake a series of experiments that combine auditory, visual, and (if possible) olfactory stimulation in order to better understand how we synthesize multi-sensory experience. We will also speak with an art historian about how peoples in South Asian history combined sensory pleasures in social gatherings.

Session 14: Engineering a synaesthetic experience

In this session we undertake a combined examination of raga mala texts, music, visual art, along with olfactory substances and ask whether synaesthetic experience is 'natural' or can be deliberately crafted.

Readings:

Abuali, Eyad. "Words Clothed in Light: Dhikr (Recollection), Colour and Synaesthesia in Early Kubrawi Sufism." Iran (2019): 1-14.

Khera, Dipti. *The Place of Many Moods*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Chapter Three: Worlds of Pleasure and Politics of Connoisseurship. pp 89-115.

Week 8: Shaping the world and self through the senses

Session 15: Neuroplasticity and sensory training

In this session we will explore how individuals and communities have shaped their senses to specific ends and ask whether it is possible to ‘re-place’ one sense with another. We will also see how sensory training and refinement have been part of cultural and political projects, including the project of modernity.

Readings:

Mehta, Ved. “Surmas and School,” in *Face to Face*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. 15-27.

Vatsyayana, Mallanaga. *Kamasutra*. Translated and annotated by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Books One and Two, pp 3-74.

Chattopadhyaya, Bankimachandra. “Aesthetic Faculties.” *Dharmatattva or Anusilan* (Translated as *Essentials of Dharma*). Translated by Manmohan Ghosh. Calcutta: Sribhumi, 1977. 170-178.

Session 16: Fashioning a sensible world

In this session we will see how some communities have attempted to create deliberately crafted sensory worlds through manipulation of the natural, built, and social environments.

Readings:

Adamjee, Qamar. “Seeing in a Sacred Manner the Shape of Things in the Spirit: Power and Wonder in Devotional Art.” In Qamar Adamjee, Jeffrey Durham, and Karin G. Oen, *Divine Bodies: Sacred Imagery in Asian Art*. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2018. pp. 1-9.

Husain, Ali Akbar. *Perfume and Pleasure in 17th-Century Deccan*. In Kavita Singh (ed.) *Scent Upon a Southern Breeze: the Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan*. Mumbai: Marg, 2018.

Week 9: Thinking through and with the senses

Session 17: Which comes first—sense or thought?

How do senses (and the language we use to speak about them) shape our thought? How does our thought shape the sensitivity, scope, and employment of our senses? What is the relationship between sense, language, and cultural difference?

Readings:

Ramanujan, A. K. “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” In *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Varela, Francisco, and Natalie Depraz. “Imagining: Embodiment, Phenomenology, and Transformation.” In *Buddhism and Science : Breaking New Ground*, edited by B. Allan Wallace, 195–230. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley: University of California, 2009.

