Japan's Living Swords: The Relational Dynamics of Human/Non-Human Encounters and their Impact on Contemporary Social Life

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ABSTRACT

Can objects be alive? This is the question I put to Japan's traditional swords [Nihontō, 日本刀], objects that have become increasingly involved in contemporary social life. Since 2015, women inspired by the franchise Touken Ranbu [刀剣乱舞] have carved out a new demographic of attendees for sword-related event and exhibitions in Japan, contributing to developments in sword culture. These actors construct swords as social beings with their own form of agency. Using Touken Ranbu's personified Japanese swords as a guide, I explore how the largely female base of contemporary sword enthusiasts negotiate gender and agency in connection with these 'historical' objects.

I do so to question the conventional, anthropomorphic approach to social objects. I argue that swords in the post-2015 context are related to as social persons, which reframes how these historical artefacts can inhabit—and be valued in—contemporary spaces. In this context, the personed sword has the potential to become a holder of experiences, a resident of place, or even a companion in human travels. Its social identity is constructed through practices of a relational ontology by women, regional community volunteers, and heritage custodians.

Through the relational attachments of swords and these human actors, the object emerges as an independent, individual, named being. Through this individualisation, we are asked to question our relationship with non-humans in the social realm, as well as to consider the ways in which independent actors shape cultural and social recognition.

Keywords: Material culture, fan culture, Japanese swords, personhood, regional promotion

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1. INTRODUCTION

What is life? This question has been asked throughout the ages, from perspectives ranging from the philosophical to the purely biological. In order to narrow this query, I provide another: what does it mean to be 'alive'?

The notion of being alive differs across contexts, and encapsulates more than biological realities. It includes diverse perspectives and values that influence how one looks at, and by extension how one determines, life. For example, one way of determining life is by the ways that the fleshy body is capable of voice and movement. However, the ways in which that body is recognised as being 'alive' contains social dimensions, too—the relational dynamics that determine the body's status as a 'person'.

The purpose of this research is to ask whether these relational determinators of life can apply to material objects, as much as they do to human fleshy beings. In asking this question, I use the background of anthropological research exploring diverse social life (and ontological expressions of that life) to examine how relationships, whether they be between human/human actors or human/object ones, signify the presence of a socially relevant entity. In doing so, I seek to expand beyond categorical boundaries used to designate social and non-social entities, and to put forward an analysis of social life based in an ethnographic examination of the actual ongoings between humans and our non-human counterparts.

In this work, I examine the notion of life through the lens of personhood and social relationships. This draws on the analysis of anthropologists such as Ingold (2007), Bird-David (1999), Sillar (2009) and Severi (2018), who examine life not as a biological reality, but as a concept that is made and reinforced by social actors inhabiting both human and non-human modes of existence. As such, the notion of 'life' that I explore in this investigation arises in the interactions and dynamics of those who are granted a status of social existence by others in their shared ontological context.

I use this relational approach to life to highlight the place that the material 'object' or 'thing' occupies in contemporary social dynamics (Miller 1998). In the relational ontology of social life, recognition is not just granted to human actors, but to non-humans as well. While this has been put to practice in discussions of animal and the social existences of other biological entities (Shir-Certesh 2012; Ouchi 2018; Wrye 2009), there is an additional need to consider the way that things non-biological and manufactured feature as potential social actors. These things exist in close relationships with humans and other entities that are granted social recognition. We share with them our intimate spaces and experiences. As such, 'things' gather their own relational attachments that resonate with the qualities of social life, making it possible for the non-biological, material thing to

gain its own personed, living status through the recognition of social actors who occupy an ontology that recognises its potential.

Since Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986), the relational and ontological construction of social persons has been seen to coincide, and be inextricably tied to, the ways things or objects of value manifest in interpersonal dynamics. In expanding this view to the study of material culture and the Japanese context, I seek to demonstrate the diverse ontology of social life, particularly in regards to the seemingly inanimate and non-biological entity, as it is manifest through its close relation with human actors (Ouchi 2018, 416; Okuno 2021,162). In this framing, objects to not simply exist, but are entwined in human activities and human social processes. Without due consideration of this involvement, a key aspect of human sociality and its means of relating to the social world, it is at risk of being overlooked simply by not fitting a biological definition of 'life'.

In this dissertation, I present an ethnography of the post-2015 Japanese sword phenomenon between the years 2020 and 2022. There is a lack of deep, ethnographic work covering this phenomenon, despite the recognition of its impact in tourism and fan studies (Sugawa 2015; Tamai 2016). My goal, therefore, is not to explain and judge the goings-on of this phenomenon, but to present it in tandem with the growing body of ethnographic work dealing with material culture and the social emplacement of material things.

Here, I describe a phenomenon where Japanese swords are objects that are potentially alive. This is not to imply that they have a fleshy body, lungs, nervous system, or any other parameter by which organic life is determined. Rather, it is to recognise how these objects take up space in the physical and metaphysical world of humans. They do not merely exist, but are entities that inhabit the social world and are engaged in relational dynamics with humans. The sword, despite being 'inanimate', 'inorganic', and 'manufactured', is nonetheless entwined in active social processes involving humans of the past and present.

My investigation examines the diverse ways and contexts in which Japan's swords have emerged as contemporary relational actors. Since 2015, swords have become increasingly present in Japan's cultural heritage as tellers of stories, vessels for a sense of existence and animacy, and players in the dynamics of human and non-human relationships. The 'life' that I attribute to them is drawn from the social processes of recognition that designate them as valued social participants, with a status and role in contemporary happenings. I seek to present not only the object as designated social person, but to demonstrate how this designation impacts on discourses in contemporary Japanese society and social relationships, ranging from questions of gender and cultural heritage to programs of regional revitalisation. The object—the inanimate 'thing'—here

emerges as a key player in both the realm of intimate social connections, and the wider dynamics of contemporary society.

Why Japanese Swords?

The primary subjects of my investigation—Japan's swords—are part of an emerging, contemporary culture. Being 'alive' may appear to be a strange way of describing the status of these objects, particularly for those who consider swords to be historical artefacts. However, it is exactly that assumption of historicity that makes the Japanese sword an intriguing lens through which to examine the dynamics of social relationships between human and non-human actors.

The Japanese sword, in many instances, is an object made and primarily used by humans of the past, with its contemporary context regulated to historical inquiry and display. As such, their increasing involvement in contemporary dynamics, not limited to historical promotion but intertwined with other present-day social initiatives, reveals the way in which the classification and designated role of 'things' is a shifting and malleable component of the social realm.

Japanese swords have, since 2015, become subject to a re-negotiation of value enacted by humans who were, from the comments shared with me by those working in Japanese heritage spaces, assumed to not hold significant interest in these objects. I am speaking here of women, primarily in the age range of teens to their 30's, who now make up a considerable component of the audience for Japanese swords and their associated cultural contexts (Sugawa 2015; Tamai 2016, 72; Setouchi City, 2021). The emergence of this audiences provides my investigation with a number of intriguing points of inquiry. I am not only considering the nature of the non-human person by examining the sword. I am presenting an emerging social context where the primary actors are those who have been marginalised or overlooked in existing discourses surrounding this aspect of Japan's material culture. Japanese swords are strongly associated with warrior culture and masculine identities of honourable violence (Watabe, 2021). What does it mean, then, for their cultural and social standing to be negotiated by actors who do not fit this assumption?

I must first explain how women have become involved in Japanese sword culture, and how they have become its primary proponents in the contemporary social setting. In 2015, the collection and management game Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—[1] [刀剣乱舞ーONLINEー], produced by the company Nitro Plus, was launched. This game takes real-world Japanese swords and portrays them as human-shaped warriors, each with a unique design and historically-inspired personality. Touken Ranbu is frequently cited in Japanese news media as kick-starting the current "sword boom" [刀剣

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[1] In Hepburn romanization, this would be written as 'Tōken Ranbu'. However, official English translations and the various actors surrounding the franchise predominantly use 'Touken Ranbu'. I will be using this spelling as it is the romanization involved parties are familiar with, and will provide the most results should the reader seek to know more.

ブーム], so-termed for the visibility of its audience base travelling en-masse to where real-world swords are displayed (Uemura 2015; Touken World 2022). In the course of my investigation a number of institutional workers made note of this "boom", and even as I write in 2022, there is a significant female presence at sword-related exhibitions throughout Japan. There is no doubt that this franchise has influenced a shift in audiences for exhibitions and events related to Japanese swords.

However, it would be inadequate to explain the entire sword phenomenon through the influence of a single media product, nor should this product be taken as the sole impetus for the Japanese sword's recent return to prominence. During the time period of this investigation, which ran over 2020-2022, Japanese swords featured heavily in a number of highly attended exhibitions throughout Japan. These range from the sold-out display of the sword Sanchōmō in Okayama Prefecture, 2020, to the sword-centered anniversary exhibitions of Tokyo's Suntory Art Museum in 2021 and the Ashikaga City Art Museum in 2022, and to exhibitions such as the Ishikawa Prefectural Museum's showcase of the Kashuu school of sword-smithing, held twice over 2021 and 2022 due to high levels of audience demand after the initial 2021 exhibition was cut short by COVID-19 restrictions. Japanese swords emerge in these exhibitions as a fixture of promotions of Japanese material culture. It is important to examine why they have become increasingly central in this promotion, and how their presentation has shifted in recent activities beyond the simple explanation of a pop-culture inspired "boom".

Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— and its media-mix structure encourages its audience to undertake their own examination of swords and their related social contexts. As such, rather than examining the franchise as a sole explainer for the post-2015 increase in attention to Japanese swords, I instead seek to understand the independent activities of those who, with varying levels of engagement with this franchise, interact with swords in the everyday. While Touken Ranbu's primarily female audience are active in their fan-based activities, they are also active in endeavours surrounding real-world swords. In this ethnographic work, I contest the categorisation of these contemporary actors as followers of a trend or pop-culture boom. Instead, I examine their contributions to sword culture through the ways in which they forge attachments to both the object of the sword and their fellow human actors, and through their own examinations of swords not as objects of human ownerships but as entities in possession of their own social existence.

Looking beyond the pop-culture characterisation of these women reveals them as primary investigators and negotiators of the sword's contemporary social value, who support endeavours related to contemporary sword culture. Alongside this, they undertake their own re-negotiation as to the assumptions of who is involved in historical and heritage-based discourses. These women, in interacting with swords, bring forward their own interpretations of the object's role in historical and

contemporary social spaces. In doing so, they further emplace themselves as cultural and social negotiators in a manner that challenges the assumptions put to gendered actors in contemporary society (Jones 2011; Ganzon 2019).

This leads to the other actors and social settings present in my investigation: custodians of cultural institutions, and grassroots/volunteer actors who engage with the socially-active sword to undertake their own activities of regional promotion. My investigation, centred around the object of the sword, is not held to the museum or institutional display, where the object is placed for viewing in its case. Rather, I engage with the widespread culture of Japanese swords as they are embedded in a variety of social situations, such as the private collection or the collections of locally-emplaced shrines and temples. In expanding the sword's context from the museum display to include other settings these objects inhabit, I seek to further broaden the ways in which swords are understood by contemporary actors outside of top-down institutional evaluations of object-value.

In searching for the relational construction of sword lives, one does not simply start and end with the explanations produced by national museums or other institutional sites of display, that frame swords as symbols of masculine might. Rather, in shifting the assumed location of a sword to sites of the periphery and to relationships with actors outside of the major institution, we can see how the object is central in its own network of social attachments. This investigation demonstrates a social ontology that recognises attributes of objects beyond their material existence. It comes into regular contact with human actors of all ages and locations throughout Japan, many of whom have perspectives and their own social attachments to objects that are not entirely represented by dominant explanations of Japanese material culture.

Thus, I present the context of this investigation as such: the contemporary social realm of swords, and how they are being made relevant in the present-day through their relationships with potentially overlooked human actors. I do so in order to undertake an examination of the object and its social ties that draw on discourses and negotiations of social validity amongst human actors; that is, by considering how the sword is made active in its relationships, we can gain further understanding in how the recognition of social objects affects wider social dynamics. This is an inquiry that seeks to highlight the diverse perspectives surrounding the object of the sword, and the revival of interest in Japanese sword culture. The perspectives involved in this phenomenon have brought to light an ontological understanding of objects that incorporates the non-human into the negotiations of social life.

How are Things Alive?

The question that underlies my research asks how relational engagements with non-humans reveal understandings of animate life. Any attempt to answer it asks for an examination not only of

the direct relationship between a person and a 'thing', but in how the thing itself has animate potential and impact on the arenas of social life. This examination is drawn from the relational ontology (Bird-David 1999; Wrye 2009) and the notion of the gathered attachments of things that form socially relevant structures in the context of human existence (Ingold 2020).

I examine swords, and by extension other potential non-human social persons, as things that can exist in relationship with social entities. I do so not through a perceived projection of humanness, but through a consideration for the thing's own qualities and the meaning it itself brings to the dynamics of engagement and attachment. The Japanese sword is not merely a re-emerging subject of institutional displays, and those who interact with it are not only curators, custodians, and the assumed masculine audience. The Japanese sword is an object with social attachments that are enacted in a variety of contemporary settings, and are recognised by an emerging group of social actors who do not fit the pre-2015 assumptions as to who is interested in this category of object.

This examination calls for an approach outside of those that designate these objects as historical artefacts or symbolic representations. Instead, I undertake an examination of the object's ontological construction, evaluating the cultural notion of the sword, how it is negotiated by social actors, and how its importance is determined, recognised, and reaffirmed by their actions. This allows for an analysis of the personal interactions between humans and swords in the present day. It further allows for an examination of how swords emerge as rallying-points for localised notions of value. And it brings forward a re-examination of how these objects are deemed valuable—does cultural value lie their craft or their provenance? Or is it in the way their existence speak to the concerns and empathetic responses of human actors?

This latter perspective is central in my examination of how objects such as Japanese swords are potentially 'alive'. I propose the object is empathised *with*, not emoted *at*; and in doing so, I argue that the sword is identified as its own individual, with its own existence, and not as an extension of a human owner's exploits. This differentiation may seem minor. However, when paired with the broader activities in Japanese cultural promotion, they have significant impact in how the object emerges in social discourses.

To question the life of a sword is also to question how these objects influence and impact on negotiations occurring in contemporary social life. This is not something restricted to the context of Japanese swords and their emerging human interlocutors. Rather, I present this ethnographic investigation of the diverse ways in which swords are potentially alive to propose the possibility of life in other non-human entities, in other social contexts. My investigation is not to create a definitive argument as to whether or not swords are alive. It is, instead, a proposition for an examination of objects and other non-humans from the perspective of social attachments in a manner that broadens the representation of ontological diversity in inquiries of social negotiation.

The Implications of a Living Sword

In this investigation I examine the contexts and framings put to Japanese swords that highlight their potential to be considered as 'living' entities. The first half of my dissertation considers the actors and settings of this phenomenon by examining the emergence of the current sword culture, its main human proponents, and the notion of animacy for non-human actors. I follow this with the second half of my dissertation, which more closely examines individual swords in their social contexts and how they have impacted on those contexts.

The first half of this work examines the current context surrounding Japanese swords. This involves the background to the value of Japanese swords as material and cultural objects. Beyond this, I present the ways in which swords are related to as potentially animate, social things. I here examine the notion of 'life' through the way the object is constructed through its relationships, and through this construction, how it is made into an individual entity.

To do so, I put forward the main actors in this phenomenon: the predominately young women who regularly engage with contemporary Japanese swords. I consider how their activities and their ways of communication formulate a social setting in which swords emerge as valued entities with individual qualities. This social setting is made in reference to historical hierarchies and assumptions as to the roles of gendered persons in the past (Murakami, Masaki, and Shimodzuki 2013; Sugawa-Shimada 2017; Saito 2021). By renegotiating these historical hierarchies in the present, the women involved in this investigation demonstrate their capacities as negotiators and determiners of social value (Jones 2011; Ganzon 2019).

In conjunction with my analysis of how these women are involved in social negotiations, I consider the role of the Touken Ranbu franchise in this phenomenon. I do so not through the lens of media analysis, but rather, in how the franchise's conceptual elements contribute to the vocabulary of human negotiators as they embark on their social interactions with swords. That is, I consider this franchise as it is used, not as a pop-culture product, but as an aspect of contemporary living. In particular, I highlight how this franchise, with its overtly historicised styling and internal language, provides a basis for its female audience to negotiate their own standings and social terms in reference to, but not beholden to, the work of top-level producers. In this manner, I seek to demonstrate how the humans involved in the re-emergence of Japanese sword culture, while using similar language to each other, are not a monolith. They are, instead, their own parties concerned with their own ways of determining valid social life.

With these elements in mind, I consider how 'life' has been determined in previous investigations of non-human sociality. I use the concept of animism as it has been used by new animists and Japanese scholars as a starting point to re-consider how 'life' is attributed to non-

human entities (Bird-David 1999; Brown & Walker 2009; Richardson 2016; Ogata 2020; Hirota 2021). This is counter to the assumption that non-human or object-based life is, by necessity, a function of anthropomorphism, which denies non-humans a sense of agency (Candea 2012; Ramsay and Teichroeb 2019). Instead of an anthropocentric framework, I use the work of new animism in conjunction with relational ontological approaches (Wrye 2009) to examine swords and other non-humans as they exist in Japanese historical literature, factual and fictional depictions in present-day institutions, and their emergence into an interactive relationship with humans. In doing so, I seek to lay the foundation for further analysis of objects such as Japanese swords as co-inhabitants of humans, who co-exist in the social realm.

The persistence of anthropomorphic and anthropocentric readings of human relationships with non-humans has the potential to flatten the ontological complexity of social dynamics. As such, in my ethnographic investigation I highlight the 'inanimate' object of the sword as an individualised actor present in social gathering spaces. The recognition of a sword's individuality by actors involved in the current expression of Japanese sword culture further recognises its past life stories and experiences. This allows for a re-framing of the broader social and cultural significance for the object, that does not present it as a simple projection or vessel for human lives or attributes. The sword, as its own social entity, allows for a deeper analysis of the object's role in human social processes as it emerges as its own kind of social actor.

I follow this discussion and the implications of shifting away from an anthropocentric view of object analysis by examining how it impacts traditional venues of cultural value: that is, the museum or gallery. Objects such as swords, legally designated as 'Nihontō' [日本刀], are largely owned and evaluated by top-down organisations or curators in museum spaces, which promote particular framings and ideas of object value (Morishita 2010, 85, 88). This is commonly expressed through descriptors such as 'artefact' or 'artwork'. When held to these categorical definitions, objects such as Japanese swords become static and with pre-determined demarcations of value, presented for display on the premise of an objective evaluation of their material form and provenance (Svašek 2007). It is here that the broader notions of value from the individualised, potentially social sword allows for counter-interpretations and a wider space for the negotiation of value that includes grassroots and independent actors.

As such, I highlight the ways in which the recognition of Japanese swords as individual entities with emotional aspects to their existence brings additional elements to the evaluation of material objects. In particular, I emphasise the notion of intangibility when it comes to the ways in which objects are valued. A recognition of the intangible qualities of objects by both institutional and independent actors provides an expansion on the loci of value for material things, and further avenues for these same kinds of things to become present in social spaces. In these negotiations,

drawing on intangible value, the space of the museum becomes more than one of display; it becomes a social setting for the object (Strathern 1990). In this pursuit of the social life of a sword, the boundary between traditional and emergent curators of cultural value become blurred, creating a venue where the 'common-sense' legal designations of material object-value are made more complex, through the incorporation of perspectives from outside the assumed norm.

With this, I move to the second main section of my dissertation: how the multiple perspectives surrounding the social status of a sword contributes to endeavours in the human realm. This section examines cases where swords in regional and independent collections have emerged as social entities that participate in acts of identity formation and promotion of their respective 'home' areas. In examining the activities surrounding these individualised swords, I seek to demonstrate how viewing the object through its social attachments, and through the actions of those who relate to it in social terms, contributes to endeavours that extend beyond the sword's assumed role as a historical item in its display case. It is here that the potentially living sword regains its contemporary social significance.

I start with the notion of habitation for the living sword. This encapsulates the ways in which social entities are recognised not simply through their tangible, material existence, but through their empathetic and interactive qualities with others who occupy space (Ingold 2020). I examine this aspect of habitation through the idea of the 'home' or 'hometown' for both human and object actors in periphery regions of Japan. It is here, away from the regulated and well-established practices of large-scale institutions in metropolitan cultural centres, that the independent and grassroots actor can most easily engage in their own acts of social negotiation, and directly involve local swords in that process. I discuss this through cultural pride initiatives, and the network-making of grassroots actors centred on the social attachments gathered by individual swords. Recognising a sword's social attachments does more than make note of the object's tangible display; it informs the sword's manifestation as a social entity, differentiated from humans, other objects, and even (through individual experiences) from other potentially living swords.

By examining these activities, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which swords are constructed as social beings, and how this construction asks for further considerations of the treatment of objects and object ownership. The social recognition of a sword brings additional dimensions to notions such as 'treasure' or 'economic asset'. As such, the social habitation of a sword does not merely speak to its potentially living status, but also asks for further considerations as to how that status is managed, mediated, and protected alongside institutional goals of cultural preservation.

Finally, I consider the historicity of swords as objects, by examining the ways they appear in Japanese historical narratives. These narratives are enacted in contemporary social space and, as

such, are subject to negotiation by human actors (Tamai 2016; Buchholtz 2011; Falola 2022). Do swords appear in historical narratives as tools, or do they have the potential to emerge as representatives of their own, individualised existence? I examine this through the way institutions and independent researchers frame swords and their role in historical narratives. Here, I highlight the sword and its individual experiences as a means for institutional actors to establish a continuious historical identity. Alongside this are the ways the exploration of sword lives provide a space for independent actors to pursue counter- and alternate- narratives to those that serve the interests of institutional heritage discourses (Falola 2022).

Socially emplaced, potentially living swords can serve as a representative of particular aspects of Japan's past, such as its sword-smithing culture. However, there are other dimensions to their position in these stories when it comes to actors who seek to shape narratives of preservation in the post-WWII context. As such, I demonstrate the role of the Japanese sword as a historical story-teller, and the ways in which simple shifts in perspective impact on their framing as objects of the past, or as objects of an ongoing present and future.

Recognising Object-Beings in Contemporary Social Life

In this inquiry, I seek to demonstrate the roles occupied by Japanese swords in their re-emergence into contemporary social life, which extends across a variety of social spaces. Their position in these spaces is actively negotiated by human actors, whose interests overlap, but cannot be contained by singular explanations that prioritise a top-down view of the phenomenon. In my examination of a relational ontology between object and human, I demonstrate how it is vital to consider how grassroots level relationships contribute to broader formations of contemporary social life.

I present a view of contemporary social life that seeks to question the categorisation of social actors. Primary in this questioning is the status of the non-human, and whether or not it can become a living social entity. However, tied to this line of questioning arises others related to the categorisation of social entities, and the assumptions levied at them based on these arbitrary demarcations of status. As Japanese swords expand beyond categorisations of 'weapon', 'artefact', or 'artwork', I also seek to expand on the designations levied at my human interlocutors, beyond ideas of socialised 'women', 'fans', 'consumers', and the hierarchies between top-level and grassroots producers.

As such, this inquiry is one of contemporary social life, not just as it applies to human and non-human entities, but as it applies to the ways in which we approach life itself. This investigation deals with a number of realms that may appear to each fit into their own category: for example, studies of material culture, heritage, popular media, regional development, etc. However, when

viewed from the perspective of the subject itself—for example, the sword—we can see how social lives, whether they be of humans or objects, engage with these realms without drawing a clear distinction between them, as they negotiate the standing of their own existence.

The so-called "sword boom" provides a complex and ongoing example of how overlapping arenas of contemporary social life are experienced, negotiated, and made by a variety of social actors. This is not a phenomenon that can so easily be explained as a pop-culture fad. Nor can it be adequately analysed by using only typical notions of object value for swords. This is a social phenomenon that draws into its negotiations the relational ties and experiences of a vast number of social actors, ranging from the young, engaged woman to the hundreds of years old sword. The voices that contribute to this negotiation—those of women, regional communities, and even the objects themselves—exist outside of the assumed norm. Nonetheless, they actively engage with each other and other established actors, and in doing so, highlight the ontological complexity to social living. It is for this reason that I have written of the sword: not as a historical artefact, or a weapon of the past, but as a living entity that accumulates and influences social connections in the present day.

2. METHODOLOGY

To understand the way that relational engagements reveal the ontological complexities of non-human life, this investigation identifies and locates the places of social interaction. I use the tools of anthropological field enquiry to enter these places as both researcher and co-participant, gathering data for analysis whilst also immersing myself in the systems that create and negotiate social life. This is an ethnographic approach that does not just include the subject of the sword alongside human participants, but seeks to determine its construction as an active social entity—that is, emplacing it in its social context.

The subjects of this investigation are not all human, and include seemingly inanimate aspects of material culture. Analysis of material culture, argues Miller (1998) "must find some channel between on the one hand mere reportage of the voice of experience, and on the other hand the merely formalistic application of schema of analysis" (12). Miller, in the introduction to *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (1998) and evident in the contributions of anthropologists to the volume, argues that this can be found in ethnography. Ethnography allows the researcher to engage with and understand lives beyond what people say about themselves, making it particularly useful in the study of material culture and in assessments of how social actors actually engage with material things (Miller 1998, 12-13). It is this manifestation of actual engagements and relational approaches towards the object of the sword that I seek to uncover with my investigation.

My approach has been born from preliminary investigation and the common ways in which human interlocutors spoke of and conducted activities surrounding swords. Their construction of swords extended beyond the display cases of a museum or gallery, and to include this in my own investigation, I have in turn extended the lens of analysis to wider social arenas where the standing of swords is negotiated. As such, this investigation does not focus on the sword as 'artefact', but 'swords' as actors.

My methodology has been undertaken to suit these conditions, incorporating the social spaces and circumstances that render swords into actors, as opposed to a historical examination of a material object. My analysis incorporates relational approaches used to determine the social status of non-humans, which are themselves varied and subject to debate. This aspect of my investigation, that is, the determining of appropriate frameworks to approach sword entities, will be covered in subsequent chapters. Here, I outline my process of determining the spaces where actors, human and non-human, are actively present in their social engagements.

Firstly, I have undertaken a primarily field-based inquiry, drawing on sustained interaction and co-participation with actors involved in sword culture, regional promotion, and cultural heritage. In doing so, I have engaged with an ethnographic form of investigation, locating myself as

a researcher within the social dynamics being investigated. This follows methods of anthropological inquiry, which highlight the need for immersion and co-participation in order to faithfully represent and analyse the phenomena at hand based on the observation and engagement with actual experience and the manifestation of social actions.

The sites involved in this investigation cover both the diverse tangible places where humans come into contact and relationship with swords, and the virtual, intangible places where the status of these non-humans continue to be negotiated. These are arenas of interpersonal interactions and community-based events, and are further inclusive of traditional institutions of cultural value such as museums and heritage sites. These sites are spread across Japan's geographic and virtual space. For the purpose of this investigation, I have selected a number of these sites which I term 'gathering places'. These places are identified not on the tangible presence of a sword, but on the intangible connections that gather at particular sites associated with swords and sword culture.

Immersion in these places of interaction allows for contact with the various actors present. The gathering places I have determined as field sites are those where the life-trajectories, meaningful events, and relational interactions of swords are made and reenforced through contemporary social practices. These places gather not only the intangible aspects of a sword's existence, but the humans who are interested in pursuing it. These human actors are varied. They include the institutional and curatorial actors of material cultural objects; emergent independent actors, largely women; and those of local communities who engage with sword cultures in connection to local place-identities. The diversity of these actors is why the field sites outlined in my investigation extend beyond those where one can directly see a sword on display. These are places where those who occupy multiple social categories, including non-humans, come into contact with each other.

Secondly, this investigation explores communities spread over vast tangible and intangible spaces. This reveals the expansive ways in which life is socially determined. To fully connect with this scope, my methods have been made adaptable to shifts in social dynamics and modes of interaction. Where possible I undertook participant-observation, engaging in sword-related events and activities with interlocutors from differing independent, community, and institutional viewpoints. To supplement this, I undertook both structured and unstructured interviews. Interviews had with community representatives and those of institutions were largely in a formal setting, while those had with independent actors were made flexible, free-flowing, and conversational, to accomodate and make comfortable those who are not familiar with formal interview processes.

Finally, my investigation required navigation of existing social boundaries between my interlocutors, as they range from independent social actors to those verified as cultural custodians in an institutional capacity. As such, the social determination of relationships between human actors

emerged as a vital component of analysis. Alongside this comes the necessity to navigate the boundaries of these relationships as both participant as researched. In this capacity, too, my methods of inquiry were made flexible and determined by the social status I was perceived to occupy in relation to my interlocutors. The status' I occupied ranged from researcher, to fellow sword enthusiast, and even as a mere stranger. In navigating these relationships, I undertook my own shifts in status and perception, which allowed for greater access to common points of gathering and sanctification as an actor in this context of sword culture. As such, while navigating these boundaries was a necessary part of my field methods, it also further highlights the ways in which 'life' is constituted through social, relational engagements.

IDENTIFYING GATHERING PLACES

Identifying gathering places is not as simple as locating a list of sword exhibition sites and making one's way to them. It requires consideration for the social potential of each site, as a place where relational engagements are undertaken. To do so, rather than examining exhibition advertisements, it is necessary to have extensive immersion into the independent networks of information-sharing made and sustained by sword enthusiasts, directing fellow enthusiasts to where they can engage with sword lives.

The identification of gathering places requires an integration into the multimodal and digital spaces occupied by these independent actors. The re-emergence in interest in Japan's swords has come alongside other emergent forms of cultural negotiation in Japan. This has shifted the locus of gathering to incorporate both in-person and virtual forms of communication. For those who seek to engage with swords, online and virtual spaces come in tandem with the exploration of physical space. This is a natural connection between sites of gathering for actors in this phenomenon.

In addition, one might assume that, to engage with a sword, you simply see it in its display. This is not necessarily the case, particularly in this investigation which seeks out the social qualities of being. Swords, like other social entities, have intangible as well as tangible attachments to people and place. As such, the process of identifying appropriate gathering places serves as a significant aspect of conducting this investigation.

PHYSICAL GATHERING PLACES

The sites that display swords—both now and in the past—are ones of gathering. These sites exist in the context of broader inter-community negotiations of significant places, and can be found all across Japan. Within the scope of this investigation I focused on the sites that display swords with a human-shaped counterpart in the Touken Ranbu franchise. Swords not yet introduced to Touken Ranbu are frequently visitors by actors in this phenomenon. However, those with a

presence in the franchise have already attained a level of social connectivity to a large audience. As such, they provide the clearest points of gathering for the diverse realms of actors surrounding sword culture.

Restricting my sites to those related to or exhibiting a sword that appears in Touken Ranbu does not, by any means, diminish the number of potential gathering places. Between October 2020 to December 2022, more than 61 exhibitions featuring a sword with some connection to Touken Ranbu were held across 24 of Japan's 47 prefectures. Of these exhibitions, around 26 were conducted with direct collaboration between the site and Touken Ranbu producers. These exhibitions were held on three of Japan's four main islands, in Honshuu, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Okinawa. It should be noted, however, that the presence of lack thereof of an official sword exhibition is not necessarily the entire motivator for the travels and/or activities of sword enthusiasts. While Hokkaido did not host an exhibition featuring a sword from Touken Ranbu in this period, the area of Hakodate remains and important travel site for this demographic. The frequency of exhibitions in the regions of Kansai and Kanto suggests a strong association with sword exhibitions and the broader historical narrative of 'warrior culture' associated with the island of Honshuu. This association between swords and the warrior past is further highlighted by fan interest in Hakodate, a city with strong associations to warfare and colonisation in the early modern period.

While sword exhibitions are concentrated in Honshuu, the presence of collaborative exhibitions in Okinawa, combined with the enthusiasm held by independent actors for swords of the Ryukyu Kingdom, indicates that this phenomenon is one with the potential to expand beyond the traditional warrior-framing of Japan's dominant, national, metropolitan historical and cultural capitals. This would be a fruitful avenue for future investigation.

Narrowing down this broad range of sites, spread across Japan, required an immersion into the community of sword enthusiasts prior to direct face-to-dace contact, in order to identify which of the many sword-related places would be most suited to investigation. I chose this immersive approach due to the way in which information surrounding sword-related sites and exhibitions is shared in an independent capacity, outside of formalised networks of exhibition promotion. This is particularly apparent when dealing with Touken Ranbu's fanbase, themselves highly engaged participants in online communities.

Narrowing down potential field sites, even when restricted to those exhibiting or related to a sword present in Touken Ranbu, can not be done comprehensively by simply targeting those that enter into official collaboration with the franchise's producers. While these exhibitions and collaborations would, in theory, attract large numbers of fans, there are a significant number of sites that manage to do so without direct ties to the Touken Ranbu franchise. Through my immersion into

fan communicative spaces, it became apparent that the presence or lack of an official collaboration had little bearing on the ways the independent actors themselves valued physical gathering places. Rather, what was important for these actors was the presence of a sword and the emotive aspects of their lives. These elements were incorporated into the ways exhibition and other display information was shared and circulated amongst independent actors.

Location	No. of Exhibitions
Tokyo	7
Kyoto	6
Aichi	5
Ishikawa	4
Shizuoka	4
Fukuoka	3
Hyogo	3
Mie	3
Okayama	3
Osaka	3
Yamagata	3
Hiroshima	2
Ibaraki	2
Okinawa	2
Saitama	2
Ehime	1
Gunma	1
Fukushima	1
Kagawa	1
Kanagawa	1
Kumamoto	1
Saga	1
Tochigi	1
Yamaguchi	1
Total:	**61**
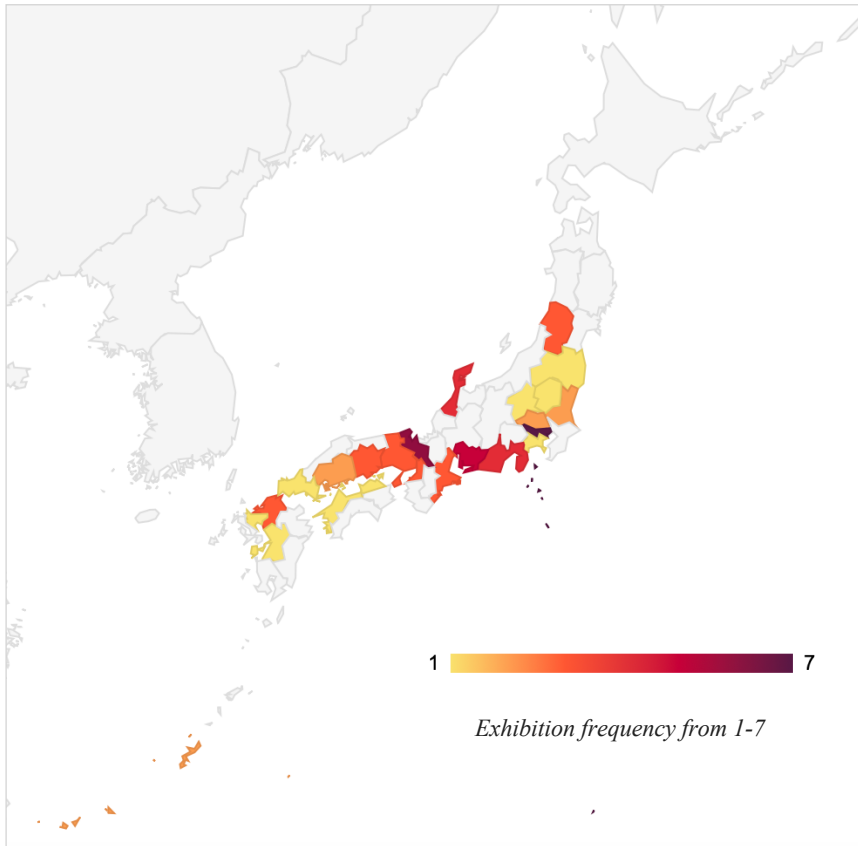
Figure 1 (top) Approximate Distribution and Frequency of Exhibitions Featuring Swords that Appear in Touken Ranbu, Sep 2020-Dec 2022. Made with Google Charts.

Of the sites ultimately selected for investigation, I had identified several as potential field sites prior to the announcement of official collaborations or promotions: their investigative potential had already been made apparent on the strength of enthusiasm held by independent actors. As such,

determining the significance of gathering places relies not on attention to the top-down producer, but to the value as generated by the body of independent actors and their own methods of information sharing. As a result, the gathering places that appear in this work are determined via community negotiations. They range from the expected museum and gallery exhibition, to regional shrines, temples, historical sites, and even entire townships. The primary gathering places that appear in this work are as follows:

Sano Art Museum, Mishima City, Shizuoka Prefecture: fieldwork conducted in January/February 2020, December 2020, February 2022

The privately-operated Sano Art Museum has a long history of sword exhibitions, preceding the emergence of the current phenomenon in 2015. Since then, the Sano Art Museum and the city of Mishima have undertaken a number of city-wide collaborations with media productions, including Touken Ranbu. This site was identified due to the popularity of its collaboration exhibitions. It was visited as a field site during both collaborative and non-collaborative sword exhibitions. It serves as an example of the shifts in the institutional framing of swords as valuable objects, occurring alongside the emergent audience of women for sword exhibitions.

The Tokugawa Museum, Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture: fieldwork conducted in August 2020, December 2020, May 2021

The Tokugawa Museum, unlike other instances of sword exhibition, has the sword Shokudaikiri Mitsutada on long-term display. This site was identified due to the often-shared anecdote amongst Touken Ranbu fans that the sword, once thought to be missing, had been brought back into prominence through the efforts of fan actors. It occupies a place of pride amongst the fan community. The long-term display of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, in connection to concentrated efforts in connecting with independent actors, has made the Museum and Mito significant sites of gathering for sword enthusiasts post-2015. This gathering takes place both in the Museum itself and at other sites in the city. The Tokugawa Museum is also significant as a place that negotiates sword identities outside of Touken Ranbu. As such, it is not only a long-term gathering place, but one where the layered and flexible aspects of social recognition are at play.

Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum, Setouchi City (Osafune), Okayama Prefecture: fieldwork conducted in September 2020, October 2021, August 2022

The Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum is a publicly-run museum focusing on the sword-smithing history of Osafune, a district of the recently formed Setouchi City in Okayama Prefecture. This area boasts a historical claim to Japan's sword-smithing culture, with many of its swords

appearing in blockbuster exhibitions, lists of registered treasures, and of course Touken Ranbu. This site was identified via the news of successful crowdfunding to purchase the sword Sanchōmō, shared by fans who had contributed to the campaign, as well as those who celebrated its successful funding. The initiatives of Setouchi City, in combination with local community groups from Osafune, provide an example by which renewed attention to sword cultures impacts on the regional development of associated places.

Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture: fieldwork conducted in February 2022

Unlike the aforementioned sites, Ashikaga City does not regularly display swords associated with Touken Ranbu. Nonetheless, it occupies a space of significance amongst the emergent communities of sword enthusiasts as the former home for the sword Yamanbagiri Kunihiro. Its strength as a site of gathering increased in 2022, with a limited exhibition of the sword in the city's art museum. Ashikaga City provides an example of a gathering place that is not limited to its singular institutions, but one that is made significant as a place in its entirety, based on the historical presence of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro and its ongoing relationship to the area.

Kuwana City, Mie Prefecture: fieldwork conducted in October 2021

Similar to Ashikaga City, Kuwana City is not a place where swords are regularly displayed. However, it has gained significance due to its the documentation of visits by independent fan actors, which are frequently circulated on social media. Kuwana City is the hometown of the sword-smith Muramasa. More recently, this place has gained additional significance amongst sword enthusiasts due to its association with the sword Kuwana Gou and its 'homecoming' exhibition. This site provides an example of a gathering place where the identities of swords and their interpretations are supported through the long-term activities of locally-emplaced independent actors, as well as those of institutional sites of display.

Daikakuji Temple, Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture: fieldwork conducted in December 2020, July 2021, August 2022

Daikakuji is a long-standing Buddhist temple located in the north of Kyoto City and a significant aspect of its historical landscape. This temple houses the sword Hizamaru (also known as Usumidori), and has a high level of engagement with independent fan actors and their capabilities as historical and social interpreters. The strength of this relationship has filtered through the emergent community of sword enthusiasts, made apparent in their repeated visits to the site and the sharing of their experiences on social media. Daikakuji, like the Tokugawa Museum, recognises fan actors, despite the fact that it has not directly collaborated with Touken Ranbu. It provides an

example of a gathering place with sustained relationships between institutional and independent actors.

Aoe Shrine, Kurashiki City, Okayama Prefecture: fieldwork conducted October 2021

Aoe Shrine is a local-level shrine in Kurashiki City. It stands separate from the city's other highly trafficked historical sites, but is nonetheless highly visited by sword enthusiasts due to its relationship with the Aoe school of sword-smithing. It has emerged as a significant site of gathering due to promotion through the combined efforts of local community actors and independent sword enthusiasts. The shrine does not have any direct connection to the Touken Ranbu franchise, nor does it display a tangible sword. This and other shrines mentioned in the following chapters highlight the presence of traditional community gathering sites, that of the local shrine, in this particular phenomenon.

The sites outlined above were chosen from amongst the large number of gathering places frequented by actors in this phenomenon so as to be reflective of the variety inherent in these places, both in their physical context and social dynamics. They are not the only ones visited in the course of this investigation, but have been chosen due to their representative nature for the concepts dealt with in my analysis. Where other sites are relevant, they are mentioned directly in the text. These sites, spread throughout Honshuu, represent the diverse arenas of negotiation between human actors while also incorporating into these negotiations the social attachments of swords. Whether as a site of display, of former existence, or of a limited-time 'homecoming', these places provide a wide representation of the contexts and dynamics of social hierarchies to which the lives of human and non-human actors are negotiated in relation to each other.

VIRTUAL GATHERING PLACES

As well as being integral to the identification of physical gathering places, virtual gathering places are themselves sites where notions of existence and social validity is negotiated. Immersion into these virtual gathering places provided information on the meaning of swords to the contemporary audience, as well as interactions with actors directly involved in sword culture. Immersion into this virtual space is crucial to gaining a full understanding of the re-emergence of swords as significant aspects of Japan's material culture. It is in these interactions, able to be had between a level field of actors, and their circulation of information and perspectives, that the active components of swords and their social position are negotiated. Without an immersion into this space, the independent voices that propagate the sword phenomenon would be overlooked.

In the early stages of my preliminary investigation, it quickly became apparent that following the social media announcements of institutional actors and Touken Ranbu's official collaborations with them was insufficient, when my focus was on the impact the franchise's fans have in promoting Japan's swords as aspects of contemporary cultural heritage. While official accounts provided evidence of partnerships with museums and galleries, they lagged behind the independent social media promotion of these sites undertaken by the fanbase. In addition, official channels, perhaps intentionally, do not promote the independent and community-driven projects that support sword cultures. As such, immersion and participant-observation within the virtual gathering places is vital in ascertaining the full scope of swords' presence in the contemporary cultural landscape.

Social Media (SNS)

The primary virtual gathering place for the actors involved in contemporary sword culture is social media: a venue for communication and social negotiation with far-reaching significance across social research. Twitter is particularly heavily used by sword-related actors, both as a means of event promotion and a site of negotiating the meaning of these objects and their pasts. Twitter allows for real-time engagements and interactions between those across various arenas of material culture: independent actors, community groups, and even institutional voices.

Immersion into social media gathering places reveals how the social activities of independent actors operate on a constant basis. As such, my own engagements were undertaken on a basis of long-term engagement. The levelling abilities of online communication here operate not only between the various kinds of fan actors, but between independent and institutional ones. This allows for diverse interpretations of objects and their social positioning to be shared, opening avenues of inquiry and circulation by theoretically equally-placed social media accounts. In addition, the portability and easy access of online social media allows for real-time documentation provided by independent actors in regards to their experiences in physical gathering spaces. As such, virtual gathering spaces are 1) a means of information sharing for physical gathering, 2) a means of negotiation in information surrounding swords, and 3) a place to record immediate reactions for the independent actors of this phenomenon.

While Twitter has a reputation for its character limit and shortened forms of discourse, the Japanese language allows for a more robust use of this character limit than those such as English. This may be a contributing factor to this platform's use by independent actors in tracking their own experiences, investigations, and research materials. Immersion into the virtual space provides access to this information. In addition, it allows for an evaluation regarding the access of information on swords based on their accessible languages.

The virtual gathering places populated by the emergent Japanese-speaking audience of female sword fans are public, however, they require both Japanese ability and a knowledge of specialised in-community vocabulary to locate and participate in their discourses. This is a specialised community, operating outside of typical institutional and English language discourses surrounding Japanese swords. However, it is not necessarily exclusive of involvement by other language speakers. With the tools of machine translation and other multilingual facilities of virtual spaces, it becomes necessary to look at this arena not only as a discoursive one, but as a 'place' of gathering on its own.

Supplementary Websites

Social media as virtual gathering places are largely utilised as engagement hubs and the sites of discourse. However, they are not the only virtual spaces occupied by independent actors who engage with swords. These additional sites include personal blogs, those that host fan content such as Pixiv, and collaborative *matome* [まとめ] websites used to collate information and contributions on social media. These supplementary websites were analysed primarily for their status as living archives of the information gathered by sword enthusiasts, and for the potential social negotiation of sword lives these archives contribute to. Non-social media sites provide a contextual basis for interactions had in other gathering places. They also gained additional significance during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they could still be accessed, interacted with, and added upon while physical gatherings were restricted.

These places, both physical and virtual, gather the tangible and intangible elements of social existence. In doing so, they provide the context by which that existence is negotiated, mediated by the unspoken boundaries of social hierarchies, gendered experiences, and with the specialised vocabulary of particular communities. Included in this direct human-to-human communication are elements of value for places of gathering that are more closely aligned to the life and experiences of swords. As such, these gathering places do not only bring actors together, but also bring together diverse experiences of living.

I now turn to those who populate and inhabit these gathering places: the human and non-human interlocutors that appear throughout this investigation.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

A significant aspect of this investigation is tied to immersion and participant-observation with those actively involved in Japan's contemporary sword culture. This has involved being recognised, particularly by the independent fan actors of this phenomenon, as one who occupies similar social space and an understanding of their approaches to popular media and real-world

swords. To be recognised, by these actors, is to become enmeshed in a form of relational identity negotiation. Relational identity negotiation is, therefore, not only a lens of analysis in this investigation, but a method of gaining access to sites and perspectives that may otherwise be inaccessible to those without inter-community recognition.

Extended interactions with interlocutors were largely facilitated by online engagement, and extended to physical gathering places. In the course of investigation, my interlocutors themselves pointed to the dual virtual and physical dynamics to their social interactions in this phenomenon. An ethnographic immersion in community activities is here a vantage point to observe and analyse the fluid dynamics of social negotiation, as they are enacted by the participants themselves.

The participants in this investigation are both human and non-human actors. This was ascertained after preliminary participant observation at real-world gathering places, where swords, too, were drawn into acts of relational identity negotiation. As such, the participants in this investigation are as follows:

• Swords

• Independent actors

• Volunteer/community actors

• Institutional actors

Swords have been included as participants to highlight the driving questions of my investigation, that is, how the designation of social life is a relational process, applicable to non-human entities. In addition, I position swords as participants in order to render them active in analysis, rather than as passive objects. As human actors are positioned via relational interactions with each other, so too do I examine the way the sword gains its intangible, social status through the ways it comes in contact with others.

I have loosely defined my human interlocutors by the social space they occupy: Individuals, acting in an independent capacity unaffiliated with an organisational group; Volunteers, acting in connection to grassroots or other non-profit activities; and Institutions, as actors involved in this investigation as representatives of an existing institutional body of cultural and material heritage. I use these descriptors to avoid binary classifications such as 'fan/creator', 'audience/management', or 'local/outsider'. While it is necessary to note the differences between the actors in this phenomenon, particularly when it comes to analysis of their mediation of typical social boundaries, the boundaries between actors themselves are similarly dynamic and flexible. Often, individual actors inhabit multiple social arenas, between which they may not make a personal distinction. The descriptors used in this work are intended to reflect the ways in which I contacted and connected with my interlocutors, rather than holding an actor to a specific social realm.

SWORDS-AS-ACTORS

Swords may not move independently or be able to voice their opinions, as human actors do, but they are nonetheless vital participants in this social phenomenon. Their status as social entities is central to the ways object and place value is negotiated in the current discourses of Japanese material culture. As such, it becomes necessary to approach the sword and its attachments in a way similar to that of a human actor.

In undertaking my immersion into gathering places and in gaining my own recognition as a qualified actor in the eyes of my human interlocutors, I encountered swords in a number of different contexts. These ranged from the large national museum to small, community spaces. I collected field data in regards to their display, presentation, and the content of their object descriptions. This information is accessible to regular visitors, and is made by the curation of institutional actors. In addition to this readily accessible information, I undertook a process of ascertaining the emplaced aspects of object display. 'Emplacement' here covers more than the physical placement of the object itself. It included a questioning and observation of human interlocutors as to how they approached the sword, and how they understood it in terms of social and cultural value. The emplaced existence of the sword can not be separated from how it is socially constructed. Thus, the sword's typical institutional display reveals both the institutional perspective of object-value, as well as those that arise from community and independent actors.

In this latter context, swords emerge as in this phenomenon as the facilitators and subjects of interactions that extend to human participants. As well as observing their physical display, I undertook inquiry into the emotions evoked by swords and their projected material and immaterial value. Alongside this, I undertook an analysis of the attachments these objects have gathered, including relationships to other swords, humans, and social places. In the typical analysis of a sword as an artefact, these elements—particularly as they relate to historical humans and places—may be considered contextual background. However, as I approach swords as social actors, this information gains additional importance as a diving factor of the objects contemporary social interactions. I present swords as more than inanimate 'objects'. They are entities with their own social contexts, sought out by human actors not for their artistic or historical value, but for what they can convey about the spaces they both tangibly and intangibly occupy.

INDIVIDUALS

I define 'individuals' or 'individual actors' as those those who are involved in physical and virtual gathering spaces without a direct connection with an organisation. An organisation may be a grassroots or volunteer initiative, or an established heritage institution. Individuals incorporate what may other investigative contexts may term the 'visitor', 'audience', or 'fan'. While I may use these

terms in the process of explaining context and actions, I prioritise the use of the term 'individual actor' to distance my interlocutors from any implied or assumed definition they may have as purely consumptive actors. Instead, I position individuals as actors whom navigate, negotiate, and legitimise the social presentation of other entities occupying gathering places.

The most frequent kind of individual actor in this investigation is the 'Saniwa' [審神者]. 'Saniwa' is a self-applied term of reference for those who can trace their interest in swords and their participation on sword culture to the Touken Ranbu franchise. It has further application in a community sense, to define the body of individual actors who engage with swords independently of an overarching, official organisation. The Saniwa I encountered in my investigation were primarily women. They are not merely pop-culture consumers, but undertake their own self-driven engagement with swords and organisational actors. Common activities of Saniwa emerge in the contexts of travel, informational investigation, or as creators/producers in their own right, providing a body of textural and documentary data for the social negotiation of swords. Saniwa are not merely 'fans' of a pop-media franchise, but those who engage in activities with a genuine and personal interest in the lives and livelihoods of swords. Nor are they only Japanese people in Japan: included in this investigation are international Saniwa living in Japan. As such, I do not characterise 'Saniwa' or their approach to swords as a 'Japanese' phenomenon: rather, I argue that this is a category of social recognition that is based on commonly shared activities and interactions that are recognised by others who identify with the term. My interlocutors have backgrounds from Japan, South East Asia, and Europe.

It is important to recognise that being a 'fan' does not preclude Saniwa from undertaking roles in organisations and institutions. As such, when referred to as individual actors, I place them as negotiators of the social contexts occupied by swords, with their own form of social authority. I do so due to the prominence and importance individual actors hold at the gathering places of swords. Their active presence across tangible and virtual sites of negotiation, regardless of other roles they may have in an official or institutional capacity, provides important data in regards to the relational aspects of this phenomenon. In an individual capacity, these persons act as the designators and recognisers of social value.

On-Site Interactions

I engaged with individual actors on flexible, conversational, and co-creative levels. This was done in both virtual and physical gathering places. I will first explain my process of engaging with individual actors on-site at physical gathering places.

I met with individuals at places that 1) exhibited a sword or 2) were related to a sword's life experiences, but did not have that sword on display (tangibly present). These places were associated

with a sword that has appeared in the Touken Ranbu franchise. However, engagements had with individual actors also included discussion and interaction with swords that are not involved in the franchise context.

In total, I spoke to 57 participants at 12 sites between February 2020 and December 2022. A conversational, flexible approach to subject interviews allowed for the gathering of a wide range of opinions. Conducting these interviews directly on-site further allowed for discussion on the interlocutor's perspectives with reference to the direct, tangible, and intangible elements of the respective contexts.

Physical gathering places in this phenomenon are often temporary, due to the fast-changing nature of artefact display in Japan and the event-based nature of access to other gathering places. As such, a conversational approach allowed for fluid and informative interactions in spite of their short length and inability to undertake typical forms of rapport-building. Broadly, conversational interviews covered the following themes:

• Motivations for visiting the gathering place;

• Other activities planned around the gathering;

• Connections to other individuals, volunteers, and institutions;

• Perspectives regarding swords and sword-related places.

While these are broad questions, they elicited a variety of responses that speaks to the enthusiasm participants have in engaging with Japanese swords and those who manage their current display and conservation.

Co-Participation

To supplement these short-term interactions and conversational interviews, which gained a broad understanding of the motives and experiences of individual actors, I undertook more extensive analysis based on co-participation at sword-related sites. I attended six exhibitions and other sword-related sites with eleven self-identified Saniwa. In doing so, I gained extended insight into the social practices of Saniwa and other independent actors they interact with.

Co-participation was primarily organised first in virtual space, and continued in physical spaces. Co-participation activities were focused on understanding how the acts of sword visitation and exploration of sword's current and historical lives constituted a negotiation of identity for both human and non-human actor. As co-participation allowed for a greater building of rapport between myself and my interlocutors, these activities were not restricted to a specific time and space, but were sustained through continued online and face-to-face engagements.

Regardless of their self-identification as Saniwa, the individual actors with whom I undertook co-participatory activities were primarily women, and in the age range of early 20's to late 30's. A small number of male actors were observed at gathering places, however their relative scarcity and strict time allowances for this investigation resulted in difficulties in their inclusion. Nonetheless, an engagement with the normative activities surrounding sword-related gathering places brings one into primary contact with women. In addition, these women are frequent participants in sword-related events, and as such, provide an insight into the hows and whys of repeat interactions between the individual and accessible cultural heritage. The prominence of women as potential co-participant actors contradicts the assumed gender-divide in sword related activities, whereby men and male-focused perspectives are dominant.

Object-Centred Interactions

Central to my activities on-site were other objects related to swords. These objects facilitated initial connections with individual actors, and were present in the activities of my co-participatory field work. As such, I introduce objects as an additional tool of investigation into social interactions. While I have discussed swords-as-actors in this phenomenon, they are not the only socially-embedded objects present. These additional objects serve, in this investigation, as a means to connect with the targeted social communities. However, they themselves may prove fruitful to future investigations of the ontological positioning of things.

The objects I used to facilitate interactions are Touken Ranbu-related 'merchandise', primarily plush dolls, figurines, and other paraphernalia. I have termed these objects 'merchandise' as they are largely produced by a licensed manufacturer and purchased by their current owners. However, these objects have a social life of their own. They may also be partially or entirely hand-made by individual actors, who decorate, personalise, and individualise the 'commodity' doll as their own relational entity.

The objects primarily used in this investigation are the small, easily-carriable Mochi Mochi Mascots brand of plush toy, made in the image of Touken Ranbu's characters. This brand is popular amongst the fan community for their portability and appealing designs. They served as an ice-breaker in my investigation. Commenting on or drawing in another participants Mochi Mascot to conversation allows for a quick means of ice-breaking and associating oneself with fan-related activities, and creating comfort for Saniwa or other fan-related actors in impromptu field engagements. My investigatory participation with Mochi Mascots signalled to potential interlocutors my own presence in the fan community, facilitating the development of rapport in short-term engagements.

The involvement of these plush objects into my investigation provided an additional point of reference for the way non-human things are present and related to by actors in this phenomenon. In co-participatory activities, it was important for participants to determine which plush objects would also be in accompaniment. In addition, other actors on the level of organiser or volunteer coordinator sanctified the presence of these socially-embedded objects by terming them as "companions" [お連れ様], constructing them in social and individualising therms. They are additionally described by research participants with personed adjectives such as "cute", "smug", "proud", or even, in one instance, described as a "hard worker". The comment of "hard-worker" was given to one plush object I had brought with me to "assist" in research activities, indicating that other actors in this phenomenon relate to such things as participants in human activities.

As such, while initially utilised as facilitatory things, these ancillary objects provide a wider view of the way actors in this phenomenon engage with non-humans. Their Mochi Mascots and other paraphernalia serve as socially important, individual entities tied to a particular 'owner', mirroring the way swords are emplaced with their own context of ownership. Thus, while my analysis is focused primarily on swords, I make mention of the accompaniment in of this 'merchandise', which exists not as a consumptive item but as one of companionship.

With this combination of typical ethnographic investigation, co-participation, and object-centred interactions, I have sought to gain insight into the largest body of actors in the current sword phenomenon: the individual. Despite my terming this group as 'individuals', they are not solo participants. I encountered those who engage in sword-related activities alone. However, there were just as many that participated alongside friendship groups, at times including more than four members. Alongside this, family groups, particularly mothers and daughters, emerged as frequent participants in sword-related activities[2]. 'Individuals', therefore, should not be assumed to represent a singular young, female, pop-culture perspective, as fans of Touken Ranbu are frequently evoked in Japanese popular media with the moniker of 'sword girls'. Rather, individual actors serve as a means to understand the dynamics of social negotiation amongst friends, family, and even across generational lines, manifesting in virtual and physical space, and extended to the lives of the swords they engage with.

VOLUNTEERS

I define 'volunteers' as those who undertake an organisational role at gathering places, but who are not employed by a museum, gallery, or government body. This largely involves community

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[2] In the case of children with parents, consent for participation was gained from both individuals and their guardians, and conversational interviews were conducted with both actors simultaneously. No participants under 18 were involved in this investigation.

and grassroots actors who seek to promote their localities and showcase local products, festivities, businesses, etc. Saniwa are at times included in this designation of volunteers. Saniwa as volunteers undertake a significant role in connecting locally-based gathering places to wider networks of communication utilised by Saniwa domestically and internationally. As such, 'volunteers' encompass both community-based actors without prior knowledge of media such as Touken Ranbu, and those with an awareness of the franchise and the interests of the emerging audience for sword cultures. There is not necessarily a hard divide between the media-engaged 'fan consumer' and the grassroots 'local producer'.

As with individual actors, I approached volunteers through virtual as well as physical gathering places. The volunteers who participated in this investigation were identified based on their engagement with individuals in virtual gathering places, and their understanding of the terminologies and modes of communication utilised sword enthusiasts outside of institutional arenas. Many volunteers engaged with aspects of the wider sword community related to specific, individualised swords, to whom they could connect with their local area. With the focused direction of volunteer activities, the social ties of swords and their recognition as individual entities is enacted by those who have the capacity to recognise and relate to these objects as community members.

Interviews with volunteers were largely informal, conducted in the gathering places of their curation, such as event spaces or in local businesses. Volunteers themselves position these sites as ones of gathering for Saniwa, and as such, they are also freely approachable social participants for any sword-related actor. My interactions with volunteers were focused not only on the specific context and arrangement of their organisational activities, but involved analysis of these activities respective spatial contexts. Through this use of in-place engagement, I aim to highlight the ways in which volunteer organised spaces blur boundaries between organiser and participant, and provide an arena of co-negotiation for the lived meanings of individualised swords.

INSTITUTIONS

Finally, I define 'institutions' as those whom I approached and interacted with as a representative of a museum, gallery, or government body. These interactions differ to those with volunteer organisations, as volunteer gathering places are largely made in community spaces with a flexible level of interaction between participating actors. Interactions had with institutional actors do not have this same level of flexibility. However, the gathering places of institutions still provide opportunities for social negotiation, inclusive of all kinds of actors. These negotiations further reveal how those operating outside of the institution are active in the renewed interest of swords, and of re-positioning their long-held assumptions of value.

Contact with institutions was done through official management, and largely undertaken with manger and curatorial staff. My correspondences with staff members was conducted both through e-mail exchanges, to compensate for museum closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in-person interviews between 2020 and 2022. This correspondence largely coincided with exhibitions of swords of interest to Saniwa and other actors of the current sword phenomenon.

I undertook more structured interviews in this formalised setting, dealing with the following themes:

• The (often temporary) display of swords

• Goals of limited and extended exhibitions

• Perspectives of the institutions/officials towards the anticipated visitors

• Ways in which the exhibition/institution sought to connect with visitors

Interviews and correspondence were undertaken with representatives of private museums and galleries, and government-run museums in regional areas of Japan. These sites were identified based on their involvement with and promotion amongst independent actors in their own communicative spaces. Major national institutions, regional museums, and private collections are treated, in these spaces, with equal importance. I have sought to reflect this notion of institutional equality in the range of those represented in this investigation. Despite the apparent levels of similarity between institutions regarding the interest of outside actors, they nonetheless differ in levels of accessibility regarding the social negotiations of actors of the public and the intentions of the curatorial staff. As such, the levels of accessibility of contact not just for myself, but for other kinds of negotiate actors, was taken into consideration in interactions with institutional staff.

The boundaries of access that differed between institutions were evident in the early stages of my investigation, as the layers of contact and formality found at centrally located and national institutions barred my ability to contact relevant parties. In contrast, local-level and private institutions were open to access, not only for my own inquiry, but in interacting with volunteers and individuals. As such, my approach in inquiry not only highlights the nature of institutional authority in the designation of historical and object value, but the ways in which these designations have varying levels of outside contributions, particularly of who occupy alternate social spaces. The barriers to my own connection with curatorial staff of metropolitan institutions only further serves to highlight the importance of opening discussion of cultural value to those outside the dominant institutions involved in the framing of material culture.

The inclusion of institutional actors serves three purposes: to understand the structural context of their gathering places; to analyse the boundaries of value-management between formal and informal actors; and to analyse the negotiation of place value in Japan's regional areas.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This investigation has focused primarily on the emplaced dynamics of social negotiation. However, it also deals with designations of value and the factors that determine social relevancy, particularly as it applies to historicised objects. As such, I have supported my field work with documentary analysis of the materials and writings that contextualise and formulate the boundaries of the related social arenas.

The documents used in this survey are materials used and produced by sword-related actors. These include institutional publications, existing research, historical texts, and independently published creative works, among other materials that explore the lives of swords. I have undertaken analysis of these materials as their own kind of object that is made and negotiated by contemporary actors, as well as for their informational content. This is similar to the notion of a boundary object, or a thing that mediates between social boundaries that arise among actors (Marheineke 2016). I take this notion further, treating such documents as negotiable objects in order to provide additional insight into the ways things and their values are negotiated by socially emplaced actors.

The documents included in my analysis are:

• Publications of museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions.

• Advertisements and promotional materials by institutional and volunteer actors surrounding local material cultures.

• Guidebooks, maps, and other forms of direction produced by independent actors.

• Research materials and analysis of existing works produced by independent actors.

• Fan-based creations and the adaptive use of franchise imagery surrounding swords.

The variety of documents available for analysis highlights the expansive nature of this phenomenon and the knowledge-production around swords, expanding it from the sole realm of historical or cultural institution. The contrasts and similarities of independent materials to those published by institutional authorities such as museums, galleries, or existing sword research books, acts as lens to see the shifting perspectives and priorities of other contemporary actors. These material documents do not only exist in an informative sense, but with their varying levels of accessibility and audiences, are also negotiate tools. While this is a documentary analysis, it is tied to social processes of recognition and validation of actors, whether those be the human authors or their sword subjects.

MEDIA ANALYSIS - TOUKEN RANBU

Through my introduction and methodology, I have made frequent reference to the Touken Ranbu franchise—but have yet to clearly explain how it is involved in the discussion of Japanese

swords and their potential social life. I will detail this involvement and its impact at length in the next chapter. For the purpose of my methodology, I will position this franchise in connection with other aspects of popular media, and how they are interwoven into social negotiations of social being.

Touken Ranbu was, in my preliminary research, initially intended to be only one of several examples where female audiences of historical media have engaged in discourses of identity and heritage. This follows research established by other scholars, particularly Sugawa-Shimada (2015) in her analysis of female fans of historical fiction from the 1960's until the current day. However, it became quickly apparent that the fanbase surrounding Japanese swords was one involved in realms that reached beyond media and related activities. Engaging with the 'fans' of Touken Ranbu brought to light their negotiations of the individual identities of historical objects, rather than the humans more frequently evoked in fiction. This lead to a different discussion away from a framework of historical fiction: that is, how objects are themselves involved in the dynamics of social personhood.

Touken Ranbu is an expansive media franchise. It is based on the premise of transforming named historical swords into human-shaped warriors, giving them a form through which they can act independently. Each branch of the franchise operates under this basic premise, although the stories that are told differ greatly in tone and scope. Put simply, Touken Ranbu is a franchise that, through its interesting character designs and variety of entry points across media forms, introduces Japanese swords and their histories to its predominately female target audience.

There are a number of established ways to approach the analysis of a pop-culture franchise. One primary way would be to treat it as a media product, examining its reach and impact through the lens of economic or strategic forms, such as the media mix, or through a deep narrative analysis. Solely using these forms brings limitations to an investigation dealing with wide-spread social negotiations. Firstly, an approach that examines the economic and production side of the franchise overlooks the dynamism of its fanbase, particularly as they operate outside of the boundaries of production oversight and official collaborations. As well as this, a narrative analysis would necessitate a deep familiarity with all of the franchise's major narrative forms, which, at the time of writing, encompass no less than 40 episodes of animation, three of which are theatrical release; 38 stage productions; a live action film; comics anthologies published by several major publishers; and even a secondary game that differs from the franchise's original Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—. While each of these productions is under the franchise umbrella, they are managed by their own teams of storywriters and directors. A narrative analysis of the franchise is a huge undertaking that must not only accomodate the variety of media and storytelling forms or the prominence of the individual works, but deal with the styles, intentions, and messaging of numerous authors. As such,

it would not be prudent to try and understand swords solely though their popular, fictional representation, even if that representation theoretically belongs to a single 'franchise'.

Instead of following established modes of analysis from fields such as media and fan studies, I incorporate elements of their approaches to create my own: that is, using the Touken Ranbu franchise as a source for the the vocabulary and specialised language used by a significant amount of emerging sword actors. This involves terms such as 'Saniwa', which I introduced in my discussion of independent actors, but also extends to particular aspects of vocabulary—for example, terms such as *kyodaitō* [兄弟刀], meaning 'brother swords', have increased in use by institutional actors despite their origins amongst Touken Ranbu fans.

My intent with including Touken Ranbu in this investigation is not to examine the messaging of a narrative franchise. Rather, I seek to understand how the tropes and concepts of this franchise have been taken by its audience to explain the social existences of swords in a real-world setting. This approach is not without precedent. While they do not specifically examine audience's manipulation of franchise vocabulary, research in contents and media tourism has examined the way these same audiences explore the social context of the real world with media as a tool of exploration (Nakamura 2018; Katayama 2013; Okamoto 2015; Sugawa-Shimada 2015; Hernández-Pérez 2019; Andrews 2014). Similarly, the documentary materials produced by fans has been examined in the field of media studies for their potential as tools of negotiation for both narrative and identity, outside of official oversight (Benson 2018; Herrera & Keidl 2017; Wood, 2006; Jones 2011; Sawada 2021; Ishikawa 2020; Wilson 2003). Both of these approaches to media-based investigations consider the 'fan' in relation to the 'product' of their consumption.

A primary example of media and fan-based research in Japan deals with the 'otaku pilgrimage', or visits to real-world sites related to media and fiction. Similar practices can be seen in Saniwa's travels across Japan in search of their favourite swords. I extend this existing research by moving beyond the framings of outsider 'fans' engaging with 'locals' through the lens of their inspiring media. I position the travelling Saniwa as a co-creator of cultural capital in their negotiations of identity for human and non-human actors. They may be 'inspired by' media, but they are equally inspired by the real-world existence of swords and their current lived contexts. In this context, Touken Ranbu is not an explanation for the motivations of 'fan' travels, but is instead its own kind of framework through which to examine media tourism from a new standpoint.

Similarly, the documentary materials produced by independent actors in the sword phenomenon are frequently made by those knowledgeable in Touken Ranbu's textural and visual vocabulary. 'Fan' and 'derivative' works have, like the media-inspired tourist, been examined in the context of media studies for their potential as negotiators of both narrative and identity outside of the input of official authors. Such negotiations are regularly analysed within the fan space, or in

how they relate to individual creators of derivative works. Here, too, I position the works of Saniwa beyond the scope of popular media, analysing them for how they impact on non-fictional approaches, framings, and interactions had with swords.

Further separating this analysis from media and fan studies is the scope of the contemporary sword phenomenon. While all of my interlocutors in this investigation had some knowledge of Touken Ranbu, this knowledge ranged from full immersion in the fan community to a mere awareness that the franchise existed. As such, to suggest the entire scope of contemporary sword culture can be explained by a single fictional franchise is to overlook the impact individual actors have themselves on the negotiation of sword meanings, value, and potential social life. A purely media analysis may overlook the independent and volunteer actors who undertake their activities with little to no awareness of the Touken Ranbu franchise. Even in the case of the 'fan', awareness as to the narratives of the franchise's many adaptations are mixed. Nonetheless, the conceptual aspects of Touken Ranbu remain prominent in the negotiations of sword lives and identities. It is these conceptual aspects, used as a framework of approach to swords, that forms the basis of my approach to media in this investigation. I will outline these concepts in greater detail in the following chapter.

Thus, this inquiry into sword life is not necessarily about Touken Ranbu. Rather, it is about the contemporary activities surrounding swords, their locations, and their identities, which are at times supported by an interest in Touken Ranbu, but also extend beyond it. This is not to dismiss the influence of popular culture on actors in this phenomenon, but to highlight participants for their own actions, outside the designation of 'fan' to a 'franchise'. Touken Ranbu acts as a guiding aspect to the introduction of swords to a large audience. However, what happens after that—the investigation, the exploration, the seeking out, and the negotiation of swords as social entities—is in no ways constrained to it. These actions are instead enacted by those who are directly involved in the gathering places of contemporary sword culture.

LIMITATIONS

This investigation spans a number of different social contexts and spaces, at dispersed physical locations. The scope of potential sources of data is in itself a limitation, as this is an inquiry undertaken by a single researcher. In addition to the physical scope of this phenomenon is the concern of language and nuance when analysing gathered data from participants of differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impact on this research, limiting access to field sites as well as impacting the ways interlocutors and potential participants could interact and be accessible in public spaces. With flexible research methods in mind, I made efforts to limit the impact these limitations had on gathering meaningful field data.

My inquiry into the status of Japanese swords has proved to be unexpectedly wide-reaching. As such, the scope of investigation itself has become a limitation of this work. As has been outlined above, even a textural analysis of the Touken Ranbu franchise requires an exhaustive breadth of analysis beyond initial expectations of a theoretically singular franchise. When the re-interpretations and negotiations of the audience are added to this, as well as the implications of previous works of historical fiction or education, this deceptively narrow scope expands even further beyond what is feasible for a single researcher in a three-year period.

This scope only continues to grow when it deals with (as this investigation does) those who operate outside the field of popular media, and seeks to grasp the social expressions of wider phenomena.

I have attempted to narrow the scope of this investigation by focusing on the question of 'social life' as it manifests in inanimate objects. To do so I highlight the individualised sword, with the diversity of interactions and negotiations had by research participants focused around these objects as centralising entities. This allows for a narrowing of field sites to a sword's immediately related places, which, vitally, does not preclude the existence of other expressions of object-life phenomena occurring elsewhere. While the sites I have chosen have their own implications as to the social realities of swords, the door remains open for future research in other contexts, from other perspectives, such as those in Okinawa or Hokkaido, far from the centralised narrative of Honshuu's warrior culture.

As a single researcher attempting to grasp a nation-wide social phenomenon, I focused my inquiry on the following:

• Regional municipalities of Honshuu, accessible from Tokyo;

• Emphasis on participants of individual and volunteer status, to counter-balance the dominance in discourse of institutions or production bodies, and include voices from across Japan;

• Contextualisation of place via interactions and supplementary documentary analysis, focusing inquiry to its specific, individualised context.

In focusing my research on accessible sites of the periphery, and in contextualising these places through the in-person and in-place interactions had with those who inhabit them, I have sought to create a work that captures the reach of this phenomenon while maintaining its ethnographic value. While this approach has its limitations, such as a restriction to sites on Honshuu and a focus on regional institutions, I have nonetheless attempted to use these limitations in a manner that uncovers their potential in social interactions. A deeper inquiry into major institutions, with a comparison to those of the periphery, would prove of interest to future research in this arena.

Finally, a significant limitation to the scope of this investigation is that it is seeking to understand an ongoing social phenomenon. In the process of writing and consolidating my collected data and analysis, I was faced with daily sources of new information, new perspectives, and new sites of potential in this active and ongoing discursive space. As such, while the scope of this investigation is a limitation, it is also a source of great potential. With the ever-shifting context of Japanese swords, and the increasing prominence of periphery voices in their related discourses, future work may be dealing with a setting far different to that in which I have written my own.

LINGUISTIC LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted in Japan, and primarily in Japanese, with a small number of Japan-based international participants with their own linguistic and ontological backgrounds. While I have endeavoured to represent the words of my interlocutors accurately, there are nonetheless linguistic limitations in communicating ontological concepts across social and cultural divides. These range from the simple, such as my writing in English—how do we translate the various descriptors for 'swords' in Japanese (tōken 刀剣, katana 刀, ken 剣, tachi 太刀, wakizashi 脇差, shintō 新刀, shintō 神刀, guntō 軍刀, to name a few), when the word we have at our disposal in English is simply 'sword'?—to the more complex, such as notions of gender and how these are vocalised by participants depending on their linguistic backgrounds.

These are both concerns of translation and ones that have a greater impact when the source of translation is an ontological concept, which is not always at the forefront of our active thinking. The ways in which translation is used can have significant impacts on the presentation of data. For example, when speaking and writing in English, gendered pronouns are common and natural to use. When investigating with English-speaking interlocutors, it was natural to refer to swords as 'he'. This has significant implications as to the personhood of swords, as they are granted a gender designation usually reserved for animate beings. However, in my time with Japanese interlocutors, gendered pronouns never arose in the context of real-world swords, despite common use of other terms and terminology that imply their social existence. Translating this data with the genderless 'it' pronoun in English carries with it the nuance that what is being referred to is designated 'inanimate', and has a diminishing of being that stands contrary to the experienced realities in conversations surrounding swords.

I have endeavoured to present my data and the perspectives of my interlocutors with the nuances as they appeared in field work and our direct interactions. This was done through in-field note taking, and clarifying questions when applicable. As well as this, formalised interviews were recorded and transcribed by a Japanese native speaker familiar with my investigation and the processes of academia. Terms that lended themselves to conceptual and ontological complexity,

such as 'spirit', were noted in both Japanese and an initial English translation, with the nuance to be checked and cross-checked with both my research advisory team and other interlocutors in the field. This process allowed for comprehension not only on the behalf of the researcher, but facilitated understanding of the use of terms and their meanings in the direct context of my field sites. As conceptual translation across language and social context is at the core of this work, it is also a limitation that must be overcome should that translation be successful.

COVID-19

This investigation started in early 2020, coinciding with the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As my work concluded in early 2023, the effects of the pandemic still lingered. The impacts of COVID-19 shifted over the course of this investigation, creating significant and shifting barriers to field access. As such, while I have endeavoured to present the discourse surrounding the social position of swords in the current day, there is no doubt that the timespan covered by my work is one outside of the previous, and possibly future, norm.

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant limitations to any social research, it also brought to light the adaptability of social gathering places. One example lies in the increased significance of the virtual place, not as a substitute of physical space, but as its own site of gathering interwoven into the social whole. As such, while there were restrictions as to what was possible during my investigation, it nonetheless captures a unique period of time. In this context a limited inquiry itself contains an element of discovery, in the search for how engaged social actors managed gathering and interaction in times of physical separation.

Social Research Practice

Use of the regular modes of social research, particularly those that apply to in-person and immersed community research, were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first three months of my investigation, Japan faced its initial State of Emergency in response to COVID-19. A great number of people restrained their movements, and the majority of public and private facilities, including museums and galleries, were closed to access. As a result, I was unable to undertake co-participation or immersion-based research in the physical gathering spaces identified in my preliminary investigation.

After the initial mass closure of physical gathering places, successive States of Emergency brought swift and unexpected closures of field sites. This impacted my ability to interact with government interlocutors, whom were unable to meet with unaffiliated parties during State of Emergency closures. Thus, unpredictability underlay this investigation: not only of my own need to

quickly and flexibly modify field work plans, but also as individual actors were faced with this quickly-changing landscape of access.

When access was possible, an additional concern of participant safety arose. Face-to-face meetings and communicative engagements were arranged on ever-changing schedules, and of the highest concern was ensuring participants were not exposed to unsafe conditions, particularly in the initial stages of data collection.

The impact of these limitations lessened as measures against COVID-19 were refined and public health management lowered risks of disease. Nonetheless, I sought to ensure the safety of my research participants at all stages of this investigation. This resulted in the following:

• An emphasis on participant choice as to place, time, and comfort in face-to-face interviews.

• Scheduling of co-participatory activities after vaccinations were available, or conducted after 10 days of isolation for the researcher.

• Increased online and e-mail interaction with participants, in place of face-to-face interactions.

• Constant use of masks and sanitation, as well as conducting in-place, conversational interviews outside or otherwise socially distanced.

These approaches mitigated the risk of infection whilst sill allowing for the gathering of data vital to this investigation. In addition, a greater use of virtual and online tools of communication fostered ongoing connectivity, in comparison to the more transient connections of in-field, event-based research. The limitations of COVID-19 asks for a greater incorporation of digital research skills, particularly when investigating the social dynamics of communities that are heavily engaged in online communication.

Field Access

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated States of Emergency heavily impacted site access for both researcher and participants. Particularly across 2021, many limited-time exhibitions faced sudden and premature closures. Due to the nature of exhibition practice in Japan this had both immediate impact and brought into question whether the suspended exhibitions could be held again in the future. The landscape of physical gathering places over the course of this investigation was volatile and subject to change at short notice.

To counter this limitation, I focused more heavily on sites within easy access from Tokyo, as I would be able to undertake higher flexibility in research arrangements for sites easily accessible from my own location. It is for this reason that sites in Japan's southern regions, such as Kyushu and Okinawa, are not present in this work, despite their high number of sword exhibitions. Despite this flexibility, the impacts of exhibition and site closures remained. As a consequence, my field

work was conducted even during the initial writing of this dissertation, emphasising the necessity for concurrent analysis of data with field research.

In face of these difficulties, every opportunity to visit a gathering site or event was taken when deemed safe and possible. I have strived to include a variety of forms of gathering places in this investigation. However, their organisation, and the level of engagements had within them, may be abnormal, as their operations were influenced by the pandemic. In addition, there may be other sites of gathering that are absent from this work, due to the precarity of in-person gathering during the period of my investigation. The search for such sites would provide an interesting point of future inquiry, once the lasting impacts of the initial COVID-19 pandemic have been mitigated.

Changes to Museum/Gallery Practice

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impact on the operation of museums, galleries, and other sites of exhibition in Japan. This took the form of intermittent closures, particularly in regards to publicly-run facilities. In addition, many sites of display implemented measures to manage and limit visitor numbers during the pandemic. This included daily visitor caps, modified times of operation, and reservation and lottery systems that impacted on their availability and access as places of gathering.

Due to the highly engaged nature of independent actors in this phenomenon, reservation systems and lotteries were quickly overwhelmed at their time of opening, making my own attendance difficult to attain. Here, the importance of digital literacy and engagement with online spaces proves vital, should one wish to gain access to the physical sites of social negotiation. In addition, it highlights the importance of direct communication with institutional actors, who could potentially provide their own form of access separate to those undertaken by individuals.

As well as access, shifts in institutional operating practice provide additional complications in any attempts to compare sites to each other. In the case of the individual site, limitations on visitor numbers and changed modes of access provides difficulties when attempting to compare operations to those of years past. When considering multiple sites, their size, visitor capacity, and the modes they chose for determining visitor limitations provide further layers of complication in equalising quantitative data for comparative or potential statistical analysis.

While an evaluation of visitor movements and numbers would be highly interesting data to supplement this investigation, the additional layers of mediation needed to ascertain and equalise the various numbers of visitors for each institution provided an unexpected barrier. It would prove fruitful for further investigation, as my own experience has revealed that, more often than not, reservation systems were frequently pushed to their limits when faced by attention from enthusiasts

of Japan's swords. Whether this is a reflection of the enthusiasm of independent actors, or simply a result of limited attendance numbers, would be of interest to future research.

SUMMARY

In my investigation, I seek to uncover the ways in which the socially-mediated notion of 'life' is extended to and manifests in seemingly inanimate objects. When this query is put to Japan's swords, it involves more than the artefact itself. By the very nature of social recognition, a determination of social life involves the relational activities of human actors towards each other and to potential non-human counterparts. As such, my research is centred in the gathering place: those sites where these acts of recognition and relational attachments are made and mediated by actors from across differing social boundaries.

My methods for investigating these gathering places focused on drawing out the contextual and ontological qualities of these relational engagements. By immersing myself within these interactions, I undertook a variety of communication methods. Whether this be in the casual, conversational interviews with Saniwa, or in the formalised context of the historical institution, I undertook my work with reference not only to the phenomena I seek to understand, but to the shifting roles of the various participants within it.

Brought into question through these shifting roles is the status of the sword itself. Thus, the analysis presented from hereon is not to provide an example of human actors determining objective value, but one in which these actors recognise the values, actions, and evaluations of each other, whilst simultaneously applying these perspectives to the relational construction of the sword. While the temporal context surrounding this investigation renders it unusual in comparison to previous works, it also provides a view into the social dynamics of a world populated by humans and objects—in this case, swords. In the chapters that follow, I will more deeply examine these dynamics: firstly, with how the actors themselves present unique perspectives on assumed social arrangements, followed by my final sections on the manipulations of historicised figures, a category to which swords themselves belong. In doing so, I seek to further complicate the notion of a human/non-human binary, and to extend socially determined 'life' to all entities it impacts.

3. WOMEN, SWORDS, AND THE QUESTION OF ANIMACY

3.1 The Saniwa and the Sword: Touken Ranbu as a Framework for Sword Lives

The most visible contributing factor to the re-emergence of interest in Japan's swords, for the outsider, can be found in popular culture: that is, in Touken Ranbu and the accompanying 'boom' of female sword fans. However, this franchise is not the only explanation for why emerging audiences are interested in swords. The franchise itself makes up only one of several interconnecting aspects to how media-engaged women embark on their negotiations of social life. The post-2015 sword phenomenon is not merely a case of popular media overlaid onto historical sites and artefacts, to be consumed by its fans. It is, instead, a context in which the vocabulary of a pop-culture work has been used by others to express ideas surrounding social life in a way that differs from the assumed norm. Instead of Touken Ranbu as an explanation for the renewed interest in swords, I use it as a framework to positioning the object as one with a potential social existence.

What is the post-2015 sword phenomenon? I inquired about expected sword audiences at the field sites I visited in this research. Institutional representatives regularly pointed to the launch of the jōsei-muke [女性向け, female-oriented] game Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— in 2015 as signalling a shift in exhibition attendees. The idea of Touken Ranbu as a catalyst is also present in mass media, which highlight fans of the franchise when reporting on mass exhibition visitation (Uemura 2015). As the franchise grew, so too did the entry-points for new potential audiences. Each of the Touken Ranbu franchise's expanding works contains the core elements of the original online game, despite their vast differences in narrative tone and style. Rather than treating Touken Ranbu as a singular work, it may be more apt to consider the franchise and its concepts as their own kind of framework to explore the notion of life, as it exists in non-human, object forms.

The franchise framework is most easily seen in the original online game. Touken Ranbu— ONLINE— opens with a brief outline of its setting: the year is 2205, and the Time Government has sought out those who can act as *Saniwa* [審神者], who have the power to rouse the life sleeping within objects. They awaken the life in swords to help in the fight against an army that travels through time and seeks to change the outcomes of history. The awoken swords are called *Touken Danshi* [刀剣男士, Sword Warriors], and have been transformed by the Saniwa from a sword shape to a human one. The Touken Danshi travel through time to famous battlefields of the pre-Meiji Period [pre-1868], and fight against those who seek to change history. The player Saniwa can organise and enrich their Touken Danshi, send them to battle, or an investigatory soiree. When they

do so the Touken Danshi operate largely autonomously, with the player character only having control over battle formation and whether or not to push through a skirmish or retreat back to their home base.

Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— is ostensibly set in the distant future. This future is nonetheless constructed with historicised aesthetics. The main game screen depicts a traditional-styled Japanese manor, called the Honmaru [本丸, citadel]. This serves as the home base for the Saniwa and their Touken Danshi. Its design and naming evokes ideas of the feudal castles and castle-like structures of Japan's past. The secondary setting of the game are historical battlefields, each represented by a stylised map and generic illustrations. Combined with the setting of the Honmaru, these elements create a mix of time (future/past) and aesthetic representations which illustrate a rather basic game and gameplay loop. In existing outside of expected time, the setting of Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— provides a platform where the enterprising Saniwa can re-negotiate the expected social relationships and hierarchies of an aesthetically historicised space.

This potential is furthered by the franchise's lack of typical narrative structure. Instead of clearly defined characters, the Saniwa and their Touken Danshi exist more as conceptual guides. It is important to keep in mind the franchise's jōsei-muke designation, and its large audience base. The agency granted to player in interpreting the conceptual characters and the narratives they undergo both in the home-setting of the Honmaru and the conflict-based one of their missions provides a means by which they can critique social hierarchies and historical roles. Touken Danshi are designed with historical and modern-day motifs drawn from their historical pasts and their in-franchise characterisations. They are represented in the online game through static images. Their characterisations come from a handful of scripted voice lines and limited, unlockable dialogues with other Touken Danshi. Direct narrative content in the online game is scarce, which in practice renders the 100-character cast as freely interpretable entities through which the player Saniwa can explore relational dynamics without being held to a strict narrative arc. The player is in control of her experiences with and relating to the male-designed entities under her command.

This exploration of relational dynamics does not exist solely in the fictional or narrative space. With this free-form approach to character and story, players are quick to supplement the conceptual ideas of the franchise with what can be gained from real-world documents and historical archives. This happens from the moment a new Touken Danshi is added to the game. Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— regularly teases its new characters through social media, in a style similar to other informational accounts for online/mobile game franchises. These teasers take the form of a text announcement accompanied by a cropped version of the new character's illustrated design, with the character's name (the sword it is inspired by) promised for future announcements. This is an event for Saniwa, who rush to identify the possible inspiring sword, its current location, past

ownership, associated stories, and potential relational ties it has with other swords. Whether or not this information is subsequently included in the game's characterisation is irrelevant: it has already circulated as part of the information-sharing of its audience, an act that contributes to the construction of the life of a sword.

Examining Touken Ranbu as an aspect of the contemporary social context reveals the ways its franchise concepts extend to negotiation of real-world social identities. The concept of the Saniwa provides a questioning of social hierarchies; the Honmaru exists in a space of malleable time; and the Touken Danshi themselves not only embody the life of a character, but that of a real-world sword and its own accompanying relationships.

The concepts of the franchise are carried through to real-world spaces. It is for this reason that the franchise is, unlike other historical fiction franchises, highly flexible in the ways it can be applied, from promoting contemporary exhibition spaces to community volunteer organisations. There is clearly more to engagement with Touken Ranbu than a simple enjoyment of character designs, historical aesthetics, and the mechanics of gameplay. This is a case of media engagement that draws on overt modes of communication and identity formation by its audience in their own explorations of social life.

WOMEN, MEDIA, AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES

In the course of my work, I often encountered the assumption that women are not consumers of historical media or exhibitions that deal with violence and warfare (for example, Black 2005, p.14). This assumption may derive from gendered notions regarding what is an appropriate arena of interest for women as social persons. By consuming media outside of what is considered the appropriate norm, women's interests have at times been deemed strange or unusual by fellow social actors. This can be seen frequently in connection to identities surrounding media consumption, such as the gamer or comics fan in the western media landscape (Kuss, Kristensen, Williams & Lopez-Fernandez 2022, 6; Kivijärvi & Katila 2022; Healey 2008), or in the tensions surrounding female fans of franchises such as Gundam, dealing with robotics and warfare, in Japan (Kohara & Kawata, 2021). I have myself experienced surprised reactions when speaking of the media I consume, when it deals with subjects and social realms deemed to be outside the socially acceptable concerns of women. Perhaps if I had undertaken this research in the years prior to or in 2015, I would have received the same reactions towards my interest in swords.

At every institution I visited in this investigation, I was treated to a similar anecdote from staff members: prior to 2015, interest in swords was the realm of middle aged and older men. This characterisation of audiences for historical media, particularly as it relates to idea of a 'warrior culture' in Japan, has been recognised by scholars of women's media (Sugawa-Shimada 2015). In

addition, research into the wider realm of 'otaku' fan research—that is, identifying the dedicated fan communities of Japanese media works—is populated by articles dealing with male-oriented franchises, or those with predominately male audiences (Ono et al 2019). In doing so, there is a tendency to define otaku as "primarily male" (Okamoto 2015, 3) actors, removing women from the social norm regarding the negotiation of popular media.

These definitions contribute to the assumption that the normative otaku or 'fan' is a socially male figure. It is therefore important that research exists to examine female fans and female-oriented media, and that treats this audience as persons who are not just consumers, but are present as negotiators in fan community spaces just like their their long-studied male counterparts.

Female fans of historical fiction, particularly that dealing with warlords and their conflicts, have been active in Japan since the 1960's and 70's (Sugawa 2017, 173-74). Sugawa (2017) highlights the practices undertaken by these fan communities across the decades, which have real-world impact through their connection of fictional narratives and physical historical sites. In this exploration, women negotiate their contemporary social standing and the concerns thereof through historical structures of hierarchy and formality, using the language and associated imageries of the historical media that has inspired them (Sugawa-Shimada 2015, 51). Historical fiction dealing with male military leaders here acts as a means by which the modernly-emplaced woman negotiates the existential pressures of her own context. Thus, rather than the question of why a woman may be interested in media dealing with historical and military violence, we might instead ask what aspects of this media resonate with the negotiation of a woman's socialised life.

The notion of social life, as relating to the processes of recognition and acceptance, shifts and is made nebulous when bringing into question the oftentimes taken-for-granted boundaries of social acceptability. This extends to all forms of media, including those outside of the historical fiction highlighted in this investigation. Saito (2014) has examined the ways the magical girl genre, ostensibly aimed at a female audience, has its tropes and their readings negotiated by mixed-gender audiences. These negotiations occur alongside changes in the social standings and expectations of women. In this manner, the meanings of media are not static, but are in a state of flux dependent on their concurrent social ontology. In the magical girl genre, changes in the interpretation of power and autonomy for the female protagonists reflect the shifting boundaries of acceptability for women's roles in the ontology of social life (Saito 2014). These changes also bring to light the voices that are dominant, and those that are marginalised, in discourses surrounding social standing. For example, there are cases where the presentations of powerful magical girl protagonists are a re-enforcement of majority-derived expectations of gender and gender binaries, rather than a subversion highlighting women's autonomy (Saito 2014, 149). Media is not just a product to be

consumed, but a venue through which the boundaries of social expectations and social validity are made apparent.

The intentions of media producers and the interpretation of their works is one avenue through which the negotiation of identities is made visible. Another lies more directly in the actions of the 'consumer' audience members. Audience members are not simply consumers of a product, but are their own socially embedded beings with their own agency and capacity for action. Women artists such as Mariko Mori have appropriated media-related imageries to question and critique the role of women in contemporary Japanese society (Wallis 2008). Her appropriation of robotic forms and science-fiction tropes draws on a level of pop-media literacy to cast a sociocultural critique on the expectations and perceptions of women in fictional and non-fictional realms (Wallis 2008, 4). As professional creatives utilise their media literacy in highlighting the tensions in gendered social life, the 'consumer' too has her voice in manipulating the tropes and imageries of media works to negotiate her own social standing and identity.

Audience members have the ability to interpret their social roles and the boundaries of social inclusion through fan-produced content. In doing so, they utilise the framing and concepts of a media franchise and enter into a relational dynamic with the self, the work, and other social entities. This dynamic ranges from internal explorations of being to the maintenance of alternate community structures, where participants can undertake a social life deviating from existing bounded realms. Jones (2011) examines this through the lens of the "prosumer girl" in the fan communities of the vampire romance novel *Twilight*. The prosumer girl uses her own voice in mediative spaces, such as online/virtual gathering places, to form her identity. Alongside this, she utilises her platform to negotiate the identities of others at social margins. The prosumer girl becomes an independent creator directly dealing with issues deriving from, but by no means restricted to, the media of her interest. In doing so, she demonstrates that her opinions are not necessarily in direct alignment with franchise messaging. She is an author of her own creative works that, while utilising the tropes and imageries of *Twilight*, expands on them and uses them in her own toolset of social critique.

Thus, it would be a disservice to simplify the involvement of women who enjoy Touken Ranbu as a passive audience merely consuming a product. This is particularly relevant when considering the franchise's own use of conceptual structures, rather than an overarching narrative, in its media output. If the 'prosumer girl' of the Twilight fan community, whose inspiring work is a prescribed narrative, can nonetheless take these forms to comment on social lives, then it serves to reason that the 'consumers' of a franchise with inherent structural flexibility can do the same.

Fan negotiation in Japan, in its modern sense, traces back to the establishment of fan communities in the 1960's (Murakami, Masaki and Shimodzuki 2013). The dōjinshi [同人誌 lit. like-minded publication]-style of community that arose in this period remains central in fan-based

forms of communication and negotiation to this day. Dōjinshi, also called secondary works [二次創作], are creative works that extend across various media formats, and provide a peer-to-peer avenue for the interpretation of fictional media. Dōjinshi and other fan works exist in a theoretically equalising space (Wilson 2003). This can be seen in their venue of distribution and circulation, or the comic market. This space has, since the 1960's, been a place managed and organised by volunteers (Murakami, Masaki and Shimodzuki 2013). Comics markets serve as a venue where authors and readers of fan works can meet and interact, extending the interpretation of a work and its messaging beyond a single person's creative output, and into direct discourse.

Dōjinshi market events are a gathering place for a dedicated social community. The gendered notions of social life are also present in these spaces, rendering the fan community into an arena for its own kind of boundary negotiation. In the 1970's and 1980's, the social expectations placed on women created difficulties for female authors to attend and be visible at in-person market events, the primary locus for wider inter-community interactions (Murakami, Masaki and Shimodzuki 2013, 139). These expectations and the general status of women in the wider Japanese social context of the time provided difficulties in travel and accommodation that impacted their participation in a way that did not inhibit their male counterparts. Similar pressures also arose when women, particularly young women, attempted to create their own gathering places in arenas dominated by male voices (Murakami, Masaki and Shimodzuki 2013, 139). Major dōjinshi events in the modern day, such as the bi-annual Comiket, remain places where women have experienced senses of exclusion (Lamerichs 2018). This is not necessarily done through an overt rejection of women participants, but rather, through the ways in which these spaces have put forward passive barriers to participation for those of a particular gendered identity.

Inclusion in these theoretically inclusive spaces is itself an act of tension and negotiation, where gendered binaries are at play. This tension shifts along with the shifting designations of acceptable social lives. Recent studies have noted that nearly 50% of circles (groups of independent authors) participating at the biannual Comiket identified as women (Ishikawa 2020). As women become more visible in these fan spaces, broadening the scope of the communities who gather within them, it follows that women's contributions to them should be treated with similar attention as those produced by dominant demographics.

This is particularly evident when it comes to the ways language is used to negotiate social space, and who can participate in these spaces. Ishikawa (2020) points to the signage decorating the booths of female authors at comics markets, made with particular visual and textural vocabularies that are "understood by those who understand them" (307-308). These signs are made by women authors for their target audiences: that is, those readers who engage with media from perspectives that differ to those of male or male-oriented authors (Ishikawa 2020, Wood 2006). The specialised

vocabulary of women-promoted dōjinshi often appears in stark contrast to the expected use of visual and narrative tropes of the works they are derived from, especially if the originating works are aimed at a male audience. Wood (2006) explains this as expanding on the assumptions of existing works, as independent creations by women authors support a platform for the negotiation and re-negotiation of sexuality and gender roles. The intent and messaging of the male-oriented original work, particularly as it deals with ideas of masculinity, has the potential to be re-made by authors whose lives occupy a different space in the wider social realm.

Dōjinshi are works that are open to community negotiation (Benson 2018). This negotiation, in the current day, has expanded from the physical gathering place of the comics market to the virtual one of online communication. With the increasing inclusion of online and multilingual platforms (Ishikawa 2020, Ogura 2000), women's creative works and the social and cultural perspectives included in their negotiation expand to create a "counter-public" (Wood 2006, 404) beyond the immediate Japanese fan space. Thus, when examining media and its audience, it is vital to consider both the scope of the community itself, as well as how its members communicate. It is in these interactions that the tensions of dominant social roles are negotiated, made flexible, and critiqued by those who do not necessarily align their own existence with the expectations put towards them.

It should come as no surprise that women found interest in the realm of Japanese swords, despite assumptions to the contrary, when there are existing instances of women involving themselves in assumed male spaces. It should also come as no surprise that the specialised communicative methods of the fan-creator space extend to experiences had elsewhere. I return here to the realm of historical fiction and its female fanbase in Japan, who are also frequent visitors to heritage sites. Previous study of the *rekijo* [歴女] or 'history girl', so termed for her interest in the assumed male-dominated realm of historical media (Sugawa 2017, 171), highlights the role women play in re-framing and re-negotiating the value of heritage sites. This is done on a top-down, organisational level, such as tourism coordinators recognising a new audience for their ventures: however, it is just as strongly enacted by travellers themselves, who leave creative depictions and markings in the guestbooks and votive plaques of the sites they visit (Sugawa 2017, 184; Andrews 2014). As with the specialised vocabulary of signs in dōjinshi markets, these material mementos left on-site use particular communicative norms that are "understood by those who understand them". Their authors relegate their personal experiences in this form of material memory-making in objects that serve as a visible footprint of a likely female visitor and her relationship with present and past notions of identity.

Thus, the female fan is not simply a consumer of top-level content. She is her own producer, whether that be in defined fan gathering places, or in other tangible realms through her use of

specialised vocabularies and marking her presence in these spaces. By making her presence visible, the female fan has the ability to position herself within, against, and transcendent of the normative assumptions that frame her social life. Media serves as a tool by which her social realities are negotiated. The female fan—and in my specific investigation, the Saniwa—is a social entity, actively evaluating her own life in relation to the definitions put upon it and engaging in an ontological debate as to the validity of social existence. Through her actions, she has the potential to highlight the lives of other entities who exist in the margins of, or perhaps even entirely outside of, dominant designations of social validity.

THE MEDIA MIX AS SOCIAL NEGOTIATION

If media and its tropes are the tools of social negotiation used by women audiences, then how are these tools used? In the context of this investigation, we must look at the media landscape in Japan, in particular the production of what has been termed the media mix. The media mix is both a marketing strategy and one of franchise production. It appears in its current form around the 1980's, as multimedia franchises gained prominence in marketing and in their creative direction (Steinberg 2012, 135 & Otsuka 2014, 21). The Touken Ranbu franchise exists within this context of cross-media works. Unlike global transmedia franchises such as Star Wars or Marvel, both recognised as 'belonging' to directorial producers such as George Lucas, Stan Lee, or Disney, the media mix does not necessitate a centralised narrative or authorial direction. Rather, it is a cross-utilisation of shared imagery and narrative concepts that both speak to each other and exist as separate works unto themselves.

This is not to say there are not producing bodies or directorial staff. Media mix franchises are commonplace in Japan. Readers across the world may recognise the *Pokémon* franchise, which exists across games, animation, film, and comics, each utilising the base concepts of the world with narratives that rarely, if ever, interact. Media mix narratives may even be contradictory to each other, and defy notions that they exist in a singular time or space. This allows for a variety in the creation of franchise works where licensed creators (under directorial oversight) are able to present different interpretations of a concept while remaining tied to the core franchise.

The differences between the media mix and other multi-, cross-, and trans-media franchises are subtle. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise them. The differences in the use and manipulation of media content may in itself be a sign of the diverse social standings from which audiences undertake their negotiations of self, community, and media.

One difference lies in the closeness of the authorial creator to the so-called consumptive fan. To examine this, let us consider the *Star Wars* franchise. Like many cross-media works, the original *Star Wars* film trilogy has expanded to include a diverse number of stories beneath its conceptual

umbrella. As well as a producer-negotiation of the franchise's concepts, these stories are tied to the interpersonal negotiations between fans. Kent (2019) describes this negotiation as a form of ontological security for the audience (223), coming from decades of engagement with the structures of the franchise. These years of involvement have formed a particular community with its own social norms, influencing the social designations of those who participate in *Star Wars* discourses. Kent focuses on the ontology of cosplayer communities, or those who create and dress in the costumes of the franchise, in their manipulation of ideas of validation, hierarchy, and social negotiation in their community. Their ontological security was impacted by the sale of the franchise by George Lucas to Disney, which put the hierarchies of their social sphere into a state of flux. The concerns of fan costumers regarding the new ownership tied to the validation of their own social identities and the relationships they had with each other as creators and inhabitors of their costumes (Kent 2019, 228-29). The way these characters were valued by franchise leadership, or the franchise's official authors, in turn had impacted on the fan's own modes of relating to oneself, and one's place in their ontological, social community. Should the new narrative 'owners' at Disney disregard their favoured characters, fans who formed their identities under Lucas' tenure may lose their point of connectivity to other fans of the franchise.

This highlights the relationship between audience and author, in that the existing social communities of fans had been based on reference to the sanctifications of the central franchise author (Kent 2019, 230). This sense of authorial primacy in the vast franchise extends beyond immediate fan communities, and to other sites of cultural authority: for example, the museum (Herrera & Keidl 2017; Kent 2019, 224). Exhibition displays are granted, by fan visitors, extra levels of 'canonicity', or accurateness, when their arrangements or descriptions are implied to have George Lucas' approval (Hennera & Keidl, 2017, 164). This positions fan negotiation in a hierarchy with the author, whose interpretation has additional weight and social importance. This sense of authorial primacy is inclusive of fan interpretations and re-interpretations, but is nonetheless one where the tools of social negotiation are tied to the intentions (or perceived intentions) of an authoritative figure.

In contrast, the derivative works of Japanese fan spaces do not necessarily hold such a strict adherence to the sanctions of authorial producers. In fact, creative fan works such as dōjinshi exist in a legal grey area (Sawada 2021), and seek to operate outside of the overt attention of producers. As such, the ontological sanctioning that occurs amongst these fan communities play out in subtly different ways to those of franchises such as *Star Wars*. Consider Benson (2018)'s discussion of *Black Butler* [黒執事, Kuroshitsuji] dōjinshi, where the appeal of a concept, and not necessarily the intentions of the author, is what is valued by the audience. *Black Butler* fan works retain the core concepts of a faustian pact between the series' protagonist and his demonic butler. The use of this

concept emerges as the primary locus of determining 'authenticity' and subsequent social sanctioning by the audience (Benson 2018, 134). Even the existing licensed works of the *Black Butler* media mix —produced by animation or stage companies and not directly written by the original author—deviate widely from the original work's narratives. As such, fan works are also considered on their thematic and conceptual level, rather than through the sanctioning of an authorial voice.

Here, negotiations of the media mix are enacted through a conceptual framework where the audience acts as a determiner for what is or is not an acceptable use of franchise concepts. What I argue here is not intended to be an extensive examination of the media mix, but rather, a consideration for how the operations of a franchise impacts on the ways its audience uses it in their own social negotiations.

Otsuka (2014) describes two main forms of the media mix, dubbed 'Type A' and 'Type B'. Type A franchises originate from a single work, with a hierarchical relationship between each subsequent production similar to the *Star Wars* franchise. Type B media mixes are designed around a world system (or conceptual base), where each subsequent production speaks equally to that system (Otsuka 2014, 24-25). Touken Ranbu is an example of this second kind of mix. While Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— holds some primacy as the 'original' work and the venue through which concepts and characters are introduced into the broader franchise, in practice, each branch of the mix is self-sufficient.

This form of production is intentional. Producers Nitro+ actively designate the franchise as a media mix, where the possibilities of how its concepts are used are limited only by the number of people who engage with them. Even when considering only licensed works, Touken Ranbu is a singularly flexible franchise. Its strengths draw from the use of its conceptual tools to explore different situations. The first stage adaptation, Musical: Touken Ranbu, held its trial performance in 2015, the same year of the game's launch. This work frequently highlights notions of spirituality with its focus on swords of the Heian Period [794CE-1185CE]. The animated, comedic series Hanamaru, more concerned with daily social realities relatable to its modernly emplaced audience, aired the following year in 2016. Alongside this were the first performances of the philosophical, historical-drama inspired stage adaptation, Stage Play: Touken Ranbu. Another action-oriented animated series, Katsugeki/Touken Ranbu, aired in 2017, while the similarly action-based live action film Touken Ranbu was screened across Japan in 2019. Multiple comic anthologies have been published across the years, as well as cross-over storylines with other franchises in Japan's media landscape. This franchise's scope is not just in the media forms it takes, but in the tone and intention of the various branch authors.

The acceptance of each media branch by the audience is based on their use of Touken Ranbu's concepts: those of a Saniwa (player character), their swords, and the home (Honmaru) they inhabit. Series producer Dejitaro explained in an interview: "there are a thousand different ways audiences can enjoy Touken Ranbu. Each player [of the online game] has a different image of their *Saniwa*, and the policies and situations of their *Honmaru*… I don't think there is a single *Honmaru* that is the same as another." (Yokogawa 2020, paragraph 35). This assertion can easily be seen when stepping away from the franchise's licensed productions and looking to its fan-made works. Benson's (2019) examination of *Black Butler* fan works considers the ways in which a singular concept—the faustian pact and its character dynamics—is re-interpreted and negotiated by fans. This scope is only made more expansive when the concept they are manipulating is not a singular social dynamic, but encompasses a vast number of actors with a vast number of life experiences. This is the case for the Saniwa and their sword companions. Fan-made works related to Touken Ranbu range from romance to horror, from historical questionings to contemporary concerns, drawing on philosophies of life, existence, and memory. They also expand beyond the negotiation of fictional narratives, and are inclusive of historical research, investigation, map-making, and guidebooks to real world places related to the lives of the swords that inhabit them.

Thus, Touken Ranbu emerges as a franchise that has a particular relationship with its fans that differs from the hierarchies of *Star Wars* or the relatively narrow narrative scope of franchises with structured narratives. Through the sheer diversity of works associated with Touken Ranbu, its strengths can be seen in the ways its concepts are freely adaptable to the concerns of any given author, whether they belong to the official mix or act in a 'fan' capacity. This free adaptability is encouraged by official authors. Audiences are regularly addressed by producers as collective Saniwa [審神者の皆さま], with the implication that each individual exists as their own empowered actor in the Touken Ranbu context. This comes with implicit recognition that each Saniwa and their iteration of Touken Ranbu's setting and characters differ from each other. Their relationship to the franchise is something uniquely theirs, situated amongst an infinite number of possible narrative contexts and relationships.

With this approach to media underlying the experiences of Saniwa the concepts of the franchise are not held in stone, but are themselves a lens of interpretation and a mode of communication between social actors. As such, it is prudent to examine the concepts that are freely used and manipulated by the Touken Ranbu audience, and how these concepts emerge as a framework for audiences to engage with contemporary sword culture.

SANIWA NARU MONO - THOSE WHO ARE 'SANIWA'

To discuss the social dynamics surrounding current-day swords, it is important to recognise the human actors who engage with them. Primary here is the Saniwa [審神者]. This term of identification derives from the Touken Ranbu franchise. However, it has a flexible meaning and is applied in both fictional and non-fictional social spaces. Saniwa is an archaic term denoting an oracle-like Shinto priest (Sudo 2004). Unlike other terms associated with modern Shinto, it is not used commonly nor is it instantly understandable to a general Japanese audience. This has perhaps contributed to its adoption by sword-related actors, who re-negotiate its meaning to suit the contemporary context. In Touken Ranbu—ONLINE—, Saniwa is a title used to refer to the player character, or the one who gives new shape to sword beings and exists as the highest point of authority in their immediate social hierarchy. It has subsequently been adopted by the franchise's audience as a real-world identifier, signifying one who approaches and supports swords with an underlying understanding of the franchise Saniwa's role as caretaker and social communicator.

The concept of the Saniwa is explained in Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—'s opening cinematic: "those who are 'Saniwa' awaken the feelings and hearts inside sleeping objects, giving them their own power and abilities to fight and swing [swords]." [「審神者」なる者とは、眠っている物の想い、心を目覚めさせ、自ら戦う力を与え、振るわせる、技を持つ者]. This description immediately positions the Saniwa as a mediator between the realms of humans and non-humans. Saniwa have the ability to transform the 'inanimate' bodies of entities with a pre-existing consciousness into a form that can speak, act, and directly communicate with the human realm. In doing so they enact a form of social negotiation, recognising socially active characteristics in things that appear inanimate. The Saniwa does not *give* swords life, but gives them the physical ability to assert that life in a manner comprehensible to humans.

The franchise Saniwa's appearance is deliberately obscured across its many adaptations. As the Saniwa is the virtual-world proxy of the player character, their image never appears on-screen in Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—. Other adaptations similarly obscure the physical person of the Saniwa. For exmaple, the Saniwa of Musical: Touken Ranbu only appears as a disembodied voice, while Stage Play: Touken Ranbu's Saniwa makes their on-stage debut covered in robes that hide their face and figure, and Touken Ranbu Hanamaru's Saniwa exists in a nebulous space behind the closed doors of their private rooms. The only major adaptation to fully reveal their Saniwa is the 2017 anime Katsugeki/Touken Ranbu, which presents them as an androgynous male character[3]. The

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[3] A few days before finalising this manuscript, the film branch of Touken Ranbu's media mix released a trailer featuring several "temporary Saniwa". These Saniwa—a high school girl, a female university student, a male government worker, and an elderly man who manages a Shinto shrine—further reflect the flexibility of the term and the diversity of actors in Japan's contemporary sword culture.

obscuring of the Saniwa is also a common practice in fan works and dōjinshi. Often, a Saniwa's appearance is rendered in a featureless, vaguely human form, with a simple round head masked with the character 'Sa' [さ] for 'Saniwa'. When a fan work depicts a Saniwa with a distinct appearance and personality, the work is regularly accompanied by author's notes warning readers that the Saniwa's person is made clear. Other fan works even depict Saniwa who are non-human: animals, trees, or other forms of living entities without a clear human form, but whom nonetheless fulfil the Saniwa's role as mediator between the object of the sword and the human social realm.

Saniwa, therefore, are those who re-define the seemingly inanimate object as a social entity, regardless of their own shape or form. This reveals a social realm that defines living entities by their roles and actions, and not the biological status of their tangible bodies. From this conceptual starting point, the fictional Saniwa and their role provides an interesting glimpse at how real-world Saniwa undertake their own social mediations.

If the fictional Saniwa is a genderless, featureless being, then what is to be made of the real-world Saniwa? While it cannot be said that every audience member identifies as such, the attendees of events and activities related to Touken Ranbu and real-world swords are, largely, women. It is here that the flexibility of the conceptual Saniwa emerges into the context of expectations, assumptions, and social roles assigned to women both historically and in the present day. The Saniwa, or the woman who embodies this role of social negotiator, is an entity that, through her actions, mediates realms of social recognition for both the human and the sword.

Saniwa, as derived from a Shinto priest, holds the connotation of a socialised male actor. This term's current obscurity in relation to its original spiritual context may have allowed for its present-day use, providing ample room for a re-negotiation of meaning, particularly as related to the gendered implications of whom it refers to. Saniwa is a self-appointed term. It stands in contrast to the ways these persons are identified by outside actors in the Japanese media context, where female audiences are frequently prescribed explicitly gendered terms of reference when their activities deviate from the supposed norm of women's interests.

Merely existing as a female fan, or being part of a visibly female audience base, puts one in a context of bounded ideas and potential negotiations regarding the socialisation of women's lives. If investigating the current resurgence of interest in Japanese swords from the top-down perspective, it will not take long to encounter the term *Touken Joshi* [刀剣女子]. This term regularly appears in media reports on increased activity surrounding swords, both positive and negative. Touken Joshi is often used uncritically, and follows in the common practice of differentiating female fanbases from 'regular' and 'normal' (male) fans, by attaching the suffix -jo [女] or -joshi [女子] (girl) to the subject of their interest. Previous studies of women's involvement in historical pop-culture has highlighted the term Rekijo [歴女, history girl], used to identify women who deviate from the

assumed male audience of their targeted works, aligning their fan activities with pop-culture fads and a desire to follow fashionable trends (Sugawa 2017, 172). -Jo and -joshi terms, particularly when applied by actors who are not the women themselves, reinforces assumptions regarding the acceptable expression of women's interests, and the social norms of women's lives.

In drawing attention to the gender of actors through the use of -jo or -joshi suffixes, top-down circulators of information reinforce assumptions as to what kinds of social participation are considered normal or abnormal. Drawing attention to the gender through terms such as Touken Joshi implies that it is unusual or unexpected for a 'girl' to be interest in swords. It further implies her interest to be purely media-driven, as the term appears in tandem with explanations of the Touken Ranbu franchise, and subsequently superficial.

An example of this can be seen in one news article, published by Tokyo Walker in December 2020, where an interviewer questioned a sword-smith on the "sword boom" of Touken Ranbu. His reply was that, while he acknowledged the popularity brought to swords by "Touken Joshi", they didn't buy them (Walker Plus 2020). This was quickly taken up by Saniwa on social media criticising the assumption that they did not purchase or support the forging of new swords, supported by voices from institutional actors who regularly interact with Saniwa (Yohei 2020).

Ascribing terms such as "touken joshi" to the sword-enthused woman denies her own agency in determining her interests and activities, based on the assumption of how she 'should' act. This is not restricted to the Japanese context—much of the English language reporting on Touken Ranbu and its audience's sword-related activities also use terms such as 'sword girls'. They may even go further to directly state the interest of these women derives from the "attractive" male designs of Touken Danshi (Sora News, 2015; Nintendo Wire, 2021; Anime News Network, 2021). Here, too, gendered terms are used in tandem with the implication that women who are interested in swords are an unusual occurrence, and their involvement in the sword context must have its explanations in acceptable realms of women's interests: for example, attraction to male characters. The use of terms such as 'sword girl' and 'Touken Joshi' creates a heteronormative view of women's interests, with the further notion that such interests are based on fad or fashion, in contrast to the serious masculine norm. It is for this reason that I refer to the women (and others who do not identify as women) in this phenomenon as Saniwa, the self-described, self-applied form of identification that refers to a role and not a specific gendered entity.

The historicity of the term Saniwa, in combination with others used in the Touken Ranbu franchise, has implications beyond the assertion of women's agency regarding their interests. The re-negotiation of these terms has further impact on the construction of social hierarchies, when considered in tandem with the franchise's majority-female fanbase.

Saniwa is, in the framing of the franchise, a title. It is not used by the sword-characters towards the player. Instead, they use others that indicate a social hierarchy: 'lord', 'master', and even 'boss'. The most common term of reference for the Saniwa is 'Aruji' [主], a word for a hierarchical leader that typically holds masculine connotations. The English version of Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—, launched in 2021, maintains this male-coded term, translating it as 'lord'. As such, the terms of reference for the franchise Saniwa have historicised connotations of masculinity and traditional notions of historical social hierarchies based on the assumed male lord in a position of command over militarised subordinates.

The use of these masculine terms with the obscured form, figure, and gender of the conceptual Saniwa comes with further possibilities to re-negotiate social expectations, and the valuation of social lives. These terms are, after all, used in reference to a player character for a franchise aimed at a female audience, placing this audience in a role of traditionally masculine authority. When combined with the fact that the term Saniwa is used in self-reference by actors outside of the fictional realm, we can see the further influences that this juxtaposition of audience and the assumed gender of historicised leadership has on real world social dynamics.

"[To me, 'Saniwa'] has the sense of 'freedom'" [自由], explained the manager of a community group called Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai [ニッカリ青江友の会]. This manager, a male volunteer actor who in many ways suits the assumed image of a sword fan, regularly interacts with Saniwa in online social spaces to promote events related to the sword Nikkari Aoe. As such, he stands as a social entity in a relational dynamic to Saniwa, recognising their social practices and assertions of agency, which he described to me as a form of 'freedom'. This notion of 'freedom', he further explained, has somewhat feminist undertones. It allows those who engage with the Touken Ranbu franchise the ability to determine what their position of authority means to them. This sense of freedom may be influenced by the structure of the Touken Ranbu franchise itself, based on its conceptual strength rather than an overarching narrative: for example, other female-oriented franchises may restrict the protagonist to a romance-based storyline, which would align with the assumptions of outside actors assuming Saniwa to be attracted to the franchise's male characters. In contrast, the Saniwa's position of freedom positions the role as one contrary to both the historical settings it draws its aesthetics from, and contrary to pervasive assumptions of women's media.

Touken Ranbu is a josei-muke [女性向け, female-oriented] franchise. Josei-muke games in Japan are largely in the visual-novel style. Prominent sub-genres of josei-muke games, such as the *otome game* [乙女ゲーム] deal with overt storylines of romance. Many otome games use historical settings, such as the popular *Hakuouki Shinsengumi Kitan* [薄桜鬼～新選組奇譚～]*, which positions the player character in a romantic narrative with romanticised historical figures, the

Shinsengumi. *Hakuouki's* female protagonist is positioned as an observer to the lives of the male warriors who made up the Shinsengumi, and the other male actors embedded in the political realm of the late 1800's. This game and others of its genre are identifiable by their romantic storylines and their primary focus on the large casts of attractively-designed male characters, a visual language to which, when seen by a casual outside observer, the Touken Ranbu franchise seemingly belongs to.

Existing research into Otome games has critiqued the assumptions that arise when examining media aimed at a female audience. Saito (2021) makes note of the strength of the historical setting in otome games (Saito 2021, 8). She argues that the use of these settings serves to distance the female main character from the hierarchies of power, marginalising her from the political and physical conflicts of the story (Saito 2021, 10). Saito further argues that in the case of franchises such as *Hakuouki*, where the main love interests largely suffer violent deaths, the marginalisation faced by the female player character translates to a real-world lack of control the player has over the events at play. However, Ganzon (2019) argues that one cannot assume the audience's adherence to seemingly conservative narrative and gendered ideals of romance in their engagement with otome media. She draws on interviews with international otome game players and promoters, who use these works to expand on and explore the notions of gender and gendered hierarchies embedded in their romantic stories (Ganzon 2019, 352, 355). The discursive and negotiative power of these women audience members is important to keep in mind when dealing with historical media.

In the scenario put forward by Saito, the loss of a player's love interest is directly connected to her abilities (or lack thereof) in the historical realm. It is assumed that, merely by being women, the player characters of games such as *Hakuouki* are marginalised and kept apart from the hierarchies of power. Ultimately, if these narratives are viewed through the lens of historical accuracy, the female players are distanced from a sense of ownership and agency over the narratives (Saito 2021, 10). How, then, should we consider the Saniwa—an entity that exists in an aesthetically historical space, but occupies an explicit role of authority? Touken Ranbu, with the visual features of a josei-muke game, its historicised setting, and its cast of male characters, is frequently positioned alongside historical otome games. However, as Ganzon demonstrates, the narratives of these games can not be taken as reflecting the agency and politics of their players. So too does Touken Ranbu's Saniwa—and their decidedly non-romantic role—require an analysis beyond the assumption that a historicised setting immediately places the female player in a position of marginalisation.

A Saniwa is not a romantic heroine, nor are they bound to romantic storylines. The Saniwa is the highest point of Touken Ranbu's internal narrative hierarchy, which they can manipulate by their own choosing. With the flexibility of the franchise's conceptual base, Saniwa can freely decide their relationship with their swords, whether that be platonic, romantic, or any other form they wish

to pursue. Saniwa determine the parameters of their social spaces—they have 'freedom', recognised by actors outside of the direct media context, that translates into the activities those who identify as Saniwa take in the physical world.

While it would be easy to describe the fictionalised Saniwa as a self-insert character, existing as escapist fantasy, the Saniwa as malleable and flexible identity is more a means by which to negotiate social relationships.

Rather than assuming the Saniwa to be an otome game protagonist, it may serve to further compare this role-based identification to that of producer characters in idol nurturing games, another fixture of the contemporary media mix (Finan 2021). These games feature the player character as a producer for fictional upcoming idol groups. Finan (2021) considers the *Love Live!* franchise in their exploration of nurturing games, describing it as a series with a predominately male fanbase in control of a cast of female characters. Like Touken Ranbu, this franchise has an absence of a "grand narrative" (Finan 2021, 6). Instead, the franchise subtly positions the producer-character in connection to the well known, celebrity-like producers of real world female idol groups (Finan 2021, 2-4). In this framing, the male player, or the male-coded producer character, is in a position of authority in a hierarchy of gendered roles in the idol industry, and the trope-based nature of the female characters serves to highlight their own gendered role within this social system. Finan does not look at the *Love Live!* franchise, in this instance, from the audience perspective—and thus, the significant female player-base and their negotiations of the roles and tropes of idol production are not represented in this single paper (Finan 2021, 6). As such, what emerges in this instance is the hierarchy of the in-game, faceless producer and their correlation with real-world male actors. Here, too, the deliberate de-gendering and removal of the Saniwa from obvious gendered (or even human) traits by Touken Ranbu audiences severs as a point of contrast to other franchises that replicate real-world hierarchies in their mechanics.

Saniwa are not the easily-categorisable Touken Joshi, with interests outside of the assumed norms of their gender. Nor can they be packaged as female audience members who uncritically assume historical and gendered realms of power replicated in otome games, historical narratives, or other forms of self-representing game characters. They are social entities undertaking a negotiation of their role and identity in contemporary space. I turn now to the ways in which this identity is actively negotiated by Saniwa and sword-actors themselves.

When the term Touken Joshi is used in news or television reporting, Saniwa are quick to comment on and criticise its use on social media, expressing their frustrations at the ongoing lack of consideration for their own interest and agency. Complaints often contain protests against the use of a term that implies their interest is derived from a short-term media 'fad' or 'boom', inspired only by an interest in fictionalised, humanised characters. Other critiques further state the obvious: not

all sword fans are 'girls', and to categorise the current resurgence in interest in these narrow terms is to overlook the ongoing presence of diverse actors in the contemporary negotiations of swords and their value. The use of the term Touken Joshi thus, from the Saniwa perspective, has its own implication: that those who are using this descriptor are outsiders to the realities of contemporary sword activities, or are otherwise curators of a boundary that is exclusive of the genuine interest these actors have surrounding swords.

I return here to the modern-day ambiguity of the term Saniwa. This ambiguity speaks to the desires of those who adopt its use in defining their own social practice, with an implicit understanding that their term of reference is one that can just as easily be applied to diverse human genders as it can to non-human entities. The assertion by actors in the current sword phenomenon to use flexible terms such as Saniwa, or at the very least non-gendered descriptors such as 'sword fans', is their own responsive negotiation of their social position as defined by themselves, and not outsider assumptions based on overarching gender norms.

Saniwa as a term of reference has dual meanings in fictional and real-world spaces, with those meanings themselves fluid and flexible in their determination of social identities. Thus, the term is not one with a strict definition, but a conceptual frame of reference. What determines someone as Saniwa is not their gender, but can instead be seen in their assertions of self-identification and self-management of their interests, inclusive of the role these actors assume in relation to swords.

This can be seen clearly through the events of April 2022, and Touken Ranbu — ONLINE—'s first in-game event that required direct collaboration between players. In-game Saniwa were tasked with coordinating a defence against an attack on their virtual homes. A sense of solidarity was quickly built amongst players, as their shared Saniwa identity manifested despite the game's 7-year long history of limited multiplayer content. In virtual gathering places such as social media, Saniwa modified their online handles to include the game servers, named after historical domains of Japan, they belonged to. In doing so, Saniwa identified themselves on a virtual geography that connected with other virtual spaces, and acknowledged their collaborative responsibility to the entirety of their intangible homes and the swords that inhabited them.

The in-game event was organised around tiers of increasing difficulty, so Saniwa of all levels could participate. As it continued, however, a pattern emerged that was contrary to assumed progression: the most difficult levels were being cleared the fastest. On social media, participating players joked that this was the work of the *Gorilla Saniwa* [ゴリラ審神者], players affectionately characterised in terms of raw strength and power, leading the charge to protect the less experienced Saniwa tackling the lower levels of the event.

Series producer Dejitaro actively participated in this social media discourse. Picking up on the spread of the term Gorilla Saniwa, he posted a tweet expressing the desire to see a more elegant name, proposing the term *Shūgoshin Saniwa* [守護神審神者, Protective Deity Saniwa] (Dejitarou 2022). This was, largely, rejected, as the player-base responded with their own interpretation of the proposed term, manipulating the reading of the characters 守護 [shūgo] to say 'go' [守護] and

adding to the end 'rira' [リラ], returning the name to *Gorilla Saniwa* [守護リラ審神者]. Rather than accepting the beautification of their name, Saniwa responded with an assertion of their own identification. Dejitaro made a follow-up tweet accepting this term, referring to the motivated players as "守護リラ審神者" (*Gorira Saniwa)* (Dejitarou, 2022a). Saniwa did not adhere to the assertions of series production in determining what is and is not the proper use of franchise terminology, as seen in fan communities such as those of *Star Wars*. Instead, they quickly negotiated their own terms of reference, even when presented with alternatives from top-down actors. Just as the female Saniwa is not one to be automatically positioned in narratives of romance, she further distances herself from terms of elegance or appropriate social characterisations of her strength.

Saniwa as a relational term uses franchise terminology as a negotiative tool in an equalising realm of authority. Saniwa, when used in a relational sense, does not stratify oneself from other actors. Nor does it simply provide a form of reference for a particular 'fan community'. It recognises and identifies particular social actors who undertake their sociality in similar realms, with similar notions of value, and equalises responsibility where each Saniwa assumes a similar hierarchical position. This is extended to those who theoretically exist in authoritative positions in the franchise. In April 2022, shortly after the aforementioned collaborative, in-game event was cleared and completed, Stage Play Touken Ranbu's *Kiden: Ikusa Yo no Adabana* [綺伝 いくさ世 の徒花] was preparing for its final Tokyo performance. Around an hour before the curtains were set to rise, actor Umetsu Mizuki, who plays the Touken Danshi Yamanbagiri Chougi, tweeted his shock at the event's emotional ending narrative. Later, after the performance was completed, the actors lined up on stage to give their closing comments. He started as the others did, expressing thanks to those who had come to see the performance and support the production. He then quickly segued, breaking from the standard tone of a thank-you speech to one more impassioned: "As for the Saniwa in the audience… right now, something terrible has happened in your Honmaru [citadel, the setting for Touken Ranbu—ONLINE—]! Please check it as soon as you leave the theatre." [審神者の皆様におかれましては、今、あなたの本丸で大変なことが起きたので、劇場に出たらすぐに確認して]. This was met with laughter from the live audience, and an equally amused

reaction online. "He's a real Saniwa!", a flurry of tweets read. The divide between actor and audience, and the closeness the former has to the actual production of the media franchise, was made irrelevant: in that moment, the shared identity of 'Saniwa' took prominence.

The transposition of the conceptual Saniwa from the fictional world to one of real-world identification thus positions it alongside other forms of social recognition. It emerges as a relational aspect of one's activities and the defining realms of one's social life. Here, I use myself as an example. At the start of my investigation, despite having played Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— since its launch in 2015, I described myself as a 'fan' and not a 'Saniwa'. I pursued my interest of Touken Ranbu individually, without engaging with other players online or visiting exhibitions: in other words, without engagement with the gathering places where Saniwa identities are manifest. This changed in the course of my work, as I became increasingly involved with Saniwa and increasingly frustrated by the limitations and assumptions of terms such as 'fan'. My visits to physical gathering places became more frequent, and alongside this, I adopted a Saniwa's way of expressing their favourite swords—using colours, motifs, and merchandise from Touken Ranbu as well as from the collections of museums and galleries—to signal to others with a language that is "understood by those who understand it" (Ishikawa 2020). As I became more involved in virtual gathering places, I became more aware of the ways in which exhibitions and sword-related events were circulated: through posts titled 'to Saniwa', or notices of attention 'for Saniwa'. In reading, responding, and sharing these notices, and following up with physical attendance to the events they promote, I became more astutely aware of the social community of Saniwa that I was increasingly immersed in.

Alongside this re-positioning of self is the relational way in which identities are recognised and re-enforced by the acceptance of other social actors. To be a Saniwa is not an isolated task. It draws on immersion with others who identify as such, and their acceptance of one within this social sphere. This is the relational component of social identification. Alongside my internal shift from 'fan' to 'Saniwa', a similar shift occurred with my interlocutors. This was a gradual process that strengthened as I established my own network of relationships within the ontological realm of Saniwa. The encompassing nature of the Saniwa identity as one not bounded by notions of gender, or even 'Japaneseness', becomes evident when looking at the ways in which my own terms of reference changed as I became increasingly recognised as a Saniwa. I was, in the course of this investigation, explaining to a fellow Saniwa some of the nuances of the English used by the English version of Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—. These were then shared on social media. Originally, she described them as the work of "a native English speaker". Several months later, after visiting sword exhibitions together and interacting more frequently in virtual space, she shared another set of my explanations, this time with my identifier as an "English speaking Saniwa". In time, alongside

additional work in the co-interpretation of historical documents in English and Japanese related to swords, I became referred to as "gachi Saniwa" [ガチ審神者], or truly recognised as part of this social group and its co-experienced activities.

Thus, Saniwa is not merely a component of Touken Ranbu's fictionalised setting: it is a mode of relational standing. This can be made in participation in the online game and consumption of other elements of its media mix. It also extends to ways of recognising each other, expressed in one's own social activities. It is not contained to the boundaries of fictionalised space but inclusive of exhibition visitation and cultural support. It is here where the concept of Saniwa becomes both an identity and a tool in the negotiation of social lives and their cultural relevance.

TO ARU HONMARU - THE STORY OF A CERTAIN CITADEL

The animated series Hanamaru opens with the following disclaimer, spoken cheerfully by the series' protagonists: "*Kono anime wa, to aru Honmaru no, to aru Touken Danshi-tachi ni yoru, Hanamaru na hibi no monogatari desu*" [このアニメはとある本丸のとある刀剣男士たちによる花丸な日々の物語です] — "This anime is the story of a certain Honmaru, and certain Touken Danshi, as they live out their 'hanamaru' [top-effort] days" (Nitro Plus 2016-2022).

Touken Ranbu Hanamaru is markedly different in tone than what one would expect from a franchise dealing with historical swords. The bright colours and music, in combination with its cheerful introduction, emphasises the flexible nature of the franchise. Hanamaru is centred on another of Touken Ranbu's main conceptual elements: the Honmaru [本丸], or Citadel, the far-future space where Saniwa and swords make their home. Hanamaru's disclaimer that the series is a story of "a certain Honmaru" situates its Touken Danshi and their stories in a specific social sphere, while acknowledging that their iteration is only one of many different takes on (fictional) sword lives.

As with the notion of Saniwa, the Honmaru is not just a fictional concept. It is derived from a real-world term and uses real-world historical aesthetics in its construction of social space. As with the concept of the Saniwa, the Touken Ranbu Honmaru transcends its use in fictional contexts, as the term is manipulated to refer to real-world gathering places and navigation of their accompanying social dynamics.

Honmaru is a historical term. It commonly refers to the inner spaces and areas of residence inside the fortifications of a Japanese castle, and is frequently encountered when visiting reconstructions or castle ruins. In Touken Ranbu, the Honmaru is the place of residence for Saniwa and their sword collection. The typical franchise Honmaru is a traditional Japanese building, and makes up the space where the Saniwa and their swords enact their daily lives: training for battle,

farming, caring for their horses, undertaking household chores, and interacting amongst each other in a self-sustaining community setting.

Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—'s Honmaru is represented by a single image: the background of the game's home screen, customisable by the player through a selection of garden and nature views as seen from the balcony of a traditional Japanese manor house. What exists outside this view is free to the interpretation of each individual player. As with the mediative nature of the Saniwa concept, this freedom allows players and audiences to construct their own interpretation of the Honmaru's space, reflective of how they approach the role of Saniwa and the care of their Touken Danshi. The social nature of this space is emphasised in the works of Saniwa and official productions. The animated series Hanamaru is set almost entirely in its respective Honmaru, and its narratives focus on the daily lives—chores and all—of its Touken Danshi. Saniwa, too, engage in this social exploration through their own constructions of the Honmaru space. It is understood amongst Saniwa that the flexible space of the Honmaru is unique to each circumstance. As such, it emerges as both a physical setting and a potential venue for explorations of author experiences and social norms undertaken by dōjinshi and fan work creators (Wilson 2003; Wood 2006). How does the physical layout of one's own Honmaru facilitate the relationships between sword-beings? What historical knowledge or social expectations go into the building's design? What rules exist in the space of the Honmaru, and what are the consequences of their transgression? In designing a Honmaru, one inevitably defines the boundaries and dynamics of an (albeit fictional) social space.

The franchise Homaru is a place that draws on historical social settings, and in doing so continues the evocation of historicised hierarchies present in the relationship between Saniwa and swords. While the Honmaru is largely left to Saniwa's own construction, the 2020 Honmaru-haku [本丸博], an exhibition held to celebrate the franchise's 5th anniversary, provided a diorama of a theoretical Honmaru. This model was evocative of the dioramas common to Japanese museums. Accompanying the diorama were notes that explained the buildings, their use, and their design, largely drawn from Edo Period [1603CE-1868CE] manor houses of the samurai class. Touken Ranbu is set in the future of 2205, yet despite this, the official Honmaru is aligned with the castles and manor houses of the past, evoking gendered implications of power as associated with the command of feudal lords or samurai.

The overtly historical aesthetics of the official Honmaru stands in contrast to some of the more striking audience interpretations of this space. Saniwa frequently share their own interpretations in virtual gathering spaces such as social media. These, at times, lean heavily into the franchise's future setting by incorporating technical elements and transforming the historical buildings into a modern complex, or by drawing on elements of surreality to create imaginative, physically impossible building forms. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that the official historicised

Honmaru and its implications is consistent with how the audience interprets the space. As with the concept of Saniwa, the freedom in interpreting the physical form of a Honmaru brings with it the possibilities of social dynamics derived from contemporary or potential future settings, rather than those established in historical hierarchies.

Thus, the Honmaru emerges as a frame for the negotiation of one's creative ideas, and a means by which the individual can explore who or what belongs in the social roles of this space. In the re-interpretation of assumed hierarchies tied to the commander/retainer dynamic between the agender Saniwa and their human-shaped swords, and extended further in the Saniwa's curation of residential space, the Honmaru allows for a temporal and physical transgression of social expectations, emphasising the audience's agency in determining their social bounds.

This extends beyond designing fictional space, and into how Saniwa mediate their social relationships in the physical world. Saniwa frequently frame their contributions to gathering places in terms of "my Honmaru" [弊本丸]. This frames one's creation or interpretation, whether it be a brief thought on the franchise's sword-beings or a more elaborate fan work, as being made through the individual's understanding of social space and dynamics. These interpretations, noted as belonging to "my Honmaru", are implicitly positioned in a setting full of other Honmaru, and the interpretive works of others. This designation of "my Honmaru" in a context of countless other such social settings is continued in physical sites of interaction: for example, the term is frequently used to describe one's collection of merchandise. When gathering in physical spaces such as exhibitions, events, or a simple social gathering, Saniwa often bring with them small companions [小さなお連れ様], or plush dolls made in the image of Touken Danshi. Designating these small entities as belonging to "my Honmaru" is a form of social differentiation, recognising the unique experiences of one's own companions when faced with those that belong to the social space of another Saniwa.

The in-community, common-sense use of "my Honmaru" to frame one's contributions to the fan sphere and the ownership of companion objects allows Saniwa to simultaneously assert their own interpretations of social space, while acknowledging the potentially infinite possibilities of other spaces. As such, this use of the word Honmaru does more than evoke the idea of castles, lords, and the like. It is used as a transcendent concept that bounds and mediates a social space made by autonomous Saniwa and their personal interpretations. The flexibility of the Honmaru as a defined space allows its interpretations to be taken further than the settings of other media mix forms—it is a concept that acts as framing language for fictional, virtual, and physical spaces. The Honmaru, while an intangible place without real-world presence nonetheless emerges as a way for Saniwa to explore diverse kinds of social existence, as a fictional idea that manifests in the dynamics of real-world social life.

TO ARU TOUKEN DANSHI - THE STORY OF CERTAIN TOUKEN DANSHI

Finally, I turn to the last major conceptual element of Touken Ranbu: the swords themselves. As with the "certain Honmaru" of animated series Hanamaru, the franchise's characters, called Touken Danshi [刀剣男士], are explained in terms of a particular iteration of infinitely possible beings. This makes them both character and malleable concept. Touken Danshi are the humanised form of the spirit, heart, or soul that rests within the tangible form of a sword. While Touken Danshi's character designs are overtly connected to the Touken Ranbu franchise, they have been subsequently used by Saniwa in reference to real-world spaces, objects, and experiences. This turns the character concept into one of social exploration. Touken Danshi make tangible the intangible aspects of socially emplaced and active objects. Thus, while Touken Danshi are characters of a media franchise, they can also be used to evoke and articulate the ways in which humans interact with non-human lives.

Before discussing Touken Danshi as characters of the Touken Ranbu franchise, it is necessary to understand what a sword is in the Japanese context. Readers unfamiliar with this context may be imagining the curved samurai sword made popular through film and other visual media, with its place in the hands of warriors and its use in the context of battle. This popular imagining only makes up a fraction of the Japanese sword's social and cultural presence.

The swords of my investigation, and those of the Touken Ranbu franchise, are categorised as Nihontō [日本刀 lit. 'Japanese Sword']. The term 'Japanese sword' does not refer to any sword used in Japan. It is a particular kind of object with its own specific definition. Nihontō are a legal category, designated by the law surrounding ownership of guns and blades as enacted in the post-war period: the *Jūhō Tōken-rui Tōroku Kisoku* [銃砲刀剣類登録規則] (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2019). According to this law, a Nihontō is an object that:

1) Has a shape, forging, tempering pattern, or engraving that has artistic merit, or is otherwise representative of one of Japan's traditional sword-smithing schools.

2) Has an inscription that is of documentary value.

3) Has historical or heritage value, or

4) Swords which have similar characteristics to the above, with notable craftsmanship.

By-and-large, this limits the category of Nihontō to swords made by sword-smiths of the past, or those licensed and working in traditional forms today. This excludes any bladed object made via mass-manufacture and works that are not recognised as upholding notions of craft and tradition.

This categorisation of Nihontō presents them as objects valued for their make and connection to skilled craftspeople or famed historical contexts. From this legal definition alone, we

can see that categorical English terms such as 'sword' are insufficient in communicating the varying status' and differentiations of bladed objects in the Japanese context.

A further examination of the linguistic divisions of Japan's swords reveals other forms of linguistic categorisation that do not map easily to the English-language notion of 'sword'. There are numerous terms in Japanese used to categorise swords. I here highlight ones used in Touken Ranbu, to which its fanbase, an emergent group undertaking their own learning of swords and sword lives, are familiar with. These terms are *ōtachi* [大太刀, extremely large swords], *tachi* [太刀, large swords, most commonly seen in earlier periods of Japanese history], *uchigatana* [打刀, shorter than tachi, and similar to the typical 'samurai sword'], *wakizashi* [脇差, short swords, often paired with uchigatana], and *tantō* [短刀, daggers, ranging from sizes as large as cleavers to as small as paper knives]. Also included under the 'sword' umbrella are *yari* [槍, spears] and *naginata* [薙刀, Japanese halberds], which in English terminology would be classified as polearms. Their inclusion as 'sword' indicates categorisation based not on tool-use, but in the quality of their form: the blades of yari and naginata are forged in a similar manner and by the same craftspeople as 'swords'. They are not differentiated by their use, nor are they grouped together by the ability to cut: rather, Nihontō are defined by how they has come into existence, and endured through that existence, as carefully crafted objects.

The definition of Nihontō highlights the value and presence of sword-smiths. They are the ones who, in their craft and practice, create these objects that are differentiated from those of mass manufacture and consumption. This makes Nihontō and their value attributable to particular creators, with distinct creative styles and crafting practices, separating the 'Nihontō' from other objects that have a similar shape and form.

Swords as crafted and artistic objects are further emphasised in the descriptive terms of museums and galleries. Even when an object is associated with a famous historical warrior, it is not uncommon to see its value to that warrior framed in empathetic terms. These appear frequently in exhibition promotion: swords described as 重宝 (*chōhō*, treasure), 名刀 (*meitō*, famed sword), 愛刀 (*aitō*, beloved sword), among others. The use of these emotive designations are supported in the present-day context by the use of historical documents to assert their material value. For example, the swords termed the Five Swords Under Heaven [天下五剣] are said to have their artistic, crafted qualities recognised as far back as the Muromachi Period [330's CE-1570's CE]. This factoid is repeated by institutions such as the Tokyo National Museum when highlighting particular swords in their collection. In appealing to historical authorities on artistic and cultural value, present-day social negotiators position the sword in a continuity of aesthetic appreciation, rather than their practical use (cutting). As such, the categorical value of the tangible sword—before even

considering its potential for social life—is negotiated along complex lines as to what a sword is and how it should be understood. These ideas are enmeshed in contemporary cultural discourses.

The contemporary value of objects such as Nihontō can be easily seen in museums and galleries. However, swords are also found in private ownership, in the object collections of Shines and Temples, or even shrouded and enshrined as a sacred object of these same institutions. As such, the sword's temporal location, too, influences its ability to be involved in contemporary social and cultural negotiations. It is an object encountered in the validating space of the museum display; but can also be found in other spaces with their own social constructions of value and the role of objects. Seeking out a Nihontō in the current context requires a navigation of legal, artistic, and spiritual concepts in a traversal of different tangible spaces with their own constructions of objects and social life.

It is here that I return to Touken Ranbu and its Touken Danshi. The Touken Danshi are the primary characters of the franchise, with their experiences past and present forming the stories across the original online game and its adaptations. Touken Danshi are, explicitly, swords, despite their human shape. They refer to themselves as such, and act in a manner that distinguishes them from human actors. In fact, many Saniwa protest the characterisation of Touken Ranbu as a *gijinka* [擬人化, anthropomorphic] franchise—the Touken Danshi aren't representations of the idea of a sword, but are the spirit of the sword itself transformed. Characterisations of Touken Danshi draw on their status as individual, crafted objects, similar to legal designations of Nihontō. The majority are named after an existing sword, with its own distinct name and history. Their transformation into human shape by Saniwa does not create a life, but gives a new form to the experiences and individuality of the pre-existing sword.

Touken Danshi are negotiable entities that are as diverse in their interpretation as the number of Saniwa who oversee their existence. As the similarly malleable Honmaru is evoked in the real-world by Saniwa, Touken Danshi, too, have the potential to exist outside of the franchise's fictional setting. This is often done by depicting the character image of a Touken Danshi alongside that of the tangible, real-world swords of their inspiration.

In this evocation, Touken Danshi exist as an aspect of visual communication through which Saniwa can articulate their experiences and interpretations of real-world sword encounters. There is an interest in the character, yes; but also in its status as a real-world object that has existed, and continues to exist, across time. The use of Touken Danshi images juxtaposed to their real-world counterparts is a community norm used when exploring the entirety of a sword's existence. The non-human sword's conception of life is made comprehensible through writing one's own narratives and non-fiction works staring Touken Danshi. This use of the human-shaped sword turns the character into its own kind of analytical framework, recognising the individual nature of the

tangible object in combination with an entity that can speak and feel in terms understandable to a human audience.

The use of Touken Danshi by Saniwa to comment on swords' own pasts and experiences provides an interesting addition to the concept of the object biography (Kopytoff 1986). Object biographies as proposed by Kopytoff are a means to track the movements of objects, whose exchange makes visible the changes in human social relationships. The object is emplaced with social value and social impact, as ontologically significant things of their respective contexts. However, the object biography has the potential to lose sight of the object itself, particularly when the thing is made into a means of facilitating relationships between human actors, and not recognised as its *own* actor. For example, Kopytoff (1986) puts forward the abstract idea of a car or house as objects that change in response to human social lives: but they are not framed as clear participants in this life.

Nihontō are an easy fit to the exchange and facilitation role of objects in their object biography. Their long-standing value in the Japanese context can be seen in their frequent exchange between warrior families, recorded in historical collection documents (Pitelka 2019, 111), and reinforced in the present-day when references to these documents are used as verification for the value of Nihontō (for example, the documents of sword-evaluates the Hon'Ami family, frequently displayed in sword-related exhibitions). When framed by documents of value, the sword is held passive as an object given and received, reflective of human experiences but not a holder of its own. This shifts when the sword is viewed through the lens of the Touken Danshi.

A Touken Danshi has the ability to comment on its own biography. This voice can provide alternate modes of valuing swords or understanding their exchanges. This is regularly enacted by Saniwa,when taking the Touken Danshi from the franchises narratives and emplacing them in the present-day context, surrounded by recognisable structures of contemporary life. Saniwa do this through their own narrative works, inspired by real-world places and historical events. They also frequently make illustrated guides to history or historical places accompanied by the comments of Touken Danshi, providing commentary on the sites and events depicted. They even juxtapose images of Touken Danshi directly over photographs or other images of sword exhibitions, sites of display, or places with significance to a sword's past.

As an example of how Touken Danshi center object biographies on the object's own experiences, let us consider the sword Higekiri [髭切], also called Onikirimaru [鬼切丸]. This sword has a biography recorded in Japanese literature: it is a treasure of the Minamoto family, and was present in their rise to power. This is recoded in the *Tsurugi no Maki* [剣之巻, sword scroll], a middle ages [中世] addition to the *Heike Monogatari* [平家物語]. This tale outlines the sword's initial crafting by skilled sword-smiths of historical Kyoto, and goes on to highlights its role in a

number of supernatural conflicts and human social exchanges, where it accumulates new terms of reference for itself with every feat it accomplishes. This sword, when displayed by custodians such as Kyoto's Kitano Tenmangu Shrine, is contextualised by the events of this narrative and the famed humans who wielded it. Touken Ranbu's Touken Danshi Higekiri draws on aspects of this biography in his characterisation. He calls himself a treasure of the Minamoto family, aligning his in-franchise past with the famous stories of historical literature. He is forgetful, particularly when it comes to the many names he has been given over the years. He has a close relationship with his 'brother sword' [兄弟刀] Hizamaru, whose past is also outlined in the *Tsurugi no maki*.

The voice of a Touken Danshi has been used by institutional custodians to convey the sword's past and associated value more directly to visitors: Touken Danshi Higekiri's voice actor can be heard narrating the history of the sword, when visiting one of its limited displays by its holding institution Kitano Tenmangu. However, this information is provided in a factual style and with a heavy emphasis on events of the past, holding the sword to its historicised context.

Saniwa's use of Touken Danshi allows for an expression of the feelings that inhabit tangible swords outside of the directly historical context. Saniwa visitors to Kitano Tenmangu have later depicted their visits through images of Touken Danshi Higekiri sitting politely in the case that holds his tangible sword form. He vocalises thankfulness to his visitors, or comments on those who have come to see him. This use of the Touken Danshi directly places the sword and its intangible possibilities in the present, taking it beyond the confines of its historical biography. He represents the physical, social, and emotional presence swords maintain in contemporary human social spaces.

Outside of the institution, Saniwa invoke Touken Danshi as conduits to build on existing object biographies. This can be seen in the attention they bring to events outside of the object's most famous owners and exploits. For Higekiri, this is evident in Saniwa attention to the Shimotsuki Incident of 1285 [霜月騒動], a civil conflict that occurred after the time period covered by the *Tsurugi no Maki*. Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— referenced this event in 2020. However, Saniwa had already, and for many years prior, explored the incident and the potential impacts it might have on the swords that were present for it. Saniwa recognise the event in commemorative social media hashtags on its anniversary [#11 月 17 日は霜月騒動の日, #November11Is ShimotsukiDay], where they explore the tensions and traumas of violence through creative works depicting Touken Danshi Higekiri. Hashtags such as this, populated and promoted by Saniwa, have ongoing potential to connect other actors to the exploration of historical events and the object's role alongside those of human warriors. Using the framing capacity of Touken Danshi provides a means for actors on the periphery of discussions in martial history—such as female Saniwa—to negotiate the impact and representation of historical conflicts.

In this manner, the Touken Danshi is not an exclusive character of licensed franchise actors: he is a conceptual tool of exploration, both of contemporary social spaces and as a means to examine the past experiences and actions the sword has been witness to. This exploration is significant to the negotiation of social lives. The abilities of Saniwa to utilise Touken Danshi as vocalisations of lived experiences contributes to the malleability and communicative power of fan-negotiated media forms. While licensed producers present one form of narrative, Saniwa present alternates. In their exploration of these alternate possibilities, they in turn highlight experiences that are outside of mainstream negotiations. This may be in commemorating events such as the Shimotsuki Incident, or in considering how the object of the sword itself grapples with its existence in the present. The Touken Danshi is not merely the character representation of an object designated Nihontō: it is a means by which the socially-embedded life of objects can be articulated in a manner understood by the human experience.

POP-CULTURE AS INSPIRATION, NOT EXPLANATION

This is not an investigation of media that seeks to analyse its narratives or the choices of its producers. It is one that examines the ways in which popular media is included in contemporary social negotiations when it is taken by audiences and used outside of the immediate narrative context. The branches of the Japanese media mix are not simply a means to construct and promote cross- and trans-media products, but present the possibility of creative exploration for audiences that extends beyond the realm of popular media consumption. In the case of Touken Ranbu, this franchise provides a language-framework of words and images that are taken by 'consumers' to other spaces of social negotiation.

I examine Touken Ranbu not for the direct impact of its producers on Japan's sword cultures, but in how the manipulation of its conceptual elements has allowed the audience themselves to impact on the evaluation of swords as both historical objects and inhabitants of the social space. This has additional impact in the questioning of gendered norms and expectations when it comes to historical content. If those who are seeking to understand, explore, and care for swords are outside of the assumed norm of middle aged and older men, the re-emergence of interest in swords must also consider the position these new actors occupy in contemporary Japanese social space. In the following chapters, I ask that the reader keep in mind that the negotiations and explorations of the bounds of social living are being conducted by a base of largely women actors, present in their own social community and with their own terms of identification that manipulate the expectations of socialised and historical hierarchies.

Touken Ranbu provides, in the current context, a set of concepts and clear vocabulary that actors can use in communicating amongst each other. In the next chapter, I expand on the framing

of swords in other narrative contexts, and amongst other non-human social actors who have asserted their living status. The social realm negotiated and made flexible through the liberal manipulation of popular media in the present has also undergone similar negotiations in the past: and, through this, we can see how the framings of Saniwa bring forward existing ideas of objects as living entities with their own life biographies that contain more than reflections of human sociality.

3.2 Anthropomorphism and Animate Non-Humans

"You've noticed by now, haven't you? …That I'm not human."

あなたはもう気づいているのでしょう…私が人間ではないということ。

"I have! But there's no need to worry—after all, I'm not human either."

ああ、だが気にすることではない、俺も人間ではないからな。

So goes a conversation between Touken Danshi Mikazuki Munechika and the spirit of his former owner Kodai-in in *Muden: Yūgure no Samurai* [无伝 夕紅の士], Stage Play: Touken Ranbu's 11th production (Nitro Plus 2021). Two human-shapes stand on stage, each asserting their non-humanness. Nonetheless, they speak of their past, their present, and their intent for the future. These non-humans—in one case, an entity that formerly had human status—still recognise each other as socially embedded and alive actors, each able to influence the events around them.

Swords are things manufactured. They do not move or breathe as other non-humans do. How, then, can they be 'alive'? To answer this question, I consider the creative language used in fictional works such as the aforementioned stage play alongside the various means by which anthropologists and other social scientists have analysed the qualities that make a thing into a social entity. This is a transformation of some*thing* to some*one*, enacted through a relational social ontology. These relational qualities involve emotional and intangible modes of connection that reach across the boundaries of existence. As such, concepts such as 'life' and 'living' emerge from an ontological, rather than biological, context, that does not have prerequisites such as a particular kind of physical form (Bird-David 1999, S70).

'Swordness', when explored through an ontological lens, involves both the presentation of the sword and its construction in the language of other social actors such as Saniwa. By positioning this swordness as an aspect of social life, we can see more clearly the relationships between human and non-human actors occurring in contemporary Japan. As a result, this examination of relational social engagements between humans and non-humans has the potential to bring even the manufactured object into the realm of animate, social persons.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In the framing of 'life' as an aspect of a relational ontology, it is important to draw a distinction between assumptions of anthropomorphism—that is, of a non-human being passive subject to projections of humanness—and approaches that recognise agency in the non-human. While any approach to the non-human is enacted, by necessity, from the position of the human, an adherence to the projections of anthropomorphism as the primary way of engaging with non-human

things has the danger of denying autonomy and agency in anything that does not fit the human category. An anthropocentric reading, particularly as it comes to objects, may hinder full comprehension of the relational social standing of non-humans and their own existences.

Anthropomorphism is a concept with its own ontological origins. It is a means by which those of certain ontological backgrounds understand life in the non-human (Gell 1998). Anthropomorphism is commonly described as a projection of, or a human-based observation of, something non-human having human-*like* qualities (Allen and May 2015; Waytz and Epley 2010; Kim and McGill 2011, 95). In its use, there is implicit understanding that what makes something socially 'alive' is tied to how its experiences can be understood in human terms by a human actor. This comes at the possible denial of any ways to explain life or social experiences that are perceived to be non-human, or incompatible with human experiences. Even when considering an expanded sense of anthropomorphism, away from pure projection of human qualities, the human experience is prioritised as a process of "transformation of the non-human to the human" (Wayts & Elpey 2010, 220). This idea of transformation into human, paired with the idea of a thing being seen to have 'human-like' qualities, can lead to assumptions that an entity is only socially alive when there is a human around to make it so.

Anthropomorphism is an approach to the non-human that removes its agency and abilities, and renders sociality as an exclusively human activity. It is here that we can see anthropomorphism's own ontological underpinnings, alongside a recognition that agency is, itself, an aspect of life subject to social mediation (Janet 2006, 74). This may be more easily understood in the anthropomorphic 'making human' of animals, rather than of manufactured objects such as swords.

Research of animal behaviour deals not only with the animal subjects, but also involves the negotiation of accepted and unaccepted modes of analysis that vary between humans of differing cultural and ontological backgrounds. One example comes from the field of primatology. In this field, anecdotes have been used as a means of analysis for primates social life: and, subsequently, criticised for unnecessarily anthropomorphising these subjects (Ramsay & Teichroeb 2019, 683). These criticisms argue that framing primate behaviour in terms of anecdotal memories is contrary to research standards of scientific objectivity. Such a critique holds with it two assumptions. One of these assumptions lies with the notion that non-human life can only be understood through terms of human projection. When anecdotal analyses are denied for their anthropomorphism, it is with the underlying idea that declaring behaviours in primates as social is to consider them as (or to make them) human, rather than animals. Using anthropomorphism as a critique of primate social analysis discourages work that considers the primate subject's own actions, and runs the risk of dismissal purely on the assumption that sociality can only be understood through human terms.

This leads to the second assumption present in critiques of anecdotal primatology: that of an 'objective' basis of scientific analysis. Denying the validity of supposedly anthropomorphic analysis due to a lack of objectivity has the added risk of denying contributions from researchers who do not consider sociality to be a strictly human trait. Primatologists have, in the past, dismissed contributions by non-Western researchers whose differing ontological backgrounds and use of anecdotal analysis was deemed to contain inappropriate levels of anthropomorphism (Ramsay & Teichroeb 2019, 687; Candea 2012, 112). This dismissal, supported by the assumption of scientific objectivity, is based on a specific set of ontological norms—that is, those of Western-centric researchers from wealthy nations (Ramsay & Teichroeb 2019, 687). The dismissal of any work deemed anthropomorphic inadvertently categorises the sociality of primates as something that can be measured in an objective manner, denying their animate status while also denying alternate approaches to determining what is and is not socially alive.

Anthropomorphism may appear a common sense approach to distinguishing between the human and non-human: after all, the human understands human experiences, and should not assume that other biological entities have those experiences. However, this does not mean researchers should abandon any attempt to understand the non-human experience. Nor should we render it entirely in terms of the non-human being made human.

The field of meerkat research, like that of primatology, grapples with the notion of anthropomorphism in its analysis of animal behaviour. Volunteers at the Kalahari Meerkat Project were cautioned to be 'scientific'—and thus, not 'anthropomorphising'—towards the animals they cared for (Candea 2012, 128). However, as Candea (2012, 126) writes, there are consequences to such warnings. By assuming all descriptors of meerkat sociality align with human sociality, there is an implicit denial of the meerkat's own capacity to live together in cooperation. Young meerkat researchers, as of yet not entirely entrenched in the traditions of their field, have observed this cooperation, and explained it in terms of agency (Candea 2012, 124). The recognition of the animal subject's agency is a vital difference between anthropomorphic assumptions and those that seek to understand the non-human for its own social capacity. Should volunteers and emerging researchers continue to be warned against searching for this agency under the criticism of anthropomorphism, meerkats and other biologically alive entities will in turn continue to be denied recognition of their own social abilities.

I critique anthropomorphism not to deny its validity, but to highlight the ways in which it impacts on our understanding of human and non-human relationships. This has impact beyond the realm of research. Anthropomorphism, in its 'making human' of the non-human, assumes sociality as tied to human social structures. As a consequence, it has an additional danger of rendering any

space occupied by a human as that belonging to human social norms. This, too, denies non-humans their agency of existence.

In an account of a nearly-fatal encounter with a crocodile in northern Australia, writer Val Plumwood expressed frustration at how her experiences were framed by media outlets (Calarco 2014, 424). Despite her entering a natural space without human structures, accounts of her experience rendered the crocodile as an outsider. In the media, her encounter was one of a violent attack against one with value and agency—the human—by one without reason or logic—the crocodile. The crocodile was not seen as a living being of its inhabited space, but an irrational entity that has attacked a rational one. Plumwood argued against this framing. Rather than the crocodile entering into the human realm and 'becoming human' (anthropomorphism), Plumwood positioned her own entering into the crocodile's inhabited space as an act of 'becoming meat'. The crocodile, in its own context, has its own way of rationalising entities. This is an unsettling of anthropocentric and anthropomorphic analysis of human/non-human interactions, where the crocodile's own agency had re-defined a human's existence to one of meat (Calarco 2014, 425-7). Instead of the thing becoming human, the human has become the thing.

With the above examples, I have sought to demonstrate the limitations of anthropomorphic and anthropocentric framings in explaining human and non-human relationships. Animals are biological, organic entities that have the same physical capacity for life as humans. However, despite this closeness, they are regularly rendered into 'things' through the denial of their agency. If this is so prevalent in the context of animal sociality, it serves to look closer at how we frame our relationships with inorganic non-humans.

Kim & McGill (2011), when explaining the conversations had between a player and gambling machines, describes the interaction as a projection of humanness to the non-human machine. Despite being a conversation partner, the machine is not granted the possibility of agency, and is instead rendered into an entity subject to human action. These machines are things to be acted on, rather than partners to converse with. This analysis lies close to explanations of non-humans as subject to the anthropomorphic, "natural tendency to read human characteristics in the non-human object or animal" (Allen & May 2015). However, does this positioning fully explain the emotional and relational qualities present in conversations with the non-human? Does it allow for avenues of investigation into the ways a conversational machine is differentiated from a non-conversational one? The gambling machines in this study are not viewed as objects of relational potential, but as ones of human projection. The ability to be social is kept distinctly separate from any sense of agency in the non-human.

Anthropomorphism arises as an explanation for *why* a human sees sociality in non-humans. To answer the question of why the player talks to the machine, it may be more appropriate, and

more fruitful in an exploration of diverse relational ontologies, to also ask *how* a human comes into this social relationship. Asking 'how' one comes into social contact with non-humans holds more flexibility in analytical approach regarding how relationships are made, maintained, and recognised between human and non-human actors.

Questioning how one comes into relational engagements with non-humans expands beyond anthropomorphic and anthropocentric assumptions. This is inclusive of socially embedded, ontological engagements without necessitating that they take place in human-defined realms. It further recognises social potential without holding it to human projection, opening up the spaces, contexts, and dynamics of interaction beyond the anthropocentric experience. It includes not only how the human sees the 'thing', but how the 'thing' might potentially see the human. Finally, by questioning the direct means of interaction between humans and non-humans, we are afforded a better position to consider the social position of the inanimate, inorganic, and manufactured entity, by allowing for the possibility that such beings have their own agency beyond that which is projected onto them.

By moving away from anthropomorphic readings, I do not dismiss the role the human mind plays in filtering and making sense of social interactions. Rather, I seek to expand on the analysis of this 'making sense', by including the possibility of a relationship with the non-human on its own, non-human, terms. It is here that I return to the object of the sword.

Japan's swords are material, inorganic, and manufactured objects. However, this does not preclude their potential for attaining a socially-embedded existence. I argue that swords do not have their relational and emotive qualities projected onto them as a static object subject to human manipulations. Instead, I present them as their own kind of social entity existing in relationship with humans. This allows for a deeper understanding of what it means to be 'alive' without necessitating a 'making human' of the object. Swords are instead made social on terms that allow for the non-human to retain its non-human qualities.

TOUKEN DANSHI: HUMAN SHAPED, BUT NOT HUMAN

The notion of anthropomorphism frequently reared its head when sharing my in-progress findings to those without a connection to Japan's contemporary sword culture. This was, perhaps, due to the presence of the human-shaped Touken Danshi, the protagonists of the Touken Ranbu franchise. A surface-level examination of these human-shaped character designs seem to indicate that the revival of interest in Japan's swords, driven by women, is derived from the human-based relationships one might have with the characters. As such, before explaining how sword-shaped swords are made social and into socially-embedded persons, I will first address concerns that Touken Ranbu's characters, by necessity, makes this an anthropomorphic phenomenon.

It seems simple to connect the human-shaped Touken Danshi to the anthropomorphic notion of making something non-human into a human. Each Touken Danshi is based on a real-world sword, and thus it could be argued that they are an anthropomorphisation of this inspiring sword. I do not argue against this potential point of view, but rather, against the reaction I was met with when I offered alternate explanations. Particularly memorable is an instance where my conversation partner, who was not familiar with Japanese sword culture, insisted that I must be mistaken in describing Touken Danshi as a 'personification' of the sword. This term, after all, implies a thing is 'made a social person', which is a quality that they could not see as applicable to an inanimate thing.

It is for this reason that I take this space to explain the ways that Touken Danshi, despite their appearance, are understood as being *swords*. They are not a projection or a rationalisation of humanity, but a transformation of the sword and all of its social capabilities into a human shape. They remain, in essence, swords. Indeed, the very ability for a sword to become a Touken Danshi relies on intangible qualities that they already possess in their 'inanimate' forms. These qualities were met with an easy acceptance and explanations from my interlocutors who were located firmly within the social dynamics of Japan's emerging sword cultures, and faced none of the anthropocentric push-back encountered elsewhere.

The difference between projection of human qualities and transformation into human shape may seem minimal, but is significant examining non-humans beyond anthropomorphism. This can be seen in the assertion by my interlocutors, occupying various social positions and roles in the current sword context, that swords remain swords despite the shape they occupy. When speaking of real-world swords and Touken Danshi, my interlocutors often used direct terms of personification, such as allocations of gender by my English-speaking interlocutors or the use of verbs indicating living things for my Japanese-speaking ones. They have also used abstract descriptions of emotional engagements and relationships had by swords. These objects remain swords. There is no mistaking the object for human, nor do the humans involved with them cache their explanations in 'human-like' terms.

How, then, do we explain Touken Danshi and their role in the sword phenomenon? They are, overtly, fictional characters. However, I argue that when drawn into real-world interactions, these characters serve as a conduit for expressing the non-human attributes of swords to human actors.

Swords are objects with intangible qualities that stand distinct from a human existence. Touken Danshi, despite their appearances, retain these qualities. This idea is present in Touken Ranbu itself. Touken Danshi are entities whose "spirits are awakened from the memories within sleeping objects" [眠っている物の想い、心を目覚めさせ] (Nitro Plus 2015). The object in question—the sword—has aspects of life in its memories, spirits, and the ability to 'sleep', that pre-

exist its human shape. 'Swordness' is conveyed not in the form of the being, but in how it relates to, acts on, and is acted upon by its surrounding social world.

In the original online game, Touken Danshi are maintained with mechanics that imitate the maintenance of a sword. New characters are attained first through a forging of their sword-body, before they are made into Touken Danshi by the player Saniwa. Existence in sword-form is a necessary prerequisite for the human-shaped one. When Touken Danshi are injured in battle, they are sent to be repaired [手入れ], a process accompanied by tools and movements associated with polishing and maintaining Japanese swords. As well as this, Touken Danshi do not die, but break [折れる]. An unlucky Saniwa witnessing the loss of their Touken Danshi is met with an animatic of their human form shattering, just as a metal one might. Touken Danshi can even force their own re-transformation into sword-shape, to be wielded in a traditional sense. Touken Danshi's fundamental swordness is further asserted by the language used by Saniwa, regardless of the shape they occupy. For example, Saniwa use the Japanese counter for swords, *furi* [振り], rather than that for humans [*nin*, 人], to refer to Touken Danshi collectively.

In this manner, Touken Danshi retain qualities of swords. And, regardless of their shape, they have the capability to interact with other social entities. The transformation of a Touken Danshi is thus incompatible with assumptions of anthropomorphism, as they relate to a thing being "made [socially] human". When a sword is in a human form, it continues to explain and experience its social life in sword-based terms. What is transformed is not the sword's ability or agency to engage in social relationships, but the form that allows for this agency to interact directly with the human social realm.

Entering the human social realm does not mean that a thing must become human. This is evident in the ways Touken Danshi experience the human realm through a state of learning social structures, and their undertaking of this learning with their own kind of agency. While this is largely told through the fictional lens of Touken Ranbu, it provides a creative means of understanding non-human social life as it engages with the human one. One such act of learning that clearly differentiates the Touken Danshi's existence from projections of anthropomorphism is in the acclimatisation to existence in a human body. In licensed and fan-made narratives, newly manifested Touken Danshi are frequently depicted being given a run-down on the needs of their human bodies by their seniors. They are reminded that they now need to eat, rest, and engage physically with the world in a way unfamiliar to the life experiences of a sword-shaped form. Their internal, animate consciousness has been maintained across sword and human forms, but their embodied experiences are now entirely different.

"It's… strange, here," [なんかさあ、ここはヘンだ] laments Musical: Touken Ranbu's Kashuu Kiyomitsu, indicating to where a human heart would be, as he struggles with how his emotions are felt in a human body. He understands emotions—recognising the impetus of his current discomfort as worry for his fellow swords—but is unfamiliar with their new biological embodiment. He concludes that "it's troublesome… having a heart," [厄介だよな、心って] (Nitro Plus, 2016). Similar vocalisations of unfamiliarity with the experiences of human bodies occur throughout the franchise. At times, this is even used to highlight the fact that, despite humans and swords occupying different tangible forms, the human and non-human nonetheless engage in emotional similarities. "[You'll have to explain]. Unfortunately, I'm not human" [あいにく人間ではないものだ] is the curt, sarcastic response of Stage Play: Touken Ranbu's Yamanbagiri Chougi to the human Kuroda Kanbei, bristling at the accusation that his status as a non-human means that he does not understand empathy (Nitro Plus 2022). Rather than being anthropomorphised, these are entities that hold distinct differences to humans, while nonetheless having qualities that allow for mutual understanding with the human and the creation of relational engagements.

Social interaction is not tied to shape, but to the willingness to engage with these shared social qualities. A Touken Danshi's human shape makes its incursion into the human realm more manageable, but is not a strict requirement. This re-contextualises the boundaries of physical form to delineate what is and is not a valid living entity. Objects without voice or apparent independent movement are nonetheless recognised for their communicative ability. In this manner, the social recognition of a sword and its subsequent relational engagements is defined by comprehension, rather than their physical shape.

This, too, is apparent in the narratives of Touken Ranbu. Musical: Touken Ranbu's production *Kisho Hongi* [葵咲本紀] plays with the notion of comprehension between human and non-human entities, as the sword-shaped Inaba Gou interacts with both its human owner Yūki Hideyasu and a sword-turned-Touken-Danshi, Kotegiri Gou. Still in its sword shape, Inaba Gou can communicate with both a human and a transformed non-human due to their emotional attachments and relational ties (Nitro Plus 2019). This occurs in the fictional narrative and is accepted by the audience without extreme ontological disruption, appealing to a sense of commonality in regards to emotional existence had by human and non-human actors.

The fictional Touken Danshi can not be explained as a simple process of anthropomorphism, if he retains and expresses his sword qualities. It is similarly inadequate to explain the real-world use of Touken Danshi imagery in these terms, especially when these images are employed by Saniwa to comment on experiences from a non-human perspective. Instead, I propose that images of Touken Danshi are part of the communicative language of contemporary sword actors. Saniwa's

employment of a Touken Danshi's human form continues the pre-existing sentience and animate agency of the sword it is made from, and is used to recall and voice the sword's life. Who owned them? What collections were they in, and what other swords did they share these spaces with? How have they experienced key events of Japan's past? In using Touken Danshi to explore these questions, we can see a desire by Saniwa to understand the *who* of a sword, and its human and non-human social networks of the past and present.

Saniwa explore these ideas through their creative works. This is particularly evident in works that depict Touken Danshi in exhibition halls and object displays. This is a use of the sword's human form to explain the contemporary role of swords and their social settings, that is, the places where they can be socially encountered. These works take the Touken Danshi from Touken Ranbu's historical fiction framing and place them in faithful reproductions of current day settings. In doing so, they make visible the intangible and social qualities of swords that can not be seen by the human eye in contemporary spaces. Saniwa have a number of ways to describe the presence of a Touken Danshi in its contemporary exhibition space. Two common terms describe them as *rei* [霊] or *tamashii* [魂]—the 'spirit' of a sword, occupying the intangible plane of existence. Paired with this spirit is the *hontai* [本体], or the tangible body of the sword that sits in its display case.

The position of Touken Danshi in works of Saniwa as the 'spirit' of a sword implies that, as human bodies hold human spirits, sword bodies, too, are capable of holding sword spirits. The existence of the human-shaped Touken Danshi does not diminish the sword's status as a bladed object. Both the human-shaped Touken Danshi and the sword-shaped artefact are aspects of a singular conscious entity.

The framing of Touken Ranbu, and the form of the Touken Danshi, draws heavily on intangible aspects of life. Swords are not, in this phenomenon, understood as projections of human experiences, nor are their social interactions restricted to human-shaped actors. To characterise the transformation of a sword to a Touken Danshi as anthropomorphism is an anthropocentric approach that overlooks how the socially significant aspects of being—experiences, memories, and communicative comprehension—are understood by actors in this context as belonging to non-humans. A Touken Danshi is not an object made human-like. Its transformation is closer to relational personification, where the sword's attributes of sociality are recognised by humans as belonging to relatable social persons.

In the following sections, I will delve further into the notion of non-human personhood: first, by examining the context of non-humans in Japan, and secondly, through the particular ways swords are made individual social entities, with the implications this holds for the non-human in contemporary society.

ANIMATE BEINGS AND SOCIAL PERSONS

Anthropomorphism is not the only way to explain the sociality of non-human beings. The notion of social personhood has long been used in anthropology to examine the relational dynamics between humans, and between humans and non-humans. I bring the question of swords and their life status to this existing body of work. I explain the Japanese sword in terms of social personhood to highlight the agency of non-human entities: that is, whether the impetus for social engagement lies entirely in the human, or if it can be provoked by the non-human as well. Social personhood recognises the potential of agency in non-humans by focusing not on biological form, but how actors are emplaced in the social realm.

Alongside the notion of social personhood is that of the animitic ontology, or a worldview where 'life' and 'agency' exist in realms outside of the human. This animism is not that of early theorists such as Tylor (1873). It is one that has developed alongside the goal of demonstrating ontological differences, particularly as they relate to interactions between humans and the non-humans we share our physical world with. My use of animism is not to argue that there is a distinctly and ethnically bound form of spiritualism at play: it is to highlight ontological possibilities aside from anthropomorphism, as they apply to the recognition of social life in non-humans.

"In the animitic ontology," writes Ingold (2006), "beings do not simply occupy the world, they *inhabit* it". If 'occupation' of the world is a physical presence, then 'inhabiting' may be the social one. Beings that inhabit are able to relate to each other, creating and recognising the emotive ties, experiences, and relationships that formulate a lived experience. In the context of my own investigation, swords do not merely exist in their gathering places: they are an inhabitant both tangibly in their cases and collections and intangibly through their engagements with human visitors.

The animitic notion of inhabiting recognises beings as active in the relationships they hold with other social entities. I argue that this trait is not exclusive to Japan's swords, but that swords are merely one kind of non-human that has recently re-emerged as a relational actor with humans. To fully investigate this emergent phenomenon, it would be beneficial to first consider the ways other non-humans have made their presence known in the Japanese context, and how their existence extends beyond mere "occupation" of the world as inhabitants with the status of social persons.

ANIMALS AS NON-HUMAN PERSONS

I begin this consideration of non-human persons, as I did with the notion of anthropomorphism, with other biologically alive beings. Animism, despite its controversial origins, has in recent years undergone a re-examination. Japanese scholars have contributed to the re-

evaluation of the term, particularly in pushing against the strict human/non-human (or non-agent) binary in the analysis of animal and nature beings. This binary, argues Hirota (2021), is derived from ontologies that have a social distance between human and nature beings. This distance should not be presumed as existing in all ontological contexts.

Hirota (2021) uses the example of fox transformations in Japanese folklore to argue against the default separation of the human and animal person. These transformations change the fox from an animal shape to a human one as they interact with the human realm. In the animitic perspective, this change is one of form, and not of substance. The fox remains a fox, despite its shape, and in turn its agency and social potential remain as belonging to a non-human entity. Analysis of this and other Japanese folk tales of non-humans shifts from anthropocentric questions, such as "why is the fox seen as human", to one that recognises social emplacement: "how does the fox *engage* with the human?".

If 'life' emerges from social relationships, then the ability of the non-human to engage in these relationships should be adequately examined. The fox, whether or not it currently wears a human shape, inhabits the social realm. It exists as both a biologically animate entity and a social one, recognised through its abilities to intervene in the human realm and interact with its inhabitants.

Similar to Japan's foxes, Fortes (1966) describes animal entities as possessing social potential through the substance of their 'spirit', or an intangible quality that transcends the physical differentiation of beings (Fortes 1966, Morris 1994, 129). The Tallensi in West Africa relate to these kinds of nature beings that possess a spirit, interacting with them as co-inhabitants of the social realm (Fortes 1966, 14). As with Hirota's fox transformations, the qualities that enable social relations between humans and non-humans in the Tallensi context is based on the substance of a being, and not its physical form. For the Tallensi, this manifests in the nature being's presence in human kinship dynamics and social history, intertwining the experiences of a non-human spirit with the social realm without requiring it to be understood or defined as human (Fortes 1966, 14). Thus, we see an ontology that does not divide beings as 'human' or 'non-human', but one that designates personhood based on a spirit's social involvement.

The terminology of a social 'person' is not interchangeable with 'human'. This use of 'person' designates valid actors in dynamic social relationships. As a relational designation, the recognition of one's personhood has allowed for the negotiation of human social. For example, negotiating and designating personhood in the Nayaka people's relational epistemology creates significant, socially important human actors (Bird-David 1999, 69). Inversely, the negotiations of personhood can remove a human's social validity and render them into a thing or commodity, such as in the process of transforming a human person into a slave (Koppytoff 1986, 84-85). In these

cases, being a human is not a requisite for being a person: in fact, even a human entity can be denied personhood.

The differentiation of personed and non-personed entities extends to non-human actors. Returning to Fortes (1966, 15), the animals recognised by the Tallensi as having a social spirit are barred from human consumption. These animals have been differentiated from those used for food by being drawn into social relation to humans: therefore, they cannot be eaten. Their non-personed counterparts lack the recognised qualities of social habitation, and are able to be eaten without concern. Designations of personhood are thus a means by which social life is mediated, negotiated, and made in relation to intangible qualities of living.

Becoming a person is a social, and not biological, process. As such, personed non-humans are able to become participants in the negotiations and relational dynamics of the animate realm. Personhood, in combination with an animitic framework, allows for a holistic examination of the ways in which non-human beings are made and un-made as inhabitants of the social realm.

I return here to the nature beings of Japanese folklore. These nature beings inhabit their stories as social agents. They regularly have 'real-world' counterparts: foxes, cranes, spiders, and tanuki are frequent personed agents in these tales, appearing alongside fantastical beasts such as the water-bearing kappa or the various mountain demons that appear throughout Japanese storytelling. These entities, regardless of their real-world or fantastical origin, interact with humans as they participate in the human realm. While they enter into social relationships with humans, they are not precluded from having their own, non-human social realm. These are entities who transcend boundaries between the assumed animal and the assumed human, acting with their own inherent, and not projected, power as a social agent.

There are many possible tales of non-human incursions into the human realm to examine, however, it would be apt to consider an example that also includes swords. The Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku [文楽 puppet theatre] play *The Kokaji* [小鍛冶, The Blacksmith] is one such story. It goes as follows: the renown sword-smith Sanjo Munechika has been tasked with forging a sword for the Emperor, but struggles with the task. As he works near Kyoto's Fushimi-Inari Shrine, a fox of the shrine takes on a human form to assist him. The sword that they forge together is called Kogitsunemaru [小狐丸], or little fox.

Swords are commonly attributed to a single smith, however, the act of forging is a collaborative one. In this instance, rather than the help of his assistants, Sanjo Munechika works with a non-human entity—a fox—to forge Kogitsunemaru. The fox has taken on a human-shaped guise to participate in the forging process. Nonetheless, it remains substantially a fox, and is recognised in the name of the sword they forged together. The fox's participation in this story comes under its own agency. It has undertaken its own transformation to interact with the human

realm. It is not anthropomorphised, but is an independently existing entity that transcends its normative realm to enter into a social relationship with a human.

The foxes of Japanese folklore, it may be argued, are literary inhabitants as much as they are real-world ones. Nonetheless, there are other examples of animal beings having their personhood negotiated as they come in and out of human social realms. This once again highlights the dynamic nature of personhood and its designation.

Shir-Certesh (2012) writes of the making and unmaking of animal persons in the Israeli context, where family pets are subject to changing dynamics of the family home. The animal being, entering the human realm, is at times considered a valid social entity as a fellow family member: however, it can just as easily be denied a place in this realm when changes occur in the inhabited contexts, such as with the introduction of a human child (Shir-Certesh 2012, 429). Wild animals, too, are subject to ontological negotiations of personhood. Wrye (2009) highlights the diverse responses to bear activist Timothy Treadwell's interactions with the bears he considered 'pets'. The largely negative reactions from the wider public reveal, in the broader human realm, a perceived inability for certain kinds of 'animal' to inhabit the same social realm as humans and pets.

Nonetheless, in the direct social context of Treadwell and his bears, he treated them in social terms and as social entities (Wrye 2009, 1037). Social personhood does not exist on a binary of the human/non-human social realm, but rather, is a process of that reveals the ways existence is determined by an ontological recognition of what is and is not a valid actor. In one realm, the bear is incapable of being granted social life. In another, it has this status. The differentiation lies in the ways relationships are had, recognised, and reinforced by fellow social inhabitants, rather than its shape or form.

Thus, I argue that personhood and the animitic recognition of life is not a categorically stable designation, but one that is influenced by a vast number of viewpoints, situations, and rationalisations of interactions. It is a lens through which the incredible fluidity of social life is made apparent. With this recognition of how the bounds of what is and is not a living social entity operates in this state of flux, I turn now to the status of non-biological non-humans, and the way that objects can also be inhabitants of the social realm.

OBJECT-PERSONS AND TSUKUMOGAMI

I have thus far introduced the concept of social personhood as a means by which 'life' is determined by social actors. I now turn to how personhood can apply to life in material things, whether they be made by natural forces or are deliberately crafted by human hands, and how new considerations of animism can further expand our understanding of social life. As animals can become animal beings, material things can become object beings through the recognition of their

internal, intangible substance. They should not automatically denied a sense of life, despite their apparently inanimate forms.

Material object beings, despite lacking organic signifiers of life, have the ability to provoke emotional and sensory reactions. In the animitic ontology these reactions signify potential non-human life. One example lies in the personification of the wind and weather, forces that act upon human senses and are embodied in life experiences despite lacking a tangible form (Ingold 2020). As with the shape-shifting fox, these disembodied natural occurrences have the potential to transform, or become embodied, in order to interact with humans. This highlights how it is the perceived substance of the entity, and not its default form, that evokes a sense of life.

The embodiment of a non-human entity does not in itself need to be visibly interactive. It can manifest in other ways, signifying the being's presence through human sensory reactions. For example, the shell-trumpets of Mayan architecture may have transformed the buildings themselves into animate beings when played upon by the wind and rain, or when awoken with human breath (Harrison-Buck 2012, 75). Life is here made eminent, visible, and comprehensible by the human, while retaining non-human characteristics and a non-human form.

I describe these entities as material object beings to differentiate their physical nature from that of biological entities. Material or object beings nonetheless hold intangible qualities and potential life. As such, while I note their physical differences, I do not hold them to this material or manufactured state. There are cases where material and manufactured things serve as the physical manifestation of intangible sociality. In these cases, it may be that the material thing is a means of transgressing the boundaries of human and non-human, or tangible and intangible, realms. The transformation of Australian Indigenous Warlpiri ancestor spirits into objects are one example where the personhood of a 'thing' transcends the boundaries of tangible and intangible realms (Munn 1970 in Povinelli 1995, 513). Povinelli (1995) extends this from the Warlpiri to the Belyuen women of Australia's Cox Peninsula, who "…do not assume that transformation, appropriation, or intentionality are attributes that reside either uniquely or most fully in the human realm" (513). While there are debates as to the interpretations of Aboriginal interactions with non-human entities, particularly as it relates to 'things' of the landscape (Peterson 2011), it remains that there are qualities to tangible and intangible living that are not adequately explained if 'life' must occur in a human body.

For example, stone objects in the indigenous Andean context are recognised as non-human beings with the non-human ability to facilitate communication across human and non-human boundaries (Sillar 2009; Allen 2016). These stones, with their shapes made by natural erosion or acted on by human hands, are simply one kind of social participant in an animitic ontology that includes humans, animals, and even the landscape itself (Sillar 2009, 374). This world, as with that

of the Warlpiri, is made up not only of the human realm and the animal one, but has the potential to recognise other kinds of entities with their own form and function. This is made visible through the recognition of the thing's sociality, separating it from inanimate or non-personed entities.

This is not to say that every object is alive. As with animals and the negotiation of their personhood, object beings are differentiated from those without the prerequisites for a social existence. For example, the stone objects of the Andean context are made into persons by being brought into the human home, and made residents of a socially-recognised place of habitation (Allen 2018). They exist as socially alive through this relationship with humans (Sillar 2009), and are thus recognised for their animate, living status. They are contrasted to other objects that are not given a place in the inhabited social realm, which remain 'non-alive', 'non-personed' things.

Here, too, a 'living' or 'animate' being is based not on its form but its social potential. I move now from the object beings of the indigenous Australian and Andean context, which can occur through natural processes, to ones distinctly manufactured—robots. These object beings are inorganic, not made from visibly organic materials, and are not acted on by natural forces. Their manufacture, however, does not preclude them from a sense of non-human life, or of a life separate to human projection. This can be seen in the emergence of techno-animism, as human researchers of various cultural and ontological backgrounds seek to mediate their increased social contact with robotic creations (Richardson 2016, 112). This term is one with its own ongoing scholarly development (Aoki & Kimura 2021, 296), and reveals the expanded scope of animitic ontological exploration to the world of human manufacture.

The social existence of robots and their associated animate nature is, as with other personed beings, made through their relationships with other entities. The ontological nature of these relationships can be seen in the differences in emotional approach to robots by American and Japanese researchers, influenced by their surrounding and popular constructions of robots and robot imageries—are they adversaries, or are they friends (Richardson 2016, 112)? Richardson (2016, 112) attributes the differences in approach to robots to the ontological underpinnings of relational engagements. In this instance, the animate agency and potential personhood of robots is negotiated through broader social constructions that extend beyond their manufacture or programmed function, that is, what influences one's approach to the robot and its potential personhood is drawn from particular inhabited contexts.

This is the case of the Jazz-playing robots in America, where they are explicitly valued for the ways they can create beyond and in contradiction to human composers (Wilf 2013). These robots' compositions are made in an active interaction with human musicians. The robots themselves are designed with the purpose of engaging in a 'human' activity: the call and response of musical motifs in a jazz jam session. However, rather than mimicking or containing a projection

of human consciousness, Jazz-playing robots are valued due to their *non-human* capabilities. Their closeness to humans, their sustained interactions with humans, and their non-human attributes, contribute to their recognition as socially present, potentially animate, personed entities.

Japan's swords, like robots, are manufactured objects. Unlike robots, they do not have clear autonomous movement, nor do they have the humanoid or animal-like shapes that many robots are granted. How, then, do they become socially 'alive', with their own sense of personhood? One possible explanation lies with the concept of *tsukumogami* [付喪神] and other object-beings in the Japanese context. These object beings are manufactured tools or utensils, and largely do not have shapes that mimic biological lifeforms. Nonetheless, they possess animate potential and an agency which is evoked in their interactions with humans. Tsukumogami, like the animate buildings of the Mayan lowlands, the stone objects of the Andes, and jazz robots, retain their object-ness while they directly inhabit the human social realm.

Tsukumogami are a long-standing non-human entity of the animate realm. The written name for tsukumogami has shifted over time. The current form of *tsukumo* [付喪], a homonym for '99', provides one explanation as to how these objects become alive. This term is derived from a picture scroll of the Muromachi Period [1330's CE -1570's CE], the *Tsukumogami-ki* [付喪神記] (Reider 2009, 248-9). The term was also used in the Heian Period [794CE-1185CE] work *Ise Monogatari* [伊勢物語] to denote a human character's exceptional old age. This age, when applied to objects, is said to bring about their heightened sense of being, and renders them into entities with social potential. As well as this, their long-standing habitation of human social spaces has enabled their interaction with this realm.

Not all objects are capable of being tsukumogami. Like other social persons, they are differentiated from those without the relevant capabilities for life. The old age of objects and the mystique that accompanies them is merely one way tsukumogami are differentiated from inanimate objects. There are other possibilities. Ogata (2020, 212) and Reider (2009, 248-49) explain the concept of 'object beings' as pre-dating the use of the current written form of tsukumogami [付喪神] in Japanese literature. In earlier instances of object beings interacting with the human realm, their animate nature has no apparent connection to an exceptional age (Ogata 2020, 214). Ogata proposes a different written term for tsukumogami: not as '99-year old spirit' [付喪神], but as 'made object spirit' [作物神]—a life dwelling in a manufactured form.

Regardless of their written name, tsukumogami are beings that retain their object-ness while interacting socially in both the object and human realms. This is explored in the *Tsukumogami-ki,* a common point of reference for explaining object beings. In this tale, tsukumogami appear as object spirits that cause havoc in the urban spaces inhabited by humans. They have been discarded, and in

being rejected from their former places of habitation, conspire to enact revenge on those who unceremoniously threw them away without a consideration for their own emotive qualities. The gathered objects—umbrellas, utensils, and even prayer beads—discuss their revenge and enact a transformation, so that they may more directly impact the human realm.

This has been described as an anthropomorphic transformation (Lillehoj 1995). However, in the imagery of the scrolls, tsukumogami remain recognisable as objects. In addition, they gather and conspire to their revenge *prior* to any transformation of form: the emotional source of their conflict with the human realm derives from experiences had while in their original object state. They enact their transformation by their own agency, without human observers or actors to project onto them, and are motivated by the relational experiences they have had with humans. The tsukumogami's revenge is not a result of their being made human, but the emotional response an animate being has had to its (mis)treatment in the social realm. Like humans, these objects are, as Ingold (2006) describes, "beings [that] do not simply occupy the world, [but] *inhabit* it".

The transformation in the *Tsukumogami-ki* allows for easier comprehension of the object beings' anger by humans. But tsukumogami are not the only object beings in Japan: thus, an exploration of material entities would be remiss if it were restricted to this single tale. The tsukumogami of the *Tsukumogami-ki* base their revenge on being discarded: they have not been granted proper respect by their former owners. This sense of ritual respect remains in the human treatment of other socially-embedded objects. Ouchi (2018) explores the emotional sentiment granted to musical objects donated to Miho Shrine, a practice that continues in the modern day. The intangible substance of these dedicated instruments directly facilitates communication with the human and the non-human entities inhabiting Miho Shrine, highlighting the variety of beliefs and interactions surrounding intangibility in tangible forms (Ouchi 2018, 396). The dedication of instruments takes into consideration an intangible quality of the material object that is not tied to its explicit use of producing music. It has other capabilities, and other roles, in the social realms it inhabits.

Similarly, memorial rites have been recorded for home utensils, dolls, and even for robotic pets (Ouchi 2018, 416-17; Aoki and Kimura 2021, 16). The involvement of these material things in memorial rituals once again points to an intangible sense of being that is present in the manufactured form, which has attachments to the human mourning their passing. There is a commonality in the objects present in memorial rituals: they exist in close proximity to humans, and to human social life. In their shared habitation of the social realm and participation in its events and happenings, these objects come to hold their own sense of living.

A common example of this kind of social life is the stuffed toy, in Japanese *nuigurumi* [ぬいぐるみ]. Human owners of nuigurumi may speak with them with the sense that there may be

something inside that is listening and responding in its own way (Okuno 2021 p.162). Nuigurumi, designed to be soft, appealing, and regularly taking on the shape of biological beings, may seem an unsurprising conversation partner. However, there are similar conversations with other objects. Okuno (2021, 162) recounts one mother's lamentations that 'Towel-san' must be sad that it has become worn and dirty. Here, an object that has function—cleaning and drying—is related to in personed terms (the suffix -san), and recognised for its emotional capacity. The object is not merely a 'thing'. It is a companion, beyond its intended function. This sense of companionship can be seen further in surveys on owners of sex dolls in Japan, which highlighted the dominance of social companionship as a motive for doll ownership, as opposed to their utilitarian purpose (Aoki and Kimura 2021, 10 & 12). It cannot be presumed that an object, once it is the human social context, is constructed purely on its material or tool-based merits. To do so is to overlook the ways in which it is drawn into relationship with human owners, who empathise with them and even lament their passing.

When speaking to object companions, or sanctifying one's relationship with an object through memorial rites, there is a recognition of its intangible qualities. These qualities may be rendered as its own internal 'spirit' (Ouchi 2018, 415). The activation of this spirit lies in its close relationship with humans (Ouchi 2018, 416-17). In other words, the living or animate object is differentiated from its inanimate partners through relational actions, and is made a person. Terms such as tsukumogami, often employed in the context of folklore and literature, may evoke a fantastical quality to object beings. However, with close attention, we can see that the same substance of these seemingly fantastical entities are present in objects of the everyday.

While I deal with swords, objects that are not common companions for a large number of those living in contemporary society, they have not always been so distant. Lillehoj (1995) and Reider (2009) both note swords in the historical context as objects with the capability of becoming tsukumogami. Swords are objects made by humans, and potentially with non-human assistance. They share in human dwelling spaces and inhabit the same social contexts, whether that be in ritual, war, or simple object ownership. Like dolls and nuigurumi, swords exist in close relation to their owners: they must be cared for and maintained, or they will quickly deteriorate. And swords are, at times, valued for abilities that are beyond that of humans. It is here that my description of the current phenomenon as a 're-emergence' of interest in swords has two meanings. Firstly, that there is a renewed interest in swords in Japan in general; and secondly, that swords are regaining their place of habitation in close contact with human social life, in a context separated from their original use, but not entirely separate from their capacity for personhood.

THE ANIMATE SWORD

What kind of object is a sword? An initial assumption may categorise these things as historical objects, without a clear place in present-day social realms. This is not to say that they have *no* place: rather, that the perceived historicity of an object influences how its relevance is conceived of in the contemporary realm. Historical objects are frequently framed as a conduit of communication from past to present. One such example is Japan's tsunami-hi [津波碑], stone monuments raised by people of the past recording the impacts of tsunamis, communicating across the boundary of time to assist in the safety of the future (Good 2016, 143-144). In this sense, the object is a communicative tool that embodies the memories of its creators and shares their experiences with the present. Relegated to communicative objects between humans, their place in spaces of human habitation is constructed as centred in the past.

Nihontō, too, are granted this kind of communicative ability between humans of the past and present when they are framed as the continuation of a 'warrior's soul' [武士の魂] in their differentiation from other bladed objects. Prior to 2015, and still in many situations today, swords and their value have been explained by institutions as items that carry the 'spirit' of the warriors who once wielded them. Nezu Museum's 2011 sword exhibition description opens saying "it is said that Nihontō are the 'soul of the warrior'" [日本刀は「武士の魂」といわれ] (Nezu Museum 2011). The following year, Kochi Prefectural Museum held an exhibition titled "Swords: The Warrior's Soul" [刀 武士の魂] (Kochi Prefectural Museum 2012). In 2021, Suntory Art Museum continued this tradition in naming its exhibition "The Sword: The Soul of the Warrior". [刀剣　もののぶの心] (Suntory Art Museum 2021). These are but a few examples of Nihontō, as a category of artefact, being rendered into a communicative object that connects past human experiences to the present.

In doing so, the appeal of the sword is held to the ways in which these past lifestyles are constructed. When regularly tied to warrior exploits, this has the potential to create distance—and thus, a lack of present-day usefulness—between the human of the now and the object in its case. The warrior framing does have its appeal, and has perhaps been designed to target the assumed audience of middle aged and older men. This demographic was often mentioned by the curators I spoke to in my visits across Japan, as they explained the typical audience for the display of swords.

However, since 2015, there has been a shift in the audiences for sword exhibitions. Along with them has been a shift in the framing of the objects. It is here that the sword becomes an object valued for more than its abilities to connect past to present. Instead of facilitating the transmission of human experiences, it becomes an object with the ability to communicate its own, and is drawn into a more direct relationship between humans of the present day.

This can be seen in the exhibition framing used by Shizuoka's Sano Art Museum between 2016 and 2020. This museum holds annual sword exhibitions and is a frequent collaborator with the Touken Ranbu franchise. Where the exhibition materials of years prior used the common description of swords holding the 'spirit of the warrior', post 2015 saw exhibition promotion that highlighted the intangible, communicative qualities of swords themselves. Swords were referred to by personed descriptions and adjectives usually applied to humans, such as "dignified daggers" [凛とした短刀] and "heroic long-swords" [勇壮な大太刀] (Sano Art Museum 2016, 2021). In addition, exhibitions themselves drew on the experiences of swords—not their human owners—in their framing. 2019's "A Masterpiece is Reborn" exhibited swords burned and restored by non-warrior caretakers, broadening the potential social contexts occupied by swords while also bringing forward the particular life dangers faced by these non-human objects. By framing swords as participants in past social life, and all but dropping the word 'warrior' from exhibition materials in this period, the Sano Art Museum's shift in exhibition promotion reveals the ways in which swords occupy social landscapes outside of the previously assumed norm.

If object beings are those that exist in relation to humans, and who maintain close relationships with human social actors, this shift in framing is significant. It makes visible the social contexts that swords occupied, and thus potentially became alive in. It also extends those in contact with swords from an occupation with little relevance to the modern day—the warrior or warlord—and brings forward possibilities of engaging with swords that are still applicable to the contemporary context, such as caretakers of cultural properties.

The shift in positioning of exhibited swords may have been a reactive decision to appeal to the emerging audience: that is, of Saniwa. Saniwa involve themselves with swords outside of the Touken Ranbu context, and many I spoke to across my investigation emphasised that their activities were done with an attention to the objects themselves, and not a fictionalised projection of the character. Nonetheless, it is perhaps worth considering how swords are presented in this franchise. They are beings that directly occupy the same living space as Saniwa. They fight, but are also maintained and cared for: in fact, the primary game mechanics of Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— lean more towards maintaining Touken Danshi than controlling them in combat. In this social world, swords are entities of the present, to be looked after by their lord.

This notion of bringing a sword into habitable space is extended outside of the franchise, as Saniwa and other related actors re-position the sword's value in contemporary social settings. Those involved in Saniwa communities have made guides aimed at fellow Saniwa, outlining how one should approach a sword, or even how one commissions a Nihontō from a currently working sword-smith (Teikyodo 2020, 97). These facilitate the contemporary human person's interactions with the contemporarily inhabiting sword. In a less expensive endeavour for the consumer, institutions such

as the Tokugawa Art Museum and Setouchi City government have released virtual and augmented reality tools that allow for users to integrate swords into the spaces of their everyday life (Tokugawa Art Museum 20221; Setouchi City 2022). Both these places are frequented by Saniwa, with their personed approach to swords. Swords are not only being reframed away from the warrior context, but are actively being re-introduced into present-day human social spaces.

Even when swords remain in their display cases, the ways in which they are approached by Saniwa further places them in the immediate, present-day context. In this approach, swords are expanded from the notion of a historical object connecting past humans to those of the present. They are, instead, framed as fulfilling the contemporary social role granted to objects of history. Swords inhabit their displays. In their habitation of display cases, swords can meet with all those who come to visit and engage with them.

The display case as an inhabited realm with its associated social role was expressed to me directly by one Saniwa outside the sword exhibition room in Mito's Tokugawa Museum in May of 2021 as she explained her motives for visiting the museum. "We 'come to meet', not 'come to see'," [見に来てじゃなくて、会いに来て], she said, drawing a distinction between the two acts by deliberately avoiding the common phrasing of visiting an exhibition to 'see' its displays. In doing so, she emphasised the sword's own role as an entity to be met with.

Later that day, I spoke to two other Saniwa about the Museum's swords. Our conversation turned to the appeal of these objects. Casually, and without hesitation, one of the Saniwa indicated to the door of the sword exhibition room and spoke about "the ones living in there" [そこにいる子]. This phrasing is notable for two reasons: the first in its use of a gentle expression with a nuance of care to refer to historicised objects, and the second, in its use of 'iru' [いる], a verb reserved for animate beings. To this Saniwa, swords are animate entities, with whom they have a level of social familiarity. Their current inhabited context is the exhibition room, rendered into a space where they can engage with humans of the present day.

Both this Saniwa and her companion explained that, to them, the "ones in there" have a "tamashii" [魂], or spirit. This borrows phrasing commonly seen in sword exhibitions: that of the *bushi no tamashii* [武士の魂], or warrior's soul. However, these women were using the term in a way more common among Saniwa: that is, to refer to the inanimate agency of the swords themselves. These object have their own sentience, and are not merely vessels or conduits of a human memory. Their current position as objects of display does not preclude their involvement in social interactions. Rather, this is simply the role occupied by the sword in the contemporary context, and one that increases its accessibility to humans.

This language, from "the ones in there" to the explanation of "tamashii", refers to swords in terms of their own agency. The inhabit place, and like the animals recognised as persons by the Tallensi, they possess a spirit. This allocation of spirit separates them further from non-sentient objects as they are granted social recognition. Swords are not, in this case, anthropomorphised. They are instead understood as instigators of and possessors of their own intangible qualities, ready to be met with and recognised by other social actors.

In engaging with swords as contemporary actors, and not historical artefacts, Saniwa engage in a relational negotiation of social standing with swords through which the designations of personhood are made. The form of these objects remains that of a sword. But as with foxes, this does not diminish their social substance. They exist in close contact with humans as do dolls and household objects, inhabiting social spaces that are not reserved for the long-dead warrior class. And they enter into relationships with human actors who recognise their spirit. Swords can, as objects with agency, be recognised as their own individual persons.

SWORDS IN THE SOCIAL REALM

In the preceding sections, I have discussed some of the aspects had by socially alive, non-human entities: their substantiative animate quality, their comprehensibility by humans, and their habitation in close proximity to humans. Thus, it is apt to consider these aspects in connection to one of Japan's swords. The sword phenomenon is one that extends beyond viewing exhibitions and imagining humanised forms of distantly-placed objects. The re-emergence of the sword and its importance lies not only in its prominence in exhibitions, but in its re-assumed place among the social lives of human actors.

THE SUBSTANCE OF BEING: SWORD SHAPE

I start first with the substance of animate objects and their flexible tangible shapes. In this and in the subsequent sections, I will focus on one particular sword, Shokudaikiri Mitsutada [燭台切光忠 lit. Candlestick-Cutter Mitsutada], currently exhibited at the Tokugawa Museum in Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture. This sword, in its existence as a historical artefact, is described by the museum as thus: forged by the smith Mitsutada of the Osafune sword-smithing school, the sword was owned by the Sengoku daimyo [大名, feudal lord] Date Masamune, was subsequently gifted to the Mito Tokugawa family, and has been in their possession ever since. The sword's blackened appearance, when met with in the current day, is explained as damage from fire during the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. Interest in the sword picked up in 2015 after the launch of Touken Ranbu, and the Museum undertook a project to restore it to a form fit for display. This involved the forging

of a revived sword [再現刀 *saigentō*] to display along with the original. Placing these events together, we can see a rough trajectory of the object's past experiences.
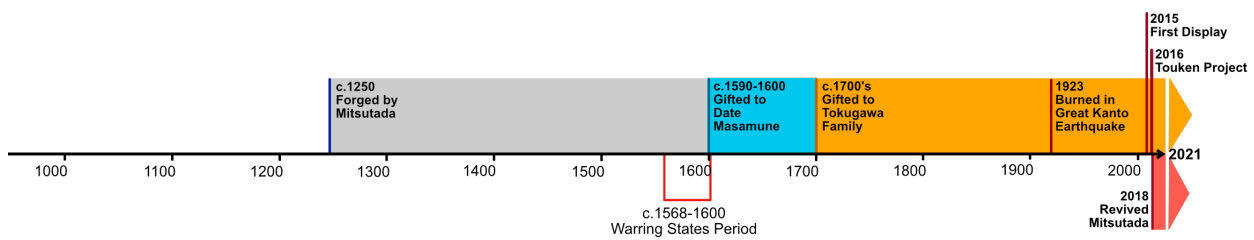
2015
First Display

2016
Touken Project

c.1250
Forged by
Mitsutada

c.1590-1600
Gifted to
Date
Masamune

c.1700's
Gifted to
Tokugawa
Family

1923
Burned in
Great Kanto
Earthquake

1000   1100   1200   1300   1400   1500   1600   1700   1800   1900   2000   2021

c.1568-1600
Warring States Period

2018
Revived
Mitsutada

Figure 2 Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's Life Trajectory, made with reference to anecdotes commonly shared by Saniwa.

The above is a rough approximation of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's life trajectory. Only some of its movements are represented, along with select notable events that are commonly referred to by both institutional and individual actors. The section of the Sengoku (Warring States) Period relevant to the life of Date Masamune has been marked in red: a roughly 30-year time-span that many objects connected to Japan's warrior past, such as swords, are contextualised by. However, as can be seen, this is only a mere fraction of the sword's existence. In addition, a second life trajectory has been started by the forging of a new object: the Revived Mitsutada. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's value as both tangible and intangible object extends beyond the scale of a human lifetime, and the understanding of a human existence.

The Tokugawa Museum, in their internal project to restore their damaged swords, describes the value of a Nihontō by its capability to accumulate memories of the past in its tangible form (Tokugawa Museum 2017). This description is similar to the "memories and feelings awakened by Saniwa" in the introduction of Touken Ranbu. When speaking to staff at institutions such as the Tokugawa Museum, as well as other actors involved in sword cultures and Saniwa themselves, there is a common sense of 'something' within the tangible form of a sword, accumulated over its long existence. This 'something' can be vocalised as memory, feeling, attachment, and other intangible concepts that, I argue, form the social substance of the object.

Historical objects are things that evoke emotional responses from the humans who view and interact with them. This quality contributes to their value as objects of display, occupying a reflexive relationship with humans as they reflect the past to the present-based actors that visit them (Strathern 1990). Here, the 'something' possessed by the sword that intrigues and evokes responses from visitors, may be a means by which the object is differentiated from representational artefacts, as it gains potential as a person capable of participating in social life.

The memories, feelings, and other senses of 'something' understood as being held in a sword's tangible form prompts the imagination, asking for consideration of an object that has

existed over hundreds of years, and whose ongoing existence relies on continued care and maintenance. Such a notion of care can easily be placed to the 'original' object, as it is the tangible form that met with its past experiences. However, in the case of these swords, this notion of care extends to its intangible qualities. In fact, it may even be that in certain contexts, these intangible qualities are considered more significant than the sword's tangible ones.

It is here that Shokudaikiri Mitsutada emerges as an interesting example of an artefact with a significant emotional and social substance, beyond what is implied by its simple blackened form. When one visits the Tokugawa Museum, they may not always see the original sword on display, but may instead be met by its restored, revived form: Saigentō Shokudaikiri Mitsutada. This is a pristine and shining sword, still labelled as 'Shokudaikiri Mitsutada', with the added component of 'Saigentō' [再現刀]. This sword was forged in 2018, and has been regularly displayed since. It is not a copy, a representation, or a replacement for the original sword: it is, substantively, Shokudaikiri Mitsutada.

How can a newly made object be the same as one of the historical past? If the object is considered in terms of its substance of being, or the intangible 'something' that evokes emotive response, the shape housing that being does not necessarily need to be 'original'. Saigentou Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, when displayed, is positioned to convey the same narrative of existence as its older counterpart. It acts as a new tangible vessel for the memories, experiences, and perhaps even the spirit of the older sword, providing a means for its intangibility to meet with visitors without further damaging the already damaged original.

Thus, care for the object involves not just its own physical maintenance, but ensures that its intangible qualities have a stable vessel for the future. The Tokugawa Museum has made this intention explicit in their explanation of Saigentō Shokudaikiri Mitsutada as a continuation of the original sword's tangible form and intangible spirit, made so that its existence can be ensured for the future. This approach to object preservation highlights the importance of the internal substance, as well as the external form, in differentiating a socially present sword from other kinds of historical artefacts.

The recognition of an object's substance is, as with other social categories of being, negotiated by fellow social actors. On my own visits to the Tokugawa Museum, I overheard from visitors discussing what is and is not the 'original' Shokudaikiri Mitsutada. The differentiation between the original and its reforged form was most heavily emphasised by the traditional older male audience for sword exhibitions. In my observations, Saniwa also made a distinction between the two swords. However, despite differentiating between 'original' and 'representation', their physical approach to the swords on display remained largely the same: each was examined closely

and carefully, and the newer sword was not ignored or dismissed out of hand for not being 'original'.

In this manner the tangible sword emerges as a flexible concept that, while assisting in identifying an object, is not its entire source of value, nor does it determine its entire existence. In fact, the extension or transportation of a sword's intangible qualities to new tangible forms is not limited to Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and its Saigentō, but can be seen at other sites visited by Saniwa seeking to engage with the living aspects of swords. In the same year Saigentō Shokudaikiri Mitsutada was forged, a 'replica' of the sword Tsurumaru Kuninaga [鶴丸国永] was dedicated to Kyoto's Fujinomori Shrine, who had cared for the original in the 15th century. In 2022, this same shrine welcomed another reforged sword, this time of Ichigo Hitofuri [一期一振]. On this sword's dedication, excited Saniwa recounted their previous visits to the shrine to see its existing Tsurumaru Kuninaga, their own dedicated items depicting the sword and its Touken Danshi form, and the quick making of plans to visit the newly made Ichigo Hitofuri. Accompanying these recollections were fan works imagining the young spirits of the newly forged swords guided by those that inhabit their originals. A fragment, extension, or a new aspect of self emerges for the original sword when it gains a new tangible vessel: indicating the importance of the object's intangible substance and the ease with which extensions to this substance are accepted amongst human sword enthusiasts.

A new tangible form for a sword's substance does not even have to be metal to be accepted and spoken of as a sword. This can be seen at Okayama Prefecture's Yukie Shrine. This shrine, like Fujinomori and the Tokugawa Museum, has a 'replica' of a famed sword, theirs known as Sanchōmō [山鳥毛]. Unlike these other swords the new Sanchōmō has been forged of Bizen-yaki, a local form of pottery, rather than the typical steel. Nonetheless, it is recognised as a sword both by shrine custodians and those who visit it. It is displayed prominently within the shrine on a stand designed for swords, and is stored in a similar sword-box as its metal counterparts. When on display, Saniwa and other visitors treat it with the same consideration they hold for metal swords. In this manner, the treatment of the tangible object aligns with what it is recognised as—a sword—rather than its material makeup.

These newly made bodies allow for greater accessibility by modern day actors to engage with the substantiative entity of the sword. Not all historical swords are freely accessible. For example, the originals of Fujinomori's Tsurumaru Kuninaga and Ichigo Hitofuri are kept from display, belonging to the collection of the Imperial Family. Similarly, Bizen-yaki Shanchōmō is freely approachable in the way its original is not, and visitors can not only closely examine the sword but directly involve it in common activities of social leisure, such as positioning it in amusing photographs. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and its Saigentō are similarly accessible and approachable, with increased potential for display that mitigates the harm that may come to the

already damaged sword. This access and approachability relies on the notion that, while a sword's tangible form is significant, there is equal significance in its intangible substance. This substance is not restricted to a singular artefact, but can be extended and met with through a number of tangible conduits.

What can be seen from these examples of reforged swords is an easy acceptance of differing tangible bodies for what one might assume as singular, historical artefacts. This is not to say that the craft of these original objects is of no value to Saniwa. Rather, it is to say that the substance of the object is just as significant, and is of a quality that transcends strict tangible form. Thus, an understanding of the sword is insufficient if its definition is tied purely to the tangible object. It must also include a recognition of the intangible, emotional substance within it. What makes a 'sword' a 'personed sword' is not necessarily its historicised object-body, but rather, the continuity of its substantiative spirit across multiple forms, which in turn continues its capacity to interact with human social actors.

THE COMPREHENSIBILITY OF BEINGS: SWORD NAMES

If the substance of existence is flexible, malleable, and can exist across multiple forms, how then can it be comprehended by human actors? In the case of Japan's swords, the individual experiences attached to this substance are made comprehensible through the sword's name. The use of names brings these objects existences in-line with human experiences, recognising that they belong to an individualised social actor. It is this name that allows the multiple instances of tangible form to be related to the experiences of a singular entity, and thus convey those experiences to the human. Nihontō are frequently known by their own individual names, or otherwise have an identifier that individualises their existence from that of other swords. It is perhaps due to these names that the Touken Ranbu franchise was able to so easily translate the real-world sword into fictional Touken Danshi. However, there is a greater significance to the naming of swords than facilitating categorisation or characterisation. Names are a means of making social swords comprehensible to the human experience.

Names are identifiers that constitute persons (Palsson 2014, 620), and their use or deliberate non-use are a means by which ontological notions of personhood become visible. This can be seen in the legal context, where the official registration of one's name acts as a sanctioning of one's identity and belonging. A denial of name registration can equate to a denial of one's value as a legally recognised entity (Palsson 2014, 621-622). This can be seen in situations of tension and where ontological approaches to valid persons come into conflict.

For example, the names of women in what is now Okinawa Prefecture have made visible the social negotiation of valued persons through the way Ryukyuan identities assimilated to a pan-

Japanese form of comprehension. The colonial governance of what is now Okinawa saw women's names change from Ryukyuan *warabina*, a form of naming that is used irrespective of an outwardly-presented identifier, to names derived from the Japanese language (Nishihara 2022, 162). These name changes occurred alongside the push for Okinawan residents to assume a national Japanese identity. Women actively modified their names to be comprehensible by Japanese social actors, so that they could continue to be recognised as valid social entities and recognised as persons.

Nishihra (2022) argues that this deliberate manipulation of names was done not only to establish one's position among nationalised identities, but to reflect womens' own exploration of identity in the face of changing social conditions (Nishihara 2022, 139). This can be seen by some women's continued use of *warabina* as an identifier, despite outwardly using their 'Japanese' ones. Their *warabina* continued to have social and ontological significance in their own intimate social communities (Nishihara 2022, 140). In this example, women used their names as more than identifiers. They become flexible, changeable aspects of social standing, and are reflective of how one is or is not perceived as a valid social entity across social contexts.

Thus when we consider names we must also consider the context in which those names are used, and how they differentiate entities from each other. Clammer (2004), in a discussion on the interpretations of animism in the Japanese context, explains Japanese anthropologist Iwata Keiji's perspective on naming as related to Shinto *kami*: to address something by name is to recognise its spirit (97). The notion of spirit has already appeared several times in this discussion of swords as *rei*, *tamashii*, and perhaps even the intangible sword-substance that facilitates its social meetings. A sword's name is here more than a categorical identifier. It becomes a way to recognise its substance and potential as social actor—that is, the means by which the sword can be recognised as a person. As humans navigate the ontological complexities of their names, it serves to also consider how names and identifiers are used in the context of objects that hold spirit, as a means of differentiating them from their non-personed counterparts.

A sword has many ways of gaining its name. Sword names can come from their actions, such as cutting particular objects or other social entities, both human and non-human; they can come from some peculiarity of the sword's own form and appearance; or they can simply be named for those that made or owned them. A sword can even change its name or have a new one given to it, as it undertakes notable feats or participates in notable events throughout its life trajectory which are then commemorated by the granting of a new name. A sword's name is both an identifier and a changeable, flexible aspect of its self that reflects actions it has undertaken in the social sphere.

The historical context of sword names is an investigation that, while interesting, is outside the scope of this one. I turn instead to the present-day navigation of sword names, once again using the example of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada [燭台切光忠].

Breaking down this name gives us two clear components. The first is a common component of sword names: "Mitsutada" [光忠]. This is the name of the sword's smith, and directly places the sword in its context of craft and craftsmen. The second component is the sword's personal identifier: "Shokudaikiri" [燭台切]. This name is said to have been granted to the sword in an event of its past. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's former owner Date Masamune once used this sword in an execution. When he did, the blade not only cut clean through the human neck, but continued in its swing to also cut through a heavy bronze candle-holder. From this feat of strength, the sword was recognised with the name "Shokudaikiri", or "Candle-stick Cutter". From this name we are given insight into the sword's value and its previous social participation. Its past and position in society is made comprehensible to human actors.

In the present day, sword names are largely seen on their exhibition object labels. This may appear to be a common, cross-cultural aspect of contemporary exhibition design and display. However, the treatment of sword names in these labels show subtle hints of ontological differences in how objects are valued, and the realms of social life that objects occupy. Sword exhibitions in Japan frequently include at least one example of a named sword. Even in the instance where there are no named swords present, swords are differentiated from their counterparts with other signifiers and a description of form or participation in past events that justifies their individual existence.

Knowing this, and having experienced it at multiple sword exhibitions in Japan over 2020 and 2022, I was confronted by a strange experience at the 2022 exhibition "Heroes: Ukiyo-e and Swords", which boasted a homecoming of Japanese swords from the collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. None of the swords on loan from the American institution had accompanying names, and were labelled only with their smith and period of forging. Similarly, the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum's exhibition "Art and Power", also featuring objects on loan from Boston, had no identifying names for the Japanese swords on display. "I thought 'oh, none of them have names'…" recalled one Saniwa as we discussed the exhibition. In these collections, Japan's swords are treasured as fascinating objects and as representations of power: but they have not been made comprehensible as socially emplaced entities. While it may simply be that none of the swords in the Boston collection had their own names, it nonetheless stood as unusual to a Saniwa, familiar with the process of understanding a sword through its name, that none of those on display were identified in this manner.

It is possible that the names or other identifying aspects of the Boston Museum of Fine Art's Japanese swords were simply not recorded in the same manner as their make and tangible qualities,

that is, that names or other identifiers may not have been valued by their collectors in the same manner as the artefact's tangibility. I experienced this difference in value between an object's make and its experiences first-hand when preparing for an international presentation on Shokudaikiri Mitsutada. I introduced this object as "the sword Shokudaikiri Mitsutada". This was returned to me with an editor's correction, to "the Shokudaikiri Mitsutada sword". This simple change in word-order reveals a difference in the ontological positioning of a sword, and the value of its name. The proposed writing of "the Shokudaikiri Mitsutada sword" renders its name into a descriptor, placing emphasis on the 'sword' aspect. "Shokudaikiri Mitsutada" is, in this wording, a title, and not an name for an entity. This in turn positions the object as a 'thing'. This form of descriptive titling comes across as a clumsy and awkward way of identifying a sword for those more familiar with its designation by name, and who put emphasis on the object's identity over its tangible category.

At the Tokugawa Museum, Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's label reads "Katana, Shokudaikiri by Mitsutada" [刀　燭台切　光忠作]. There are three elements present here: a descriptor, that it is a katana, separate from its named identifier, Shokudaikiri, and its creator, the smith Mitsutada. This formalised way of referring to the object is rarely used outside of its label. Instead, it is commonly referred to in speech as "Shokudaikiri Mitsutada", "Shokudaikiri", or even just "Mitsutada", with conversational context making clear that the speaker is referring to the sword. Even the object's own label, outside of its title section, refers to the sword as simply "Shokudaikiri Mitsutada". These terms of reference are easily paired with familiarising, personed language, unlike the phrasing of "The Shokudaikiri Mitsutada Sword". The shorter, identity-based form of naming for the sword was in my investigation used by both institutional and individual actors, showing a cross-understanding of the sword as an individual object in possession of its own name.

Names, when employed in our daily social interactions, can indicate a closeness or distance in relationships as well as recognising the social value of the entity being named. Central in this use of names to recognise (or un-recognise) personhood is the nickname. Nicknames can be mocking or familiar, excluding one or drawing them in closer, and are a means of mediation for the relational aspects of social life (Pilcher 2016, 772). Among Saniwa, the same holds true for the name of a sword. Alongside the standard terms of reference for Shokudaikiri Mitsutada is its nickname, "Micchan" [みっちゃん]. This nickname is a diminutive form of Mitsutada, made by combining the reading of the first character 'Mitsu' [光, みつ] with the Japanese suffix '-chan' [ちゃん], commonly used to indicate a particularly close and casual social relationship between named partners. "Micchan" appeared frequently in conversations with Saniwa, as well as in the letters of thanks they leave for the Tokugawa Museum addressed to both staff and sword. "Micchan" is more than an object identifier and far from the formalised, descriptive title "The Shokudaikiri Mitsutada

Sword". It is an affectionate nickname, recognising the entity of the sword and endearingly drawing that entity into a close interpersonal relationship with the human speaker.

Thus, important to not only recognise that Japanese swords have historically been granted names: their name are still involved social processes of the present. These names are not simple titles or descriptors for artefacts, but are a means by which the sword becomes involved in social life, and is recognised as a potentially social entity.

I spoke with Saniwa and other exhibition visitors over 2022 on the topic of sword names, asking their thoughts on the practice of naming swords or referring to them by name. This brought many responses: sword names are "interesting" [面白い] and "fascinating" [魅力的], giving a point of contact for the human and the unfamiliar entity of the sword. Even the human-like names for swords, derived from their smiths, are intriguing due to their unusual, historical nature—they are not names of an entity born in the present, and provide the possibility of a different kind of life to that experienced by the present-based human.

My interlocutors across exhibition sites eagerly explained their fascination with swords deriving, in part, with how these objects spoke to the past: who owned them, who made them, and how the objects themselves may have related the other persons met in their long life (hi)stories. A sword's name encapsulates its past, and makes it possible to identify the object as one would with other storied, personed, named actors of the social realm, rendering its existence comprehensible to human actors who explore life through instances of an individuals experiences.

A sword's individualising name allows it to participate in relational interactions with humans, who commonly use names to explore social validity and relationships. While names are only one way in which personhood is derived, they are a significant to make comprehensible these objects and their lives that, in other ontological contexts, may not be recognised as worthy of possessing their own, individual, means of identification.

HABITATION OF BEINGS: SWORD LIVES

The habitation undertaken by Shokudaikiri Mitsutada is one where its tangible form is 'housed', as many objects are, in the context of its exhibition case. Held in this glass case alongside its newly forged self, there is a physical barrier between the sword and the direct interactive space of human actors. This may lead to an assumption that swords are kept separate from direct, tangible engagement with humans in the contemporary context.

However, this is not necessarily the case. The Tokugawa Museum has undertaken limited events where humans can touch the sword, holding it in their own hands. This was recounted by one Saniwa in their contribution to an anthology of sword research, in a chapter titled *Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and I* [燭台切光忠と私]. This account details how the object has once again been

brought into a direct relationship with the temporally and tangibly placed human actor (Naina 2020, 53). Other endeavours have re-introduced the sword into human spaces of habitation and direct interaction via technology. The Tokugawa Art Museum, housing the collection of the Owari Tokugawa family, has in 2022 introduced augmented reality versions of their individualised swords, giving those with access to smart phones the ability to directly bring the sword from its case and place it in new contexts (Tokugawa Art Museum 2022a). Thus, the question of how a sword inhabits place is not explored through its tangibility, but rather, through the ways in which it is both tangibly and intangibly being emplaced in human social contexts.

The animitic habitation of social space undertaken by swords is supported by the ability for social actors to recognise the sword's individual quality and the events that differentiate their existence from non-animate objects. The individual contexts of swords are a key element to consider when also examining the ontological context surrounding them. Animate objects in Japan, including the Touken Danshi of Touken Ranbu, are frequently termed tsukumogami [付喪神], or object-spirits. Here I wish to focus on how the designation of tsukumogami recognises the object's habitation of social space through its intangible as well as tangible qualities, and subsequently brings to light the attachments the object makes with contemporary social realms.

Ogata (2020) argues that tsukumogami and the prevalence of their stories in certain periods of Japanese history aligns with shifts in the ways objects are socially valued. He explains tsukomogami as beings that come from "qualitative" objects with value derived from their individualised make, which are differentiated from mass-produced "quantitative" objects. This aligns with the legal definition of a Nihontō, objects so termed through a recognition of their individual make, craft, and history. For swords, both the folkloric or literary designator of tsukumogami and the legal one of Nihontō recognise qualities of these objects that are derived in a qualitative matter. These qualities are enhanced by the sword's interactions with human actors, such as their maker or wielder, who give the object context for its place of habitation in the social realm.
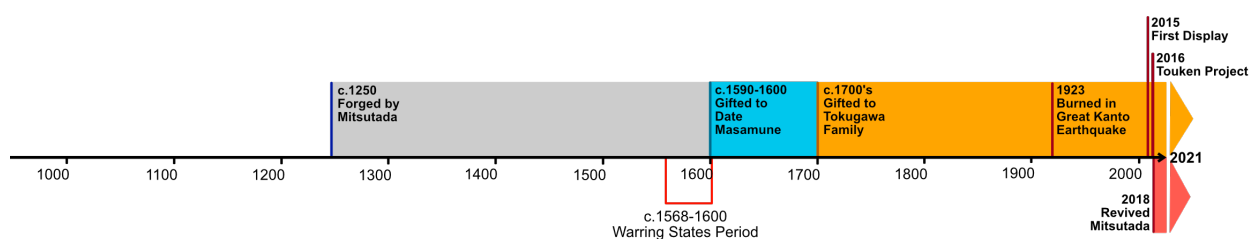

Figure 3 Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's Life Trajectory

The individualisation of a sword and the ability to trace its experiences allows for an exploration of the times and places of its habitation, and subsequently, the various social contexts and connections that contribute to its qualitative existence. These are marked by the significant

events the sword, as an individual, has participated in. It is here that the sword provides an alternate use of the object biography, in what I term the object's life-trajectory. I will once again illustrate this concept through the life of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada.

Kopytoff (1986), in the Social Life of Things, proposed the concept of the object biography: a recognition of the relationships and roles an object accumulates as it participates in the social realm, tracing its changing status in a similar sense as one would the biographic journey of a human person (1986, 66). This initial proposal of the object biography rendered objects reflective of human social dynamics, such as his example of a car showing "the relationship of the seller to the buyer… [and] the identity of its most frequent passengers" (Kopytoff 1986, 67). Later theorists have debated the application of the object biography: in some forms, the object biography renders objects into commodities and removes their personality and agency, while in others, the object biography grants them this agency in recognising their habitation of social places and engagements (Janet 2006, 75). I lean towards the latter argument, and present the object biography as a means by which to consider how objects have socially embedded, and inhabited, lives of their own.

By recognising the life-trajectories of named swords, we are not only given an awareness of the scale of their existence, as it spans hundreds of years, but are also able to differentiate the social roles undertaken by swords as they inhabit differing social realms. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's biography as derived from its exhibition description is a rather simple one. It was made, owned by a number of different human persons across a number of historically significant events, named by the daimyo Date Masamune, and gifted by his descendants to the Mito Tokugawa family. If considering this biography in terms of what has happened to the sword, it was stored, burned, restored, and is now in the collection of the Mito Tokugawa Museum. It has inhabited contexts of a weapon, of gift-giving, of being a treasure stored by its owners, and now it inhabits the museum display, where Saniwa and others come to meet it and its fellow swords. In doing so, it has undertaken roles of a tool, a holder of social ties, a holder of material value, and now exists as an entity to be met with.

This recontextualises the historical artefact in terms of a being with an ongoing possibility of inhabiting space, and the shifting social roles and contexts that come with it. A sword's life trajectory recognises its individual, qualitative existence as an actor who inhabits its context. If swords are objects made in a qualitative manner due to the craft involved in their forging, it bears asking how they can gain further qualitative aspects in the other situations they experience in their existence. For Shokudaikiri Mitsutada these events are those of the past, such as its burning in the Great Kanto Earthquake; but are also inclusive of events in the present-day context.

Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's 2015 display was enacted in response to Saniwa interest in meeting with the sword in the present day. In this capacity, the sword also undertakes the role of an ambassador of the Tokugawa Museum's 2016 Touken Project, aimed at preserving and maintaining

their sword collection. It both tangibly inhabits the display case, and intangibly inhabits a role that reaches further into activities occurring in the human social realm. The life trajectory of its revived form, currently starting in parallel, may even in time deviate from the original Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's, as it accumulates experiences of its own.

I call these events part of the sword's inhabited social role due to the way it is treated and recognised by the human actors. Its tangible habitation is recognised by addressing the sword's intangible substance. This is done both in conversation and in tangible, documentary forms. Saniwa's letters to the Tokugawa Museum, displayed in a small area dedicated to the sword and its supporters, address it by name. One in particular outlines the author's thankfulness for the care the sword is receiving in its current 'home'. The named, individual sword, with its intangible substance and multiple tangible forms, is placed directly in the context of the museum and within the social activities undertaken by its human caretakers. Its display is not an act of passive exhibition, but one of active engagement that transforms the sword from an artefact or relic of the past to a participant in the world and its events, as experienced in the present day. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada inhabits the now, as it did the then, and has the potential to continue to inhabit the future.

Undertaking the creation of a full biography or life trajectory for each named sword requires deep historical inquiry and a tracing through a myriad of documents in search of the settings inhabited by these objects and their owners. As of writing, Touken Ranbu has a cast of over 100 Touken Danshi, making even a limited investigation of its swords a daunting task. However, it is not an impossible one: Saniwa, in recognising swords and being able to comprehend the individuality of their existence, undertake this work as part of their own social activities. By locating the places of social habitation of a named sword, Saniwa search for documents to bring to light the relationships and connections a sword has accumulated in its life (his)tory. I will go into greater detail of this investigative work in the next chapter. What is of significance here is how the tracing of a sword's biography is, in many ways, the creation of its life trajectory. Research and recognition of its life events place the object at particular places, at particular times, amongst particular persons, and renders the sword an inhabitant of its respective social context.

Thus, when we speak of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, or of "Micchan" today, it is with recognition that the object has a quality beyond its tangible form. It has a substance that has experienced life in a number of contexts, amongst a number of human actors, and has been recognised through those experiences by the designation of an individualising name. The person of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada emerges as an individual entity that exists in relation to human actors who recognise its significance in the place it inhabits today.

FROM ARTEFACT TO ENTITY

I return now to the question of Japan's swords as potentially animate entities. They have an intangible substance, carrying their experiences and memories with them, and are recognised as the individual holders of those experiences. Their tangible, seemingly inanimate form has no bearing on the quality of those experiences, or the object's ability to provoke reactions in human actors. What matters is not the entity's shape, but how its intangible substance is understood, related to, and made in contact with other actors of social spaces.

Recognising an object by its social substance, rather than its material make-up, has several implications. The first is a re-examination of the way non-humans are spoken of and conceived of by researchers, particularly as they occupy multiple ontological contexts. The anthropomorphic sword, for example, fails to take into account the non-human expressions of its substance and multiplicities of its existence, instead basing the comprehension of its existence purely on how it can be made 'human'. Secondly is a consideration for how object entities exist in proximity to humans. This existence transcends physical form, and through the ways objects are spoken to and involved in human rituals, we can see that simple designations of humanness in explaining object sociality is insufficient, even when it comes to interactions that happen in our everyday homes. It is therefore prudent to remind ourselves of the depths of ontological complexity, and to have an awareness of the potentially limiting ways accepted frameworks for describing non-human actors impact our analysis.

Attached to these implications are further ones specific to my investigation. Increasingly, swords are being re-introduced into the common habitable spaces of humans. This is through the extension of a sword's sociality by Saniwa, which is enhanced by the responsive actions of museums and other institutions that facilitate meetings between human actors and swords. The visitor and the sword become two kinds of being that inhabit the present. The boundaries of an artefact and its display case are mitigated through activities such as the reforging of tangible sword forms and other newly made sword bodies. These actions extend the intangible substance of a sword to realms easily accessible to human actors. With this increased accessibility comes increased ways to engage with the sword's lived experiences, leading to even further engagement with the intangible qualities of the object and reinforcing its presence in contemporary social realms.

I have spoken in this section of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, and the way it is examined, named, and recognised as an inhabitant of the Tokugawa Museum. This form of recognition is not limited to a single sword and a single museum. After visiting the sword Matsui Gou [松井江] at the Sano Art Museum in 2022, a sword recently popular in the narrative adaptations of Touken Ranbu, I sat with a group of Saniwa to discuss what we had seen day. "All those swords have stories," one said, referencing the large number of swords exhibited alongside Matsui Gou. "We just haven't gotten to

know them yet!". These stories—these lives—do not come into existence through human projection. They exist already, inside their respective sword-shaped bodies, waiting for other social actors to relate to it and recognise its being.

It is therefore not enough to conceive of Nihontō as a category of historical artefacts or artistic objects, exchanged and displayed to convey the wealth and status of their owners. To do so is to overlook the living and malleable status of swords, and how this status impacts their contemporary existence. This investigation does not seek to determine, in definite terms, whether a thing is or is not 'alive'. Rather, it is an exploration of an object's living potential. In doing so, the way we look at the activities surrounding them brings to light nuances and particularities that would be overlooked by a purely material consideration of objects as passive tools.

Swords, rendered only as tools, artworks, or weapons, are objects acted upon; never themselves the actor. However, such a view clouds the presence they have in active social engagements. I now turn to the ways in which objects are valued, and how the recognition of a sword's potential to have individual, animate qualities reframes the exploration of historical content. In doing so, these socially emplaced beings make visible the overlooked aspects of cultural value, while also participating in the negotiation of social identities that occur in the institutional display.

3.3 Re-Examining Value in Living Objects

Objects, regardless of their designation as animate or inanimate, are things imbued with 'value'. This value and the consequences of its allocation are mediated by the object's own context, and the contexts of the actors that determine value. This, in turn, informs how other social entities are positioned to interact with objects. It is therefore important to ask who is determining, or at the very least communicating, object value. Further, it is important to consider how this value is recontextualised when the object itself emerges as a social actor.

"Isn't it fine to start as a 'copy'? What matters is what comes after. Our proof of life is our story." [写しから始まってもいいじゃねえか。問題はその後だ。生きた証が物語よ], proclaims Touken Danshi Sohaya no Tsurugi, in one of Touken Ranbu —ONLINE—'s limited dialogues between himself and his fellow Touken Danshi. Sohaya no Tsurugi, an *utsushi* [写し, an artistic work made in the image of an existing one] forged in the Heian Period [794CE-1185CE], says this in reassurance to the younger Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, another *utsushi* with a complex over his lack of originality. What matters, insists Sohaya no Tsurugi, is not how they are made, but the experiences they accumulate in life.

With this vignette in mind, I ask for a questioning of the typical denotation of value for Japan's swords, legally designated as Nihontō. These objects are frequently positioned by institutional actors as historical or artistic objects, seen in the context of the museum or gallery, and are used in display to promote particular curatorial and institutional hierarchies of value. The sword in the institution is an object physically separated from the audience and the audience's experiences by its glass case. Its descriptors speak of historical owners and events, as the tangible object is de-contextalised from the present and instead used to invoke imageries of a warrior past. Categorised by institutional and legal actors as Nihontō, the sword's value is no longer derived from the position it occupies in active social exchanges, but rather, the framings of historical educational and artistic merit.

To this view I contrast that of Saniwa and other emergent actors: "We come 'to meet', not 'to see'". Swords in this framing inhabit the present. While they still largely exist in the display cases of institutions, the shift in understanding from an object of the past to one of the present closes the temporal distance between sword and visitor. This is largely done through an understanding of value based on a social life for the object. It is not its legal categorisation but the sword's own story and experiences, as Sohaya no Tsurugi argues, that gives it a valid and valued existence.

The Saniwa's approach to sword value both aligns with and deviates from the typical framing of the Nihontō and other historicised objects in Japan. The sword's value from craft and

historical renown is not ignored, but instead woven into a life-story and presented in tandem with experiences had by the object in past and present. This presents the sword's value through is abilities to accumulate such experiences, as an individualised entity, which are in turn connected to human social activities. The sword is not an object on display, but a teller of its life history. It is the sword's ability to *be* individualised that makes its experiences unique, and worthy of uncovering.

Here, the individual stories of swords open up new avenues of research and historical exploration that are difficult to conceive of if the object is considered a mere tool of war or exchange. The life stories of swords, and the exploration of them by Saniwa, asks for a reconsideration of the museum collection as a site of value, particularly as it involves historicised 'artefacts'. Does the display merely show the sword? Or is there more to the object's value than can be contained in a brief object label?

VALUE FROM THE INSTITUTION

To understand the significance of approaching swords as entities in possession of a life story, it first serves to consider how historicised objects are presented in the conventional institutional display. Museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions serve the purpose of collecting, documenting, and preserving artefacts and other objects deemed worthy of preservation. The display of these artefacts serves an additional educational purpose, as the institution makes them available to the public audience (Svašek 2007, 127).

This approach to institutional conservation and display can be seen clearly in Japan's longest-standing modern museums. In Japan, the museum [*hakubutsukan* 博物館] finds its origins in the dynamic activities of the Meiji Period [1868CE-1912CE], where ideas of the nation and the role of the citizen within it were actively debated across the hierarchies of social actors. In this context, the collection and display of distinctly 'Japanese' objects emerges as tied directly to debates of a wider national identity. In this period, Japan's material culture underwent a classification and organisation that promoted particular notions of identity to both a domestic and international audience (Hyung Il 2013, 91). The Tokyo National Museum, standing among a number of other cultural institutions in the central Ueno Park, was one such curator of 'Japaneseness'. At the time, it was known simply as The Museum (Hakubutsukan), a grand architectural project that in both form and contents drew on Western categorisations of value for tangible things, modifying them to promote Japan's own material cultural output (Hyung Ill 2013, 77; Tseng 2004, 490).

In these processes, we can clearly see a categorical assignment of 'value' to a 'thing': the object is standardised and its meaning made easily understandable to audiences in the midst of shifting human social dynamics. Value at the Hakubutsukan derives from the collective agreement

of top-level curators, seeking to deliberately position the material objects at their disposal in a categorical manner to evoke a sense of centralised, nationalised cultural practices. This value designation still has its remnants in the operations of the Tokyo National Museum, as its 2022 special exhibition of National Treasures (themselves 'objectively' categorised as extraordinary) followed a thematic arrangement of objects based on the kind of artistic culture they represented: screens, scrolls, calligraphy, pre-historic items, and, of course, swords.

The impact of Meiji-era categorisations on current institutional displays and presentations of value can also be seen in other ways. Like Nihontō, the term *hakubutsukan* is a legal designation describing a particular kind of institution and approach to display. A registered *hakubutsukan* is managed by either the government or an incorporated entity, and must have an associated director and curator with their own registered qualifications (Agency for Cultural Affairs 2022). Registration as a *hakubutsukan* under the Museum Law has the requirements of object conservation and display for the purposes of public education. While the scope of this education has been adjusted over the years to include the diversifying nature of sites of display, it is nonetheless a top-down form of management over material objects and their employment in the social sphere (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2003).

Hakubutsukan is not the only term for 'museum' in Japanese, and some sites registered as such may employ a different word to describe their own collections and intentions of display. As such, it is important to recognise that, while these various terms are regularly translated as simply "museum" in English, their use is a reflection on the way the institution values its objects. This can be seen in one major institution of display in Japan: the Shinto Shrine or Buddhist Temple. These institutions often describe their exhibition rooms as *hōbutsuden* [宝物殿, treasure hall]. Already, from this simple shift in language, there is a shift in the value of the objects inside it. These are not the carefully selected objects gathered by secular experts, but the various "treasures" collected, gathered, and donated by the Shrine or Temple over its long years in operation. Swords regularly appear in this context, as an object with a history of religious dedication.

As well as their object collections, Shrines and Temples often have other physical attributes—such as gardens or the buildings themselves—that have cultural 'value', and thus are supported by registration as *hakubutsukan*. This has led to situations where the *hakubutsukan* registration requirements, which calls for a resident director and curator, has seen head priests of a Shrine, or a curator initially hired for their knowledge in a singular area, take on responsibilities outside their realms of expertise (Kurihara 2021, 3). Registration as *hakubutsukan* provides benefits to the preservation and conservation of cultural objects: however, its current implementation continues a top-down notion of value that does not necessarily match what is valued in practice, by the humans who are directly placed to interact with their treasures and surroundings.

This is further evident at other kinds of institutional sites of display. The *hōbutsuden* of Shrines and Temples are not only concerned with the state of their "treasures", but in establishing the value and provenance of the site itself, to ensure its future operations. Top-down recognition and registration may aid in this endeavour, as a means of asserting a site's cultural value. Other museums in Japan have their own interests and specialties tied to their respective social contexts. For example, it is not unusual to see industrial museums in regional areas sponsored by producers and companies themselves to fulfil the "incorporated entity" aspect of the *hakubutsukan* registration system. These museums serve as promoters of industrial value, as well as act as an intermediary between corporate, tourism, and local actors (Sato 2021, 15), entwining industry and particular kinds of industrial development into the cultural identity of the surrounding inhabited areas.

The diversity of sites of display is extended further when taking into account the exhibition areas of heritage sites. Tangible heritage sites have their own form of social life, emerging not just through their status as architectural monuments, but through the memories of their past uses and involvement in local social activities. For example, Sapporo's Military Hall (Sapporo Clock Tower) was a multi-purpose site used by its local community before its current designation as a cultural property and subsequent adaptation into a place of display (Yaguchi 2002, 94). The Sapporo Mlitary Hall's history of use and function contributes to its place-identity, which is mediated by curators of the present and re-enforced through recognition by surrounding community actors. It is not just the objects it displays that have their meaning socially mediated: Sapporo Military Hall's own value is negotiated, and socially constituted, alongside the changing dynamics of Sapporo and Hokkaido (Yaguchi 2002).

Sites of display are therefore not neutral spaces, but are instead subject to their own contexts and surroundings. This calls for the consideration of how these contexts inform the intent of curators when they employ the objects in their collections to validate the perspectives of their holding institutions. As diverse sites of display are manipulated to suit legal designations of *hakubutsukan*, we might further ask the extent to which legal designations of object value—such as Nihontō—influences the display of valuable objects. When employed by the curator, who may not be an expert in every kind of object they care for, are these 'things' considered for their potential social lives, or are they simply employed to promote the legal and categorical designators of value?

This is significant when considering the broadly understood purpose of institutions such as museums, particularly as it comes to their position as educators. The framing of the institution can enable or dissuade interaction between custodians and audiences, which has further impact on the way social identities are expressed and understood between involved parties (Eckersley 2017, 20). Museums and the display of their collections are not, in practice, a one-way form of communication from curator to audience, but are a dynamic exchange of ideas where the presentation of objects and

the emotional, subjective reactions from visitors contributes to wider understandings of personal identities (Anderson, Shimizu, and Campbell 2016; Anderson, Shimizu, and Iwasaki 2017).

These reactions are nonetheless mediated by institutional actors, who have an assumed authority when compared to the public in matters of object knowledge and education (Svašek 2007,123). The way institutions present objects, when disconnected from input from actors outside of the institution or the legal categorisation of things, has the potential to erase marginalised identities, experiences, and differing ontological interactions with material culture (Black 2005, 16; Svašek 2007, 143). Without consideration for voices that exist outside of institutional and legal hierarchies, the museum may engage in a flattening of ontological complexity, narrowing the scope of value for material cultural objects and their presence in human social life.

This is not a criticism of the role of curator, or the work that curators undertake in Japanese institutions. Instead, I ask for a reflection as to whether it is appropriate to consider an object's value purely in the context of institutions and top-down categorisations which may not be equipped or positioned to understand, or even properly communicate, the social dimensions of every object in their possession. As the proscriptive nature of *hakubutsukan* registration faces complications when applied to diverse institutions, so too does the proscriptive nature of object registration limit our understanding of object value.

It is here that I return to the notion of socially living objects, and how subjective interactions with them expands upon the hierarchy of institutional displays. Existing research in the social significance of museum displays towards human identity-making explors visitors reactions to objects in terms of an evocation of nostalgia, and as an opportunity to speak on their personal experiences (Anderson, Shimizu, and Campbell 2016; Anderson, Shimizu, and Iwasaki 2017). This frames social negotiation undertaken in display spaces in terms of human life stories centred on the visitor. What if we extend these experiences to the object?

Socially emplaced objects have their own value as determined by their respective ontological contexts. It may be that the ontology of the viewer does not relate the emotions evoked by object displays to their own nostalgia, but instead constructs it as a form of empathy for the life experiences of the object itself. For example, the sword-as-artefact, in its display stand and behind its glass case, is separated from contemporary social life. It is not necessarily evocative of personal nostalgia in the same way as materials from the Showa Period [1926CE-1989CE], still in the living memory of common use in human social activities (Anderson, Shimizu, and Campbell 2016). Instead, what the sword's institutional display evokes, supported by descriptions and educational writing, is a notion of the distant past.

The sword-as-artefact is presented as an 'historical' or 'artistic' object, determined as such by authorities in craft and Japan's nationalised culture. In exhibition in Japan, the sword's value is

regularly ascribed to the social life of the Sengoku (Warring States) Period [1467CE-1615CE], and is representative of a strictly and often narrowly determined past. The sword-as-artefact is a thing that does not have a social place in the present outside of its display.

The sword-as-living-object, however, appears in a different manner. It has its tangible presence in its display, where it is met with by its visitors. Emotions play a key part in these meetings, but they are not of personal nostalgia in the viewer: instead, they are applied in an empathetic manner to the sword itself, as they think on its past experiences. This differs from deliberate attempts to question non-human life, such as the Museė du Quai Branly's exhibition *Persona*, where non-human lives are presented as "alien" and "uncanny" (Grimaud 2020, 78). The potentially personed object of the sword is one met with comfortably, easily, and naturally, while maintaining a connection to its past and potential future.

In this manner, the living sword's ontological complexity is brought forward by actors who engage with it empathetically, who speak of its spirit, its emotional sense, and its life experiences in tandem with examinations of its tangible form. The living sword inhabits its case, fulfilling a social role expected of it—to be met with on display—as it communicates its existence not in a narrow sense of time, but as an object that has persevered throughout hundreds, sometimes more than a thousand, years. It is not a Nihontō, made valuable by top-down legal designations, but is individualised as an entity with value beyond a representative nature.

The typical institutional explanation of an object's value and provenance is framed in 'objective' terms: its material make, or a record of its verified ownership by famed historical figures. As with the difference between sword-as-artefact and sword-as-living-object, there are differences between the institutional record of existence and the sword's life, as understood by independent actors. This latter record is made through a combination of tangible, intangible, and emotive aspects of the sword. I will explain this formation of sword life-histories, rather than object records, with two examples. In doing so, I further highlight the ontological positioning of Japan's swords and the impacts this positioning has on understandings of their value.

In the first case, I draw on the exhibition visitation and independent research activities of Saniwa and other contemporary sword actors. While their research references museums and museum collections it does not restrict itself to them. These independent investigators use a variety of available information to illustrate and expand on the known events of a sword's life. These independent works, framed not as historical inquiry but as "sword research", are a result of personal and collaborative pursuit of object life trajectories, drawing the sword's value from its own experiences, and recognising its status as an individual, socially emplaced entity. Thus, the pursuit of a living sword leads to a pursuit of knowledge and application of social value outside the bounds of typical institutional framing.

Secondly, I return to the life of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada in the Tokugawa Museum, Mito City. This sword, in its private ownership and subject of preservation programs spurred by the interest of Saniwa, highlights the ongoing social capabilities of these apparent historical objects, and their status as actors of the present day. In addition, this case provides an example of a reflexive and responsive institutional approach that, in tandem with its audience, expands on object value and its associated ontological complexity. Through the positioning of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada as an entity embodying life and experience, the Tokugawa Museum and the Saniwa it is regularly in contact with bring forward dimensions of value to the object beyond its abilities to evoke the past, and towards its identity as a social actor of the present day. Here, as with the independent research activities of Saniwa, engagement with a living, personed sword expands upon accepted norms and introduces an alternative way of valuing objects derived from actors outside the dominant hierarchies of value.

INDEPENDENT RESEARCHERS: VALUE FROM THE DISPLAY TO THE SOCIAL REALM

The institutional museum or gallery serves as a source and endorsement for particular allocations of value, made valid through their own sense of authority as places of knowledge-sharing, preservation, research, and education. However, knowledge production, and by extension wider ideas of value for objects, is not the sole domain of institutional actors. It may be that the values promoted by large-scale operations do not capture what is deemed significant by those who exist outside of the institutional umbrella. In the case of Japan's swords, this refers to the activities of Saniwa and other independent researchers who explore sword lives beyond what is present in the display case.

There is significant debate as to the position of public and amateur historians. What I write here is not a direct contribution to this discourse, but nonetheless covers the experience of the public and their own methods of knowledge curation and distribution. This process of knowledge production overlaps with realms of institutional knowledge and allocations of object value, but is made, negotiated, and transformed through interpersonal and collaborative actions that play out in the realm of daily social entertainment.

How, then, does the independent research of Saniwa expand upon our ideas regarding the object-value of swords? And why do Saniwa undertake their own research, instead of simply consuming what has already been made available by museums and the existing body of sword research? To answer this, one only has to look at the scope of knowledge Saniwa researchers engage with.

One reason for their work lies in access. It can be difficult for the Saniwa, particularly a female Saniwa without pre-existing knowledge of swords or sword research, to access the materials

made for the assumed audience of middle aged and older men, or to access the original historical sources held in institutional collections, libraries, etc. Saniwa research, written with their audience of fellow Saniwa in mind, mitigates the existing boundaries in knowledge production and consumption, extending to the emerging audience a way of understanding their favourite swords beyond the easily accessible exhibition setting, or through fictionalised works. Focused on the individual sword, the works of Saniwa cover sword histories as well as ownership, their craft, and assessments of their material value at numerous points in Japanese history. This is inclusive of the typical designations of value for swords, as codified in the legal designation of Nihontō.

Another reason may be more closely tied to the kind of knowledge valued by Saniwa and others who view swords not as tools of warriors but as objects with their own life trajectories. This approach expands the scope of Saniwa's works beyond the 'factual' or 'objective' modes of value inherent in categorisations such as Nihontō. This can be seen in an increased scope in the kinds of events, peoples, and places deemed relevant to the historical and present-day trajectory of a sword's existence, or in works that are inclusive of events and persons beyond major historical narratives. It can also be seen in the reflective and report-style works that detail a Saniwa's experiences in visiting exhibitions, or in undertaking their research in contact with institutional actors. These latter forms of knowledge-creation focus on the sword's current existence, placing it within its contemporary context of social ties and responsibilities.

Institutional perspectives and designations of sword value made on the categorical, rather than individual, aspects of Nihontō may differ from what is considered of interest to this emerging audience. As such, instead of assuming that the knowledge of Saniwa and the subsequent allocation of value for swords-as-objects aligns with the institution, it serves to examine how Saniwa approach the real-world sword and frame its existence when engaging in their own community. As such, two key points emerge through Saniwa's independent research. The first is the emergence of a new body of knowledge surrounding swords and their value. The second presents a view of swords as their own biographic subjects, that embraces the individuality and the variances of their life trajectories. Thus, we are asked to reconsider the value of the object away from institutional views as a crafted tool wielded by warriors, and towards that of an entity with its own social existence.

THE SANIWA IN THE MUSEUM

Museums and exhibition sites feature heavily in the way Saniwa learn about swords. Despite my insistence that the tangible form is only one aspect of a sword's existence, it is nonetheless an important one, and is central in the research works of Saniwa. Knowledge-gaining via exhibition attendance is also one of the more accessible ways a Saniwa can learn about swords, and can lead to further contact with the existing body of work of sword research. As such, it is important to

consider how the Saniwa engages with the museum, and how the consideration of swords as individual entities impacts on the act of exhibition visitation.

As stated earlier, Saniwa research draws on existing and institutional approaches to value in objects. Their presence in museums has been recognised in broader research on the activities of fan communities (Tamai 2016, 72). I myself observed Saniwa exhibition attendees undertaking extensive note-taking when visiting swords on display. The Saniwa's presence at museums should not be taken simply as an act of the consumptive 'fan', but as one that has the potential to build on their own informative works surrounding swords.

Saniwa's sword-related work is inclusive of the sword's current social context—the museum—and, as sword collections are scattered across Japan, this involves an engaged form of travel by Saniwa. These travels, too, are often guided by the experiences of other Saniwa. This follows with practices in fan-based tourism that derive more strongly from the sharing of inner-community knowledge than the directives of tourism organisations (Okamoto, 2015; Ono et al 2020). This leads to a community curation of significant sites and museums for Saniwa, by Saniwa, emphasising the present-day experience of a sword's context alongside the sharing of information related to the sword itself.

"When I started in 2015… it was hard to find information [about sword exhibitions]", explained one Saniwa as we spoke in early 2022. She was explaining why she had started her long-standing blog detailing sword exhibitions held throughout Japan. She had made this blog to assist others in their travels, to gather information on swords and where they were displayed, and to provide the contemporary context of these displays. Wanting to see swords, and noticing the lack of accessible information for others in her situation, she started her work shortly after the launch of Touken Ranbu —ONLINE— in 2015. She continues to update it with frequent travels to sword exhibitions in museums, galleries, shrines, and temples throughout Japan, writing about both places of display and details on the swords themselves. While details of sword exhibitions, particularly from institutions themselves, is far more accessible in 2022 than it was in 2015, this Saniwa's blog and similar Saniwa-focused guides that are circulated on social media are invaluable resources for those in search of swords and their current contexts of existence—including in the writing of this very investigation.

Rather than the existing renown of swords based on their material construction, what emerges as a key point of value in these guides is the ability to engage with the object and its context. The diversity of sites covered in travel blogs and guides shows an extensive Saniwa interest in swords that extends beyond the famed examples that occupy institutions such as the Tokyo National Museum. This makes valuable the collections and exhibition sites of the small-scale,

periphery display, made accessible not through institutional or official Touken Ranbu announcements, but the explorative practices of Saniwa themselves.

When pursuing the travel blog written by my interlocutor, titled *Tabisuru Saniwa* [旅する審神者, Travelling Saniwa], we can see the expansive nature of seeking out swords, inclusive of those outside of institutional categorisations of value such as National Treasure or Important Cultural Property. While spurred by initial interest in the swords of Touken Ranbu, this blog is in no ways limited to those in the franchise as Touken Danshi. Rather, this Saniwa's travels and subsequent writings are derived from an interest in swords as swords. This highlights the contexts of swords and their current displays as significant components of engagement. It is a framing that, once again, derives from concerns regarding access to the sword—particularly those that are outside of the prototypical museum.

Swords valued for their ability to be met with are framed in relation to their current day surroundings. As we discussed the various places swords are displayed, the blog-writing Saniwa spoke of the differing appeal of traditional museum spaces and those of temples and heritage sites. The latter, she explained, have a "spirit-like'" [魂的], sensory appeal that is lacking in the museum, constructed as a place of education. It perhaps bears considering the impact this sensory aspect has on how one approaches objects and subsequently internalises their value.

The sensory and spatial impacts of display are not lost on typical museums or their curators. Some engage in experimental spatial arrangements aimed at capturing the sensory elements of diverse settings of display, in an attempt to replicate the subconscious, ontologically-positioned approach to potentially living objects. This can be seen in experimentations in the spatial arrangements of Buddhist sculptures in museums, as votive boxes and the spiritual context of their religious function are incorporated into the institutional display (Robson 2010, 123-4). Swords are, like these sculptures, met with in a variety of secular and religious contexts. As such, the records of Saniwa and their emotional experiences across exhibition sites provides important data in regards to how the context of display impacts on the perceived value of the sword itself.

Buddhist sculptures are institutionally recognised as objects of worship, and their largely human form may make it easier to cross the boundary between an object and the living sense embedded within it. To this, I compare the experiences of the Saniwa in the various spaces that house swords.

The deliberate addition of objects such as offering boxes is an act taken by the museum curators to bring the sensory experiences of a temple into the museum space. However, in the case of Saniwa's engagements with swords, it may be that this deliberate provocation is not entirely necessary. Both museums and sites like temples are, in the Saniwa experience, places where swords are met with. This meeting is influenced by, but not reliant on, particular spatial forms. As a

consequence, the variety of swords' spatial contexts becomes part of the visiting, influencing some aspects of engagement but not necessarily overriding the experiences and understandings gained elsewhere. This was evident when I spoke one Saniwa after visiting the sword Monoyoshi Sadamune [物吉貞宗], on display at Nagoya's Tokugawa Art Museum in July 2021.

> "I remember I was trying to look at the sword 'properly' instead of just thinking about what it meant to me personally that I was seeing Monoyoshi… so I was reading the description and looking at [its] manufacture and trying to get the full experience. Then I went to look at him the second time and I remember that this time, I felt really, really happy… I kept thinking 'wow, I'm so lucky to be here'… [T]he museum can keep him safe and cared for and many more Monoyoshi fans can come to see him and feel happy too."

This recollection covers a number of aspects regarding the subjective approach to swords, which takes into account the varied contexts of their display. First is the acknowledgement of the purpose of the museum as a place of education. However, what emerges more strongly in this recollection are the Saniwa's emotional responses, which re-frames the collection as a place of safety and the facilitation of future meetings between sword and Saniwa. It is likely that religious notions of swords tied to temple's spatial contexts are also mediated by the primacy of the emotional engagement, and the acknowledgement of the sword as an entity to be met with.

This Saniwa's experience has not been taken in isolation. Through the same modes of communication used to share exhibition information, Saniwa regularly report on their visits and the emotive components of them. Accompanied by photographs and even, at times, creative depictions of swords and their spirits interacting with the spatial contexts of their display (such as Touken Danshi enjoying a temple's ambience, crouching beneath a low doorframe of a heritage site, or wandering the halls of a museum), the Saniwa's experience at the institutional display is inclusive of their diverse contexts but nonetheless centred on the sword as a potentially living entity.

I bring these anecdotes of travel to attention to highlight the particular social construction of exhibition spaces in the experiences of Saniwa. With the pre-existing notion of swords as things to be met with, and in potential possession of something spirit-like outside of direct religious settings, the context of display sites becomes only a part of the object's life experience. They do not to be arranged in evocative tableaux to evoke a sense of life, as has been attempted with Buddhist sculptures, as Saniwa already approach swords with a base of knowledge derived from emotional connections. Instead of the spatiality of institutions mediating the display, the display itself is mediated by its visitors and defined by the entities that inhabit them—in this case, swords.

This is significant when considering the institutional framings of swords and the communication of their object-value. This value, for the Saniwa, is not entirely determined by the furnishings of display or the educational elements of an institution. It is made in reference to the experiences of other Saniwa, and their own subjective approaches to the potentially personed sword. Thus, the Saniwa in the museum is the producer of a certain kind of knowledge, promoting pathways of access for others while simultaneously sharing emotional responses that shape the understanding of swords and their contemporary existences. Value is derived from community engagements, including engagements with the sword itself, as much as it is from the framings of institutions.

A sword's significance in this context has a shifting locus of determination by institutions and independent actors as they contribute to value-creation alongside, but not subordinate to, existing definitions. The Saniwa in the museum considers the institutional viewpoint, but brings to it an existing knowledge of the sword as emplaced in social spheres of the present. What emerges from Saniwa's travel recollections and exhibition visitation is not the centralised authority of value in the institutional museum, but rather, a context of experiences occupy multiple tangible spaces. Display sites are recognised for their differences, while also being made similar in status as a place of gathering for humans and swords. It is this ability to meet that is highlighted as the valuable aspect of the sword, regardless of who writes the labels of its display.

DŌJINSHI, FAN WORKS, AND SWORD RESEARCH

In her recollection of visiting Monoyoshi Sadamune, the Saniwa explained the sense that she should approach it "properly", through an educational lens. Similarly, the Saniwa running her travel blog explained how she often reads books and other information about the swords met in her travels. This shows an approach to swords combining both emotional and educational elements. It also highlights the individualised value of swords, as both Saniwa expressed a desire to know the particular qualities of the particular objects they had met in display. For the blog-writing Saniwa, she even pointed to this educational reading as leading to her recognise previously unmet swords she encountered on her travels. The individualisation of swords and their experiences leads to a wider practice among Saniwa of undertaking research based not on the categorical sword, but the singular, individual one.

The ever-expanding body of what is called sword research [研究] undertaken by Saniwa supports and expands upon existing information on swords most readily accessible in museum catalogues or general information books. As with guides to exhibitions, Saniwa's research works are largely supported by inner-community sharing networks. In this manner, the documentary

research produced in this community further decentralises the notion of 'value' from institutional authorities.

In the first chapter of this section, I explained the concept of dōjinshi, also called derivative works [二次創作], as an aspect of social negotiation amongst Japanese fan communities. Saniwa sword research, too, falls under this umbrella. Like other fan works, sword research is published and distributed in dōjinshi markets. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and even after the majority of restrictions were lifted, specific author circles and "only" events (a term used for the sale of fan works focused on specific characters or concepts) shared their research in online gathering and sales spaces (for example, the Tōken Jiyu Kenkyūten, 2022). While these works are ostensibly about the tangible sword, a number are illustrated with images of Touken Danshi or other motifs familiar to the Touken Ranbu fan. Outside of physical media, Saniwa sword research also exists in a more directly negotiable form in social media threads. Sword research is a small, yet enduring, staple of Touken Ranbu's fan-made content.

Fictional dōjinshi are recognised as works occupying a negotiative space, particular amongst fellow fans and the boundaries regarding the appropriate use of a franchise's characters and imagery (Benson 2018). This inner-community negotiation is extended with the inclusion of research dōjinshi, expressed in a kind of free-form peer review undertaken by Saniwa, with reference to historical and institutional source documents related to a sword and its existence. Non-fiction dōjinshi exist not only as part of normative fan activities, but are a genre of public research that, while aimed in part at a fan audience, has a place amongst the wider negotiation of object meanings and their presence in social life.

This can be seen in the sites of distribution for Saniwa's research. Their work is not limited to the dōjinshi sales market. Daikakuji Temple in Kyoto directly stocks one Saniwa's research regarding a sword in their collection, recognising the work and acting as a direct sanctioning of it by traditional sources of authority on historicised objects and their associated value. The specificity of dōjinshi as "understood by those who understand [them]" (Ishikawa 2020, 307-308) is expanded from the immediate realm of fans and made accessible to other actors in contemporary sword culture. While Saniwa research is made for and made on the understandings of a particular audience, its relevance to broader object-values is made clear when it is distributed to those outside of the Saniwa community.

It is common for Saniwa research to use the imagery of Touken Danshi and the vocabulary of Touken Ranbu. However, it is important to recognise that the writings themselves are based on historical and archival documents that do not appear in the franchise, or in the licensed depictions of its characters. It is therefore difficult to conceive of these works as "derivative" of the franchise,

when in practice, their use of media content is to frame or make relatable the sometimes dense documentary evidence to a broad audience.

The pursuit of knowledge surrounding swords is therefore an act that crosses the boundaries of institution and the independent researcher. This turns the display site from a single-direction transmission of information and cultural value into a negotiative space. This is represented both in the institution's distribution of Saniwa research, and the ways they adopt Saniwa social practices— such as the colours and abstract motifs of Touken Danshi—in decorating their own spaces. There are also less visible ways in which institutions, the typical loci of authority, participate with Saniwa in the expansion of knowledge and the framing of value for swords. These activities occur behind the scenes, such as in instances of providing access to historical materials and documents detailing individual sword lives. It can also be in providing institutional verification for Saniwa's research: one staff member at the Tokugawa Museum recounted to me an instance where one such researcher asked the Museum to check their writings. The staff member recalled her sense of awe at the scale and depth of the Saniwa's research, brought to an institution for validation and reassurance. It is for this reason that I position Saniwa research as an extension and an expansion on the existing body of work, that should not be trivialised simply because it has its origins in a fan community.

I now turn to the way Saniwa research is presented. Saniwa research is largely framed around particular swords or groups of swords with recognised social ties, ie, relatives [兄弟刀] made by the same smithing school, or companions [組] belonging to the same historical collection. They are largely spurred by an interest in individual Touken Danshi, and cover both material and experiential aspects of a sword's existence. This approach differs to the typical framings of institutions, where a sword is positioned in relation to a particular human owner, rather than its own experiences and social ties to other swords. In this manner, Saniwa both add to existing knowledge while also shifting the central focus of its application. The sword is sanctioned in its own biography, with its own significance as a historical and present-day actor.

Those working in independent sword research recognise the need to expand upon the existing body of work and its focus of attention. One anthology series, called the *1000 Stories of Swords* [御刀萬語], has a significant number of Saniwa contributors (Teikyodo, 2020). In the first volume of this anthology, its primary organiser describes their motives for publishing these contributions. Existing resources on swords are founded on works written in the Showa Period [1926CE-1989CE], which may contain out-dated information; further, there are discrepancies among institutional sources as to information regarding swords, making strict use of existing work difficult to align with each other [「結果としてどういうことになるかというと、本によって言う事が違うし、展示の説明を見てもまた違う、という事態が発生します」] (Setsuka 2020, 5).

Thus, new research must be undertaken in a field where its current information is inadequate for those who seek to engage with it. This process, the anthology organiser emphasises, is a difficult and ongoing one, with the scope of swords so vast that they ask for any assistance others can provide (Setsuka 2020, 16). The scope of sword research becomes apparent when one realises that the research being undertaken is essentially focused on the individual swords themselves. These range in such number and experiences, with far-reaching connections to other human and non-human actors, that a single author cannot hope to cover them all in the depth that is expected from a work of research.

Sword research as an activity focused on individualised swords can be further seen in the distinction made by both authors and readers between historical research and sword research. The 1000 Stories of Swords anthology also makes this distinction, outlining the different approaches taken to historical research (analysing a particular social context at a particular point of a sword's existence) and sword research (focusing more on the qualities and experiences of swords themselves) (Setsuka 2020, 12). This separation stands in contrast to the historicised context provided in institutional explanations of swords. It signifies a different approach to the objects based on their own qualities and experiences, and not entirely that of their former owners or those owners' contexts.

For example, let us take one of the sword labels of the Tokyo National Museum. Iwakiri Natsuga Tōshirō [岩切長束藤四郎] is a sword listed as an Important Cultural Property. Its Japanese language description reconts it as as "having a hazy history, but was passed from Hideyoshi to the Natsuka family, then to Fukushima Masanori, and finally to the Okuhira family" (Tokyo National Museum, recorded from the exhibition 2021). This description frames the sword's value through its exchange through owners, starting with the most recognisable of these figures, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and his well known historical context of the Sengoku period. The object's significance is contextualised along with that of the unifier of medieval Japan.

A Saniwa's historical research approach to Iwakiri Natsuga Tōshirō might take on the contexts of these former owners and the passage of its exchange. It may use Hideyoshi as a starting point, and examine the contexts of the sword's various exchanges and the life situations of its owners. Sword research is more likely to take on a different path. This is likely to deal with its make, comparisons to others of its kind and era, or perhaps even a dive into the "hazy" life trajectory the object has taken beyond its famed and named owners. Thus, the distinction between historical and sword research is one that expands on the brief information found in exhibition displays, and recognises qualities of a sword's existence that are not solely contained in the realm of historical inquiry.

The separation of sword research from historical research may seem strange, if one approaches these objects by default as historical artefacts. However, when seen as individual entities with an existence that still has tangible and intangible presence in contemporary social settings, the separation of the two realms seems more appropriate and natural. There is, after all, a difference in how one values the memory of a person, in comparison to one who is still in front of you. The ease with which the realms of 'sword' and 'history' are made distinct was shared by Saniwa I met with, even those who do not pursue research themselves. While I asked many Saniwa their thoughts on the distinction between these two realms in my field work, it was the response of a group of five at Hyogo's Tada Shrine that was the most striking. Indeed, it was striking for the fact that it wasn't at all; they only needed a brief moment of consideration to unanimously agree that sword research and historical research were, of course, separate things, even if they both dealt with the subject of the sword.

Amongst the Saniwa I spoke to, while it was a common response to point to an interest in history as a reason for their current interest in swords, it was equally common to hear that they were not as interested in the past as they were in the swords themselves. It appears to be a matter of course that an interest in swords does not necessitate an interest in history. While this can be seen, in some instances, through the artistic presentation of swords in art museums, these remain objects that are frequently attributed to their historical ownership and historical make. The Saniwa's natural response that one does not need an interest in this historicised presentation to enjoy swords is another sign as to how the value of these objects is centred in their own, contemporary, existence.

This is not to say that the past is completely discarded by Saniwa. Rather, I seek to emphasise how swords are objects whose stories are ongoing, and who have qualities of fascination and value beyond their perceived status as historical artefact. The Saniwa I spoke to at Tada Shrine had come to visit a sword called Onikirimaru [鬼切丸], familiar to Touken Ranbu fans by its alternate name Higekiri, owned by the shrine and on a rare occurrence of public display. Their context of meeting—at this shrine, dedicated to the sword's owners the Seiwa Genji family, and with its name, embodying a tale of its past demon-slaying—brings forward historical anecdotes and contexts for the consideration of the visitor. But it is not these legends of past humans and past human exploits that had brought them to the shrine. It was the individual sword, and the chance to meet it in its current day context.

With this in mind, I return to the framings of swords in Saniwa sword research: valuing the object as its own, individualised, entity. Sword research facilitates and supports the interactions Saniwa have in real-world, present-day spaces, and the tropes of their writing—the use of personal sword names and imagery of humanised forms—serves to communicate the individual, personed qualities of the sword into the context of the human everyday. "Sword research" is another way

emerging actors recognise the sword's value and reenforce its place in social life. Saniwa's research works are not simply a production of factual knowledge about objects. They are a product of community negotiation of both the sword and its perceived value. This approach works alongside institutional notions of value: but, in its creation and its adoption, highlights the inherently social aspects of determining value towards things and their existences.

SWORD IDENTITIES AND COLLABORATIVE VALUE-MAKING

To understand how sword research is both a means of negotiating sword lives and of expanding on existing research and value-designations, I move to the virtual gathering places where Saniwa collaborate in their pursuit of knowledge. Virtual gathering places, particularly social media sites, are a significant component of contemporary fan cultures.

Published dōjinshi and works such as the *1000 Stories of Swords* anthology are signed not by an individual's personal name, but more often, by their social media nickname and handle. This connection to social media is more than a form of attribution: it is also an identifier used by independent researchers as they explore and negotiate developments in sword research. Central in the sharing of Saniwa's research is the ability to locate the Saniwa in the discursive space of social media. The tools of a Saniwa researcher are similarly attached to virtual space. While they, like others in pursuit of knowledge, utilise physical archives of historical documents, Saniwa are frequent users of online/digital databases, museum collections, and library archives. When these sources of knowledge have an online presence, they are easily sharable with other Saniwa. Particularly in the case of large digitised collections, the sharing of sources allows for a collaborative pursuit of the information related to swords and sword lives. Social media here becomes more than a platform for one's own thoughts. It becomes a means of community negotiation of the knowledge-base, and subsequent interpretations of value, for swords.

Online platforms have allowed for an expansion in the reach of independent works beyond Japan's geographic borders (Ogura 2000). Platforms such as Twitter, the illustration-sharing site Pixiv, and sites designed to gather multiple social media contributions such as Togetter, are utilised by Saniwa in collating their research and research collaborations and are accessible by those both inside and outside of Japan. In this collaborative and easily reachable setting the resources for research are made accessible, and the analysis of these resources is made negotiable by voices that extend far beyond the realm of institutional authority. This crowd-sourced approach to knowledge creation and circulation is not without its own critique: however, I here highlight how the virtual organisation of knowledge further positions swords in terms of their individualised experiences and socially negotiated existences.

The endeavours of Saniwa online collate the difficult to access historical and contemporary sources surrounding specific swords, increasing the scope of what is available and who is able to analyse it. This approach to collaborative source-sharing and interpretation expands knowledge of the sword and the value of its existence beyond the short space of the museum description, or the scope of research published in the post-war period.

To elaborate, I present two examples. The first is regarding ownership of the sword Koryuu Kagemitsu [小竜景光] in the late Edo Period [1603CE-1868CE]. A flurry of research activity related to this sword came about after the announcement of that Touken Danshi Koryuu Kagemitsu would appear in Musical: Touken Ranbu's Spring 2022 production, in a story centred around the assassination of one of its historical owners, the polirical figure Ii Naosuke in 1859. Touken Danshi Koryuu Kagemitsu is characterised by his volatile ownership history, passing quickly from one owner to the next rather than staying long-term in a family collection. Thus, with the character's debut in the franchise's musical, Saniwa sought to answer an ancillary question: who, exactly, owned Koryuu Kagemitsu at the time of Ii Naosuke's famous death?

Touken Ranbu's musical adaptation is popular among Saniwa for its emotional narratives and energetic music; however, it is less highly regarded in its historical contextualisation. The sub-franchise's (as of writing) nine main narratives all draw on historical settings and events, to which Saniwa provide, on social media, in-depth guides to their settings, time periods, and other related content. At times these guides may even provide corrections or elaborations on points of history that the musical's writers have skimmed in their own telling. The project to locate the ownership of Koryuu Kagemitsu arose in this context. Here, we can see that while the act of sword research is done with knowledge of franchise narratives, its goals extend beyond them. In this case, they aimed at providing a comprehensive look at the life events of a particular sword.

While the 2022 investigation into Koryuu Kagemitsu's ownership was spurred by its inclusion in the musical cast, it is not the first time an independent sword researcher sought to detangle this seemingly minor point of the sword's history. This existing work came in useful as Saniwa sought out historical documents and records of ownership for the sword, shared and collated on the collaborative website Togetter (Togetter 2022). Alongside this, links to databases and the means of access to historical sources of sword exchanges were shared for other Saniwa to investigate. Posts and threads of the investigation spread on social media, and others contributed their own research and sources, with major developments being reflected in updates to the collaborative Togetter page. What resulted is a pinpointing of the sword's complicated ownership, uncovering its singular, individualised experience at a singular point of its existence.

This record was made and shared through a living document produced by Saniwa. In doing so, the point of value and interest for the object—its life trajectory, even in a small period of time—

arise in contrast to the abridged version provided by institutional sources of information. In fact, Koryuu Kagemitsu's frequent exchanges in the late Edo period do not come under scrutiny of its current ownership, the Tokyo National Museum. In its description on the e-Museum, an online database of Japan's National Treasures, this period of the sword's life is summarised simply as "...at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867, the sword became the property of Yamada Asaemon and was later presented to Emperor Meiji" [幕末に山田浅右衛門家の所有となり、明治天皇に献上された] (National Institutes for Cultural Heritage 2022).

While not inaccurate, the nuances of how the Yamada-Asaemon came to own the sword, and its ownership by the Ii family in this same period, are not made apparent in the brief words of the museum. They are, however, by Saniwa, who propose the sword to have first been owned by the Yamada Asaemon in 1846. By the end of this same year, it appears to have been gifted to the Ii family. Possible discussions as to the sword's return to the Yamada-Asaemon were made in 1847, with their adoption into the Ii family. By the time of Ii Naosuke's death in 1860, this exchange had been completed (Togetter 2022). This timeline of events, made with reference to historical sources, reveal the level of concern Saniwa hold in identifying a sword's location, and by extension, its potential experiences: for example, whether or not the sword would have witnessed its former owner's assassination, a question many Saniwa had in the lead-up to the spring 2022 musical.

Saniwa's research aiming to locate Koryuu Kagemitsu in its historical context does not place the sword's value on its ownership (by the Yamada Asaemon, Emperor Meiji, or the flow thereafter to the Tokyo National Museum). Rather, Saniwa researchers explore the experiences of the sword
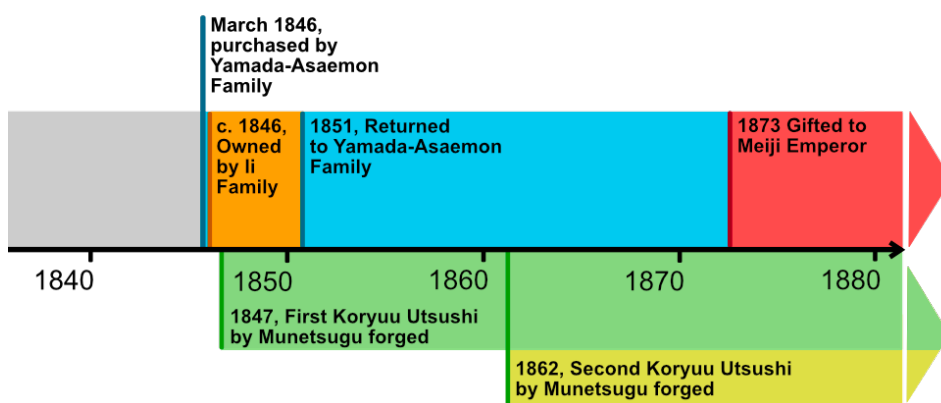

Figure 4 (top) Koryuu Kagemitsu's life trajectory as seen in collaborative Saniwa research.
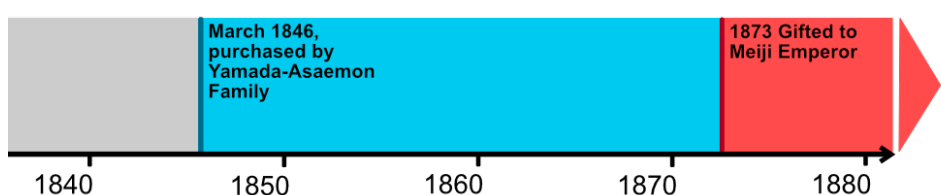

Figure 5 (bottom) Koryuu Kagemitsu's life trajectory from the e-Museum description, dates referenced from Saniwa research.

itself as they collate and make the scattered information of its existence and life events visible and accessible to those not versed in research practices. The sword's ownership is both historical data and a means to understand the relationships it accumulated as it moved between spheres and settings in the social negotiations of the late Edo period.

My second example of collaborative research is one that further emphasises Saniwa's valuation of swords by their individual experiences through the search for the origins of a sword's name. The sword in question is called Azuki Nagamitsu [小豆長光], an object without a clearly identifiable, tangible existence. It is nonetheless commonly associated via stories and anecdotes with ownership by the daimyo Uesugi Kenshin, aligning with post-war and pre-2015 institutional presentations of swords as an extension of their famed warrior owners. Verifying the origins of this name, which does not appear to have been in use during Uesuki Kenshin's own time, would assist in locating it in the Uesugi family's historical documents of sword, and potentially identify a tangible sword. The research undertaken here was conducted, in the words of its organiser, "amongst the swamp of sword researchers" (Togetter 2021). This uses the fan-term "swamp" [沼] as a reference to community participation and admiration of a particular character or dynamic, and applies it to the independent research context. In this case, it is an identifier for those with a deep interest in solving this puzzle of a name and its origins. This research is enacted under the language of fan communities, and negotiated by those who identify with belonging to this community.

The name Azuki Nagamitsu has two clear components. The first is the moniker "Azuki", meaning red bean [小豆], and the second is the name of its smith, Nagamitsu [長光] of the Osafune sword-smithing school. Nagamitsu swords are fixtures of exhibitions displaying swords belonging to Sengoku figures, and are regularly seen as examples of particularly fine works of craft through their registration as cultural properties.

The search for the origins of the name Azuki Nagamitsu shines light on the concerns held by Saniwa and sword researchers in their evaluation of swords. The first lies in verifying anecdotes: Saniwa researchers are not content to uncritically accept commonly established knowledge when identifying the life paths of their favourite swords. This is particularly true when it comes to sword names—a major means of their personification and individualisation. Verifying the origins of a name is not done to devalue the object itself, but rather, is a means of exploring the changing status of the object, its renown, and the experiences it may have held beyond its most famous anecdotes.

Sword anecdotes, employed in tandem with biographies of famed historical figures, have previously come under the scrutiny of Saniwa researchers. It is often the case that the sword's presence in these stories, particularly those of a renown craft such as the works of Nagamitsu, are used to increase the significance of a human actor. This may be most clearly seen in the common

association between the historical figure Okita Souji and one of the Kiku Ichimonji swords[4], an object of significant tangible worth said to have been wielded by a man with his own mythological status as a master swordsman. Thus, in the search for a sword's own life trajectory, anecdotes provide a useful, if somewhat fictionalised, starting point. However, they must be detangled from the mythologising of human figures, if they are to be of any use in locating tangible swords.

Saniwa's research towards the verification of sword anecdotes place the sword as central in its own biography. In the case of Azuki Nagamitsu, a verification of the origins of its name also serves as a verification of its existence as it cannot be clearly located in an existing collection. In delving through sources ranging the length of the 250-year Edo period, from encyclopaedias of treasured swords to popular novels, plays, and narratives, Saniwa searched to verify not only Azuki Nagamitsu's name, but this existence.

Their search involved popular works, such as the early Edo-period *Kōetsukawa Nakajima Gunki* [甲越川中嶋軍記], which was then identified as a potential source for subsequent sword records listing Azuki Nagamitsu, such as the oft-cited Encyclopaedia of Japanese Swords [日本刀大百科事典] (Togetter 2021). The confluence of oral tradition, theatre, and the sharing of anecdotes is pondered by Saniwa researchers, who, in their work, stressed the need for knowledge on Edo period entertainment and literature should they unravel the mystery of Azuki Nagamitsu (Togetter 2021).

In the end, this collaborative investigation successfully traced the origins of the name Azuki Nagamitsu. It most likely appeared in the *Kōtsukawa Nakajima Gunki*, before being taken up by Jōruri [浄瑠璃] musical storytelling and becoming mythologised in its own right. Alongside this investigation of documentary records, other Saniwa contributed with mentions of "Azuki Nagamitsu" in conjunction with swords in various collections of the later Edo and post-Edo periods (Togetter 2021).

With this collaborative research, Saniwa contributed to an uncovering of the way historical sources propagate terms and narrative threads in popular consciousness. They have attempted a detangling of a potential, tangible Azuki Nagamitsu from the mythology of its name and its existence as an extension of Uesugi Kenshin's mythologised life-narrative by highlighting the murky origins of common anecdotes. As well as this is the drive they show in understanding a sword by its own qualities, and under its own (assumed) name. Azuki Nagamitsu is valued here by its individualised potential: a potential that can be further examined, once its existence is verified, and the fictionalised anecdotes of its past have been made clear.

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[4] The Kiku Ichimonji swords [菊一文字, Chrysanthemum Ichimonji] are a group of swords associated with the Emperor Gotoba and the Ichimonji sword-smiths.

In the cases of both Koryuu Kagemitsu and Azuki Nagamitsu, sword research emerges alongside a perspective that swords are individual entities with their own biographical experiences. They are not valued simply as examples of craft or objects of prestige owned by prominent historical figures. Their movements, such as with Koryuu Kagemitsu, are traceable, and speak to the sword's own experiences beyond what is demonstrated by institutional descriptions. Their names and stories, as with the case of Azuki Nagamitsu, are verifiable both as terms of reference and as a means to identify a sword's existence. Saniwa research uses sources dealing with famed historical figures, such as Ii Naosuke or Uesugi Kenshin, crowd-sourced and collated in living and ever-evolving documents. However, Saniwa do not seek to expand upon the lives of these human owners: rather, they use the threads present in historical sources to unveil a sword's own existence. In doing so, the research of a sword's existence becomes its biography, not in the sense that it reflects human social exchanges (Pitelka 2019), but as a means of recognising its own social ties.

Sword research provides a venue for Saniwa to negotiate, collaborate, and present their perspectives on what is or is not valuable about a sword. In doing so, they expand the typical notions of object value to be inclusive of the sword's social experiences, and shift the active production of knowledge to a body of actors without direct institutional involvement. With their framings of sword lives and experiences, Saniwa who engage with this research either as researcher or reader take this knowledge to their own interactions with swords. Regardless of one's interest—ownership, craft, or anecdote—it is through community engagement and a clearly defined investigation into swords as their own subjects that their value is decentralised from the scope of museum authorities, and drawn into negotiable social space.

INSTITUTIONS AND SANIWA: CO-CREATION OF VALUE AT THE MITO TOKUGAWA MUSEUM

With the understanding that institutions are a major promoter of cultural value, and now with the added element of independent researchers expanding on established ways of determining that value, I put forward the question: do these actors intersect in their work? The answer is, at some institutions, yes. This can be seen in the co-creation of meaning and value undertaken when institutions interact with Saniwa beyond their capacity as audience and sanctions the Saniwa's role as a producer of knowledge. The private and local-level institutions that are frequented by Saniwa are in a position where they can nurture ongoing relationships of institution/visitor while also undertaking a revision of how value is made for the objects in their collections.

This is a responsive form of creation for object-value that includes how Saniwa and other sword actors understand these objects as significant. In the course of my fieldwork across metropolitan and regional Japan, it was the small, local, and private institution that arose as most

accessible and amicable to this kind of responsive activity. In particular, these institutions engaged with perspectives of swords that expanded on traditional framings of value based on warrior lives and histories. In doing so, the institution can undergo a re-evaluation of objects and their potential social existences beyond established notions of display.

The sword emerges as central to the interactions of institutions, visitors, and producers of knowledge, as their understanding of it as an individual entity blurs the boundaries of knowledge-distribution and determination. It is here necessary to briefly explain the typical sword exhibition in Japan.

The exhibition and display of swords in Japan are largely framed around notions of the warrior, with swords presented alongside other arms and armour in illustrating the lives of conflict for their former owners. Swords retain their spirit-like quality in this presentation, although the 'spirit' in question is most frequently tied to their human owner. Sword-spirits are, in this case, an extension of the warrior's own. This is evidenced in exhibition titles that frequently use phrases designating swords as "Soul of the Warrior" [武士の魂]. One such exhibition, titled "Touken: Mononobu no Kokoro" [刀剣もののぶの心 The Sword: Soul of the Warrior] was held at the Suntory Museum in 2021. In this exhibition swords from temple and shrine collections, some with explicit religious dedication and ceremonial use, were nonetheless framed by the exploits of warriors such as Minamoto no Yoshitsune, Oda Nobunaga, and Toyotomi Hideyoshi. This shows that the pairing of swords with famous historical warriors in large-scale exhibitions persists even when these objects are from collections of a differing use and context. As swords such as those by Nagamitsu or the Kiku Ichimonji are evoked in tandem with their former owners to emphasise past humans' status, here, in the typical institutional display, the renown of historical humans is used to give present-day value for swords. In this framing, the sword loses its status as an individual object and entity.

This form of display, however, is not set in stone. There have been shifts in exhibition practices, particularly at sites with frequent attendance by and interaction with Saniwa. Mishima City's Sano Art Gallery, located around an hour from Tokyo by express train, has in its annual sword exhibitions built up recognition and frequent attendance amongst Saniwa. Between 2009 and 2015, nearly all these exhibitions described swords and their presence in warrior ownership or warrior culture, even when showcasing the work of contemporary smiths (Sano Art Museum, 2012). However, from 2016, the terms for warrior [武士 *bushi*] appear minimally, with several-year stretches where they are not mentioned once[5] (Sano Art Museum 2016, 2021). Instead, exhibitions

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[5] 2022 and 2023's exhibitions saw a return of warrior framing alongside city-wide promotions of NHK's Taiga Dramas, 13 Lords of the Shogun and Dou Suru Ieyasu (What Will You Do, Ieyasu?), both of which deal with persons and objects related to the museum's collection.

in this period were framed on the existences of swords themselves, and the events that they witnessed alongside people of a status other than historical warriors or daimyo.

One of the Sano Art Gallery's exhibitions, 2019's "A Masterpiece is Reborn", was particularly memorable for the author of the Travelling Saniwa blog. "It's not usual to see swords [like that]", she explained of the exhibition, unique in its collection of burned and damaged swords. "It was emotional".

The exhibition's premise on damaged swords and not the pristine, shining examples that make up a typical display centred the individual objects experiences and presence at historical events. As this Saniwa noted, it is unusual to see burned swords in exhibition, let alone to have an entire exhibition framed around objects that have, in a sense, lost their typical signifiers of artistic value. Instead of craft or ownership, these swords were arranged by the events that caused their lasting damage, in a framing that lies more closely to the emotional narrative of a sword's life than the glory of a former owner. Alongside these experiences were stories of those who had restored these swords throughout history, bringing the caretaker and craftsman to the institutional positioning of these objects and their presence in an expanded social setting. This appears to be an area of interest for Saniwa, as those that I spoke to—in particular those attending sword exhibitions in Ishikawa, Nagoya, and Hyogo—would just as readily mention the caretakers and maintainers of swords as they would famous historical owners.

This is not to say that warriors do not appear in the lives of swords, but rather, that a shift in presentation brings to light those human experiences outside of the context of warriors and their conflicts. The "Masterpiece is Reborn" exhibition was held at an institution with regular collaboration with Touken Ranbu and attendance by Saniwa. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the framing of swords, and the purpose of the exhibition, deviated from long-held norms when appealing to an audience that differs from the assumption of swords as a male realm of interest. As such, although the Saniwa frequently seek out information outside of institutional framing, the interplay between visitor and museum is not one of contrast or conflict, but has the potential for co-development in the promotion of alternate values for famed objects, expanding beyond simple designations of historical or artistic worth. To examine the full scope of the interactions between institutions and Saniwa, I return to another example of a burned sword: Shokudaikiri Mitsutada.

RECOGNISING THE SPIRIT OF A DAMAGED SWORD

The Tokugawa Museum in Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture, has a long-standing relationship with Saniwa. Their display of the sword Shokudaikiri Mitsutada has, since 2015, combined the institution's forms of valuing the object with those shared with their newfound audience. The Toukugawa Museum's presentation of its objects, like the Sano Art Museum, already differs in a

number of ways to national or metropolitan institutions, as it draws on the Mito Tokugawa family's own history with their collections and displays. This perhaps contributes to the museum's flexibility in its presentation of swords such as Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, which expand beyond strict notions of the warrior. Indeed, the swords of the Tokugawa Museum are presented as their own individual entities. Alongside this presentation is the museum's more active responsive interactions with Saniwa as they validate their visitors own approaches to swords through connecting them with museum initiatives and exhibition spaces. These connective activities highlight Saniwa's own contributions to sword culture and the ongoing preservation of the "spirits" (in this case called tamashii 魂) contained by objects such as Shokudaikiri Mitsutada.

Shokudaikiri Mitsutada was one of the "unusual" swords exhibited (on loan) at the Sano Art Museum's "A Masterpiece is Reborn" exhibition. It was damaged by fire in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and as a result, the sword today is not a pristine and shining example of the sword-smith Mitsutada's craft, nor does it have the same appearance as it did when in the hands of its warrior owners. It is instead a blackened, burned blade, marked by now irremovable melted gold fittings. For many years, Shokudaikiri Mitsutada was stored by the Tokugawa Museum with its other damaged swords. However, in 2015, Saniwa eager to meet with the sword "flooded" Mito and the Tokugawa Museum in search of it (Uemura, 2015). Since then, Saniwa have become highly visible supporters of the Museum and its activities.

Common across the Museum and Saniwa's approaches to swords such as Shokudaikiri Mitsutada is the notion of intangibility. This intangibility is a key factor as to why this sword, burned and damaged, retains a high level of value among those who interact with it. As noted in the previous section, burned swords are an unusual sight in the typical institutional display. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's status as a valued object is thus tied to a source aside from craft and aesthetics.

The typical institutional display would perhaps emphasise its historical qualities: indeed, it is this quality that is emphasised in Touken Ranbu, and in the characterisation of Touken Danshi Shokudaikiri Mitsutada. This sword was owned by the daimyo Date Masamune. Its fictionalised self draws on elements of this historical human's life in his design, sporting an eye-patch just as the historical Masamune did, and expressing a fondness for the daimyo's former domain in north-east Japan. While there is an element of intangibility in evoking an imagination of Date Masamune in connection to the sword, this is a framing more closely aligned to the typical institutional display, where swords are rendered into an extension of the warrior owner.

The intangibility promoted by the Tokugawa Museum and their Saniwa co-producers is slightly different. Both note the sword's ownership by Date Masamune, but expand beyond it in their presentation of the sword as an individual entity. This is done through deriving the object's

value from its experiences, in which its ownership by Date Masamune only makes up a single part of a larger life story.

When encountering Shokudaikiri Mitsutada in its display, its object description uses its former ownership as an explanation for its existence. It is Date Masamune who is said to have given the sword its name—a significant event for any individualised entity—and it is the Date family who gifted the sword to the Mito Tokugawa family, explaining its current ownership. Added to this explanation, however, are events that come far after the time of the Sengoku daimyo. This description goes on to cover later events in the sword's life history, including its burning in the 1920's, and the subsequent present-day initiatives by the Museum in maintaining the sword and its intangible value. The inclusion of these initiatives indicates the sword and its life-trajectory has not yet reached its end—it has an existence that extends far beyond the warrior culture of the past.

Before delving into these initiatives, however, it is perhaps beneficial to compare this extended history of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada presented by the Tokugawa Museum to how Saniwa approach the sword. Like the Museum, they are concerned with the sword's exchange from the Date to Tokugawa families. They take this act beyond one of simple object exchange by expanding on the potential emotional implications of a socially emplaced entity's departure from one home to another. Central in this are the relationships Shokudaikiri Mitsutada has gathered during its ownership by the Date family, not only with its human members, but with other swords of their collection. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada as an entity embedded in its social context and social relationships is presented by Saniwa in their fan works, particularly in narrative dōjinshi. These works often use real-world events and locations such as the Tokugawa Museum to examine the emotional dimensions of the sword and its past. This view of the sword as an emotional and empathetic figure, having to leave other entities it cares for, extends the act of exchange to one that encapsulates the swords social life and associated dynamics.

Thus, both institutional and individual actors have an idea of the sword as a thing with intangible qualities. While they differ in their expression—for example, the formalised display label compared to the more fan-based works of Saniwa—there is nonetheless a similarity in valuing the sword based on something other than its strict qualitative definitions.

Across several visits to the Tokugawa Museum in 2020 and 2021, I spoke with Saniwa in attendance. Museum attendance was understandably impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, across this period there was a small yet consistent group of Saniwa visitors spending time with the museum's sword collection. Many described themselves as frequent or repeat visitors. Two I spoke to explained that they visited almost every month, while another shared her previous participation in the Museum's membership program. This frequent interaction provides the

institution and audience with a point of connection beyond their shared interest in a sword's intangible aspects.

From this interaction, subsequent activities surrounding Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and other swords can be undertaken, and the sword's value can be elaborated beyond that of an object in a historicised context. These activities make up a process of re-contextualisation of the sword that emphasises its intangible, alongside its tangible, form.

PROMOTION OF VISITOR-DERIVED OBJECT VALUE

The most visible interactive activity between the Tokugawa Museum and its visitors can be seen in the small exhibition space near the museum cafe, where gifts and letters from Saniwa visitors are displayed alongside examples of collaborative merchandise and promotional material for the museum's sword conservation initiatives. While seemingly disconnected from the main exhibition context, these displays reveal the reciprocal, co-productive aspects of the relationship between the museum and its visitors. In showcasing Saniwa's gifts and letters, the museum, too, showcases their perspectives and emotional components that inspire their visits. These act as more than simple "footprints" of travel (Tamai 2016, 71). They are material representations of the social dynamics at play when Saniwa visit museums, and of how they value the objects they meet with.

The gifts on display represent not only Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, but its social relationships. They depict both Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and individualised swords held in other collections to whom it shares a status of relationship with, primarily that of former objects owned by the Date family. In these depictions the sword is directly constructed by Saniwa visitors as a social entity with associated relational ties, with this construction reciprocated by Museum staff in their display. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's existence emerges beyond its sword-to-owner relationship with Date Masamune, and becomes overtly inclusive of other objects it has social bonds with. The simple act of displaying gifts broadens the potential way of viewing swords in their social contexts: as objects that accumulate ties, to both human and non-human entities.

This is a view of the sword that emphasises its intangible, spirit-like nature, and grants its social aspects space in the present day. Here, too, the sanctification of Saniwa's gifts and letters is an act by the Museum that promotes the notion of a sword's value tied to its social existence, and the relationships it continues to gather in this existence.

This is made clear when reading the letters on display. Many of these letters are addressed to the Museum's staff, thanking them and their actions in caring for the swords of their collection. One even makes mention of the "truly good home" they have made for their swords, tying a sense of comfort to the appropriateness of an exhibition space, and highlighting the emotive qualities of the objects within it. The sword is given comfort in its current existence through the perception of a

social relationship between it and the Museum staff. The personification of swords is further highlighted in letters addressed to the objects themselves. These are most commonly addressed to "Shokudaikiri Mitsutada". Other letters use the shortened "Shokudaikiri", while others still use the diminutive nickname "Micchan". The letters' direct use of sword names in a social capacity, rather than a categorical one, brings forward the idea that these objects inhabit their displays, and their value derives from their status as individualised *social*, rather than merely tangible, entities. As such, visitors—both Saniwa and those with no previous attachment to swords as social entities—are able to examine the emotive ties between human visitor and non-human object, and engage with a sense of value derived from something other than a categorical listing of tangible traits. This small exhibition space serves as a means of promotion of alternate modes of valuing and engaging with objects.

THE TOUKEN PROJECT AND INTANGIBLE ENERGY AS OBJECT VALUE

The Tokugawa Museum's efforts in displaying the perspectives of their visitors promotes their form of value-making to a wider audience. The museum's connective activities, however, are not limited to this display. They embrace the Saniwa's enthusiasm for engaging with swords in their intangible capacity, and have established further initiatives to continue to provide the "truly good home" so desired of their swords.

This can be seen in the launch of the Touken Project [刀剣プロジェクト, Project for Japanese Sword Culture] in 2016, with the aim to restore the fire-damaged swords in the Tokugawa Museum's collection. The goal of this project is stated to "pass on the spirit [*tamashii*] of swords and their stories" [名刀の魂のストーリーを受け継ぐため] (Tokugawa Museum, 2017). The Touken Project embraces the notion of intangibility for the museum's fire-damaged swords, centring their value along the lines of spirit and story rather than tangible form.

The level of attention granted to damaged swords such as Shokudaikiri Mitsutada at the Tokugawa Museum subverts the assumptions and expectations of legal definitions of sword/Nihontō value. Rather than the shining displays of pristine and perfectly maintained objects that project the value of art, craft, and beauty, as is inherent in the designation of 'Nihontō', the Tokugawa Museum's swords are visually distinct from those in a regular sword exhibition. Despite this, they are greatly valued by both institution and visitor.

This is supported by the fact that Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's state as a burned sword has little impact on how its visitors engage with it. In fact, it may heighten the emotional aspects of museum visitation, to the extent where they become primary in the valuation of the sword. The sword's appearance makes clear the experiences it has undergone in its existence, and a restoration of the original artefact to a pristine state may remove these visible communicators of its life story.

"It's emotional," explained one visiting Saniwa, indicating to the sword's blackened blade. "I feel grateful," explained another, "that [Shokudaikiri] has endured, so I can meet [it] today." The sword, framed in terms of endurance and perseverance, is presented as an entity valued for its abilities to last through a traumatic event. Thus, to preserve Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's value requires a preservation of the evocation of this empathy, tied to visual aspects that are not necessarily valued in the typical imaginary of an important sword.

Shokudaikiri Mitsutada has been restored to a state where it can be displayed, still marked by fire-damage, alongside a newly-forged, Project-funded duplicate of its original form. This is not a presentation of original and copy, but rather, two tangible forms belonging to a single intangible entity. The original Shokudaikiri Mitsutada stands alongside its revived form in their respective display cases as conduit for the story of existence had by an object across its own life. Its sense of being, and the emotional responses tied to it, underlie the Touken Project.

The Touken Project was launched alongside renewed attention to Shokudaikiri and the Tokugawa Museum's swords by Saniwa. It supported through crowdfunding. One staff member explained that there had been no plans—or funds—to preserve these swords before the emergence of their Saniwa visitors. These visitors provide both an economic incentive to sword display, and through it, a means of promotion for the their intangible value. The Touken Project has two main components: the restoration of existing swords and the creation of "revived blades" [再現刀, Saigentō] for particular examples in the museum's collection. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's newly-forged duplicate is one of these Saigentō. This reforging, explained by Museum Director Maki Tokugawa, is not to serve as replacement for the originals, but is a means to extend the longevity of the spirit that inhabits the swords' damaged forms.

In aiming to preserve this notion of "spirit", Saniwa's empathetic and emotional approach to swords is engaged with by Museum staff. It is directly incorporated into the Project's activities. Sitting in the Museum's café in August of 2020, Director Tokugawa explained to me the process of forging a Saigentō. It was important that they enlist a sword-smith that could faithfully replicate the historical smith Mitsutada's style. They found this in National Living Treasure Miyairi Norihiro, mirroring the categorical forms of value derived from legal designations such as Nihontō. Equally important, however, was for the smith they recruited to be willing to involve Project supporters—largely women—in the forging process. Their "energy" [エネルギ], explained Director Tokugawa, was vital to the life experiences of Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's own spirit.

Director Tokugawa recounted one cold, snowy day, as thirty project supporters, the majority of whom were young women, made their way to the mountains of Nagano. They were to learn techniques of sword-smithing from Mr. Miyairi, and their involvement was one of several opportunities for the in-progress Saigentō Shokudaikiri to be infused with their "energy". Those that

gathered in Nagano, and that supported the forging of these new sword bodies, made an unusual sight for the established, institutional representatives in attendance. "This is the kind of world we live in!", Director Tokugawa recalled saying at the sight of a fashionably dressed young woman engrossed in the sword-maintenance process, a highly unusual sight if considering the typical, masculine construction of swords. Nonetheless, the Project supporters shared their "energy" in the forging process, promoting and establishing the intangible aspects of the object's value. This direct collaboration between an institution and its audience is one where both come together in supporting a form of object preservation that prioritises an intangible view of the sword, not as a historical artefact, but as an entity influenced by its social connections.

The Touken Project is therefore not a simple means of crowdfunding preservation and conservation activities. It is a coming together of actors surrounding swords, where through their interactions, aspects of value held by the objects that are not readily apparent in the framings of large-scale institutions can be explored. Not every sword in the Museum's collection can be re-forged: there are more than 150 damaged swords, and the forging of Saigentō for two of those (Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and another sword owned by the Museum called Konotegashiwa) was a years-long process. Nonetheless, Saniwa's framing of swords as individual entities has demonstrated the value in displaying and restoring heavily-damaged swords, previously hidden in storage. At the Tokugawa Museum, these damaged objects have become central in both tangible display and the intangible telling of their own stories of perseverance.

I end this examination of the Tokugawa Museum and its co-productive activities with an anecdote from one of my visits in May of 2021. This coincided with a collaboration between the city of Mito and Touken Ranbu, and the Museum was lively and full of visitors eager to meet with Shokudaikiri Mitsutada. One of these visitors was a young woman, dressed in Touken Danshi Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's character motifs, and accompanied by her own Touken Danshi companions in plush toy form. Having noticed the extended time she had spent in the Museum, I approached her to ask her thoughts on the sword, to which she confessed: "I haven't seen [it] yet… I'm too nervous!" [緊張すぎる].

Visiting the museum was significant for this Saniwa, not only to learn of the sword's historical or artistic value, but in how the institution facilitated a meeting between herself and an entity she admired to the point of nervousness. When she did enter the sword exhibition room and came face-to-face with Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, the release of her anxious energy was palpable.

It may be tempting to explain away her excitement as based on a fictionalised overlay to an inert object. However, her nervousness and excitement should not be so readily dismissed. Her feelings, her "energy", are representative of the feelings of others who have met with the sword and made efforts to preserve its unique qualities. These meetings are made possible through the

cooperative activities of the museum and those who, like this excited Saniwa, empathise with a sword's existence. Shokudaikiri Mitsutada's value is derived as much from the ways in which it resonates with its visitors, as it does from the existence of its tangible form.

THE VALUE OF OBJECTS-AS-ACTORS

When considering the value of swords in contemporary Japan, it serves to look beyond the way they are displayed by major institutions, and to instead examine how they are spoken of, researched, and engaged with in social processes. What emerges from this examination is a value of swords not in the formalised, categorical sense as artistic and historic Nihontō, but as individualised entities with life stories and experiences of their own. In the independent work of Saniwa and through their interactions with institutions eager to work alongside them, the malleability of object-meaning comes to light.

Strathern (1990) writes that "images [of artefacts] are reflected self-knowledge" (169). While such knowledge is informed by institutional curation, it is also informed by the social, cultural, and ontological experiences one might hold that are contrary to the assumed norm. Meetings with Japan's swords are not only enacted in major institutions with the framing of education and categorical value, but are undertaken in settings where swords appear, in the experiences and recollections of Saniwa, as socially-positioned entities.

Museum studies has long been concerned with the subjectivities of ordered display in pre-determined exhibition spaces (Henare 2003, 59), and how such display imparts on the viewer a particular authoritative interpretation of the object and its value. This authoritative interpretation is met with the "self-knowledge" brought by the viewer, rendering both object and audience as mutually constitutive entities in their respective social framings (Strathern 1990, 57). What is of interest in meetings of Saniwa and swords is in how this "self-knowledge" appears less influenced by institutional determinants of value, and more heavily derived from independent exploration of the objects' life experiences. Instead of determining the object in its display, Saniwa and other emergent actors consider the object from a perspective where its current position in the exhibition case is simply another stop in its ongoing life journey.

In the case of Japanese swords visited by Saniwa, top-down intervention in prompting the visitor to think of an objects ontological depth does not appear to be necessary. Saniwa and similar actors already recognise the non-human sociality of objects. Swords are not displayed in unconventional ways, nor are they made provocative or unsettling through a highlighting of their non-humanness. Rather, they are simply understood in terms of experience—made, named, existing in ownership, experiencing life events, persevering through destruction—and rendered inhabitants of normative social spaces. This view of swords is a form of ontological complexity explored,

examined, and promoted in realms outside of the institution, as they become valued on terms that align with entities who hold a position in social life.

4. SWORDS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL LIFE

4.1 Inhabited Places and Residents of the Periphery

Saniwa travel to places like the Tokugawa Museum to meet with the swords that inhabit them. As explained by Ingold (2006), inhabiting is more than merely tangibly existing. In meeting with swords, and recognising them as inhabiting their displays, a connection is made beyond that of exhibition object and visitor. The sword becomes socially emplaced.

This can be directly, in the exhibition room, but also extend outside of it to incorporate other social spaces as those that hold emotional attachments for the individual sword. As with humans, these attachments can manifest in residences, hometowns, and other places of association. A sword's social attachments can even evoke a shared sense of community, when it is connected to others who have similar attachments to place. The social sword becomes its own community entity, with its animitic inhabiting of place acting as a means to promote places of the periphery in Japan's cultural and historical landscape.

I look at the place-attachments of a sword through the notion of 'home'. Socially alive swords gather relationships to home-like places in a similar manner to humans. They may start in one place, and move to another, creating emotional attachments to the regions they traverse. These attachments, spread over the hundreds of years of a sword's existence, are explored by Saniwa and other human inhabitants in the tracing of an object's life trajectory.

The places with these attachments are diverse. Even Nihontō designated as National Treasures are not necessarily bound to national or metropolitan collections, and are just as often found in unusual, periphery places. As well as this diversity of place, the long life of a sword increases its ability to gather attachments. A sword's attachments can be made visible through the historical documentations and records of its provenance. Exploring such records, for the social sword, brings forward the various places of importance in the sword's long existence. Exploration of these places creates the possibility of further equalisation in cultural and historical value between periphery places and those of the metropolitan centre. If a place is valuable to the personed sword, then it has the potential to increase in value for other personed actors. With this in mind, the sword emerges not as an heirloom or treasure passively passed from one owner to another, but an entity that gathers attachments and provides value to place, wherever that may be.

My focus on sword hometowns covers the places identified by Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts that are then connected to their respective regional communities. These hometowns

serve in a similar manner to those of famous and historical humans. They become their own gathering places for the dispersed actors of the emergent sword phenomenon. The significance of sword hometowns is reiterated and reciprocated by the promotions of independent, volunteer, and institutional actors, bringing together these various stakeholders and transforming the regional place into one of importance in Japan's cultural and historical landscape.

I tie this notion of hometown to that of civic pride, or the ways in which human attachments to place have been utilised in regional sustainability and development, extending the concept to be inclusive of the potentially social sword. How does the recognition of a sword as an inhabitant influence the way in which regional areas position themselves and their value? And what complications arise when an artefact, kept in an institutional collection, changes in status from 'owned thing' to 'inhabiting person'?

CIVIC PRIDE AND HOMETOWN ACTORS

The concept of civic pride describes the processes of nurturing a sense of value and emotional attachment to place in local communities, for the sustainability of those communities. When extended to potential social objects, notions of civic pride are a means to mediate the distance between a 'local treasure', passive in its admiration, and the 'treasured person', or a recognised inhabitant of a social place with its own kinds of place-attachments. With the transformation of personed swords from passive objects to fellow community members, their documentary provenance and current sites of exhibition provide new avenues of expressing local and civic pride, contributing new angles to the value of place from a non-human perspective.

Collins (2016) describes civic pride as a tool to be employed by local governments in engendering investment towards their locality and its development by residents (Collins 2016, 178). This serves to spur regional sustainability and ongoing development, drawing on emotional manifestations of 'pride' that are derived from both ideas and things more tangible. In Nottingham, England, civic pride initiatives led to romanticist programs that promoted Nottingham as a place of admirable nature, whether or not this characterisation was reflective of reality (Collins 2016, 182). Other places utilise their associated famous figures to cultivate civic pride, such as the town of Mayberry in the United States and their promotion of locally-raised celebrity Andy Griffith (Alderman, Benjamin and Schneider 2012). At both Nottingham and Mayberry, the shared attachments to place had by the local residents, their particular social character, and the character of a famed person, feeds into the collective sense of identity. Even when a real-world human is involved in this process, they may not themselves be a tangible or interactive inhabitant of the relevant place: the sense of attachment alone is able to foster collective pride.

The promotion of civic pride has largely been seen as a top-down endeavour (Colins 2016; Civic Pride Gakkai 2015). However, this is not always the case. The expression of 'pride' as argued by Japan's Civic Pride Gakkai [学会, research association] is derived from the ways the resident themselves actively contributes to their township (Civic Pride Gakkai 2015). It is not an emotion that is simply built on the reputation or renown of one's hometown, but is derived from the ways in which the actor themselves is part of its cultivation. In Japan, this has been expressed through grassroots level activities that incorporate acts of daily living into the 'creation' [まちづくり machizukuri, lit. making the town] of their respective inhabited localities (Civic Pride 2015).

For example, while the city of Matsumoto has a reputation as being the home of craftspeople since the 1980's, this has been expressed in the narrow realm of craft fairs populated by professional, working craftspeople. More recent endeavours seek to extend the identification with Matsumoto's reputation to the wider population, encouraging grassroots engagement with crafts processes and incorporating them into daily life (Kurasawa 2015, 66-67). In this manner, the pride attached to a locale's reputation can be felt and built by the everyday person, and "civic pride" emerges not as a top-down framing of the locality, as community action that aids in constructing the 'municipality' into a 'home'.

It serves to consider how the notion of home connects the local resident, their experiences, and their own activities, to their respective tangible places and to the others who inhabit those places. Eckersley (2017), in examining the understanding of 'hometown' amongst people of displaced populations, argues that the designation of home is both tangible and intangible, experienced through emotive and sensory attachments. In the aforementioned case of Nottingham, these emotive and sensory attachments may be related to the ways in which local residents enact their romantic identity. In the case of Mayberry, these attachments manifest in the celebration of a past inhabitant, and the creation of tableaux designed to commemorate their shared connections (Alderman, Benjamin and Schneider 2012). These acts of cultivating local pride bring forward a sense of home-ness, and imbue the related places and persons that embody them with their own form of value.

In the Japanese context, civic pride endeavours have utilised natural and cultural resources to endear fondness and nostalgia for regional hometowns, with the aim of encouraging residents to stay in them (Kusakari, Chiu, Muasa, Takahashi and Kudo 2018, 110; Love 2013,113). Other municipalities, such as that of Maizuru, incorporate history into their pride-fostering endeavours by encouraging participation in the commemoration of historical events faced by current and former residents of the area, evoking a shared sense of attachment between the wider municipal community (Uesugi 2019). In these instances the tangible aspects of place, such as landscapes, buildings, and even artefacts, are deployed as a conduit for past experiences to be empathised with in the present.

While such endeavours may not be directly termed by actors as civic pride, they nonetheless draw on similar constructions of place drawn from emotional attachment.

These kinds of activities regularly emerge from grassroots and independent action. One example is the practice of regional activation, which arises from a dissatisfaction with government-led revitalisation programs and a perception of their neglect for those living in the periphery (Love 2013, 113). This perception is possibly drawn from the failure of government and top-down initiatives, focused on infrastructure, that in actuality contributed to *de*population of the periphery (Tanaka, 2021, 34-35f). To address these failures, civic pride and attachment to place requires work that fulfils requirements beyond material needs. In my own travels undertaking fieldwork for this investigation, I frequently encountered independent and volunteer-led groups, without overt government ties, supporting the exploration of their respective localities in running events, promoting other areas of historical and cultural pride, and assisting out-of-town visitors with orientation around their localities.

It is this level of actor—those of community groups, local business owners, and similarly engaged residents—that supports the exploration of places inhabited by swords, nurturing the historical and cultural capital embodied in a sword and sharing these experiences with visitors. Their work is slow and accumulative, mirroring the process of attachment-making itself. The engaged and iterative nature of creating hometown attachments can be seen in the efforts of one project, aimed at ensuring the work of out-of-area researchers actually benefitted the communities they targeted. In this project, students created posters tracing their interactions with local volunteers, showing both the students' interpersonal connections and those between their respondents and their hometown (Kato 2015). These posters were still, several years later, being employed by these same locals to communicate their sense of pride and value to those outside (Kato 2015, 82). Attachments are not made overnight: likewise, the incorporation of a sword into its place of social habitation is done so through a gradual process of recognition and reciprocation from those located inside and outside of the regional locality.

The sword has here arisen as an embodied and emplaced actor, recognised and with its attachments reciprocated by human actors. Occhi (2012) has examined mascot Yuru Kyara [ゆるキャラ, Wobbly Characters] as a kind of non-human entity that embodies and promotes the sense of regional pride in Japan (113). However, these characters are rendered into representations or symbols of local desire, and not necessarily as a social entity that resides in the location itself (Occhi 2012, 111). The sword is not viewed as a symbol or representation: indeed, it is an object that has a tangible presence that can be met with outside of the direct promotional appearances undertaken by Yuru Kyara.

It is the sword's recognition as entities that makes their use in regional promotion particularly intriguing. For example, the posters made by research students and subsequently employed by locals act as a kind of communicative object. But they are also an object with their own material and emotional existence, a vessel for the attachments and memories of engagement between their creators, contributors, and their now-users. Swords exist in a similar manner. They are not just the vessels or symbols for human attachments, but communicate those attachments through their emotive interactions with other humans.

Eckersley (2017) highlights the tangible artefact and its role in evoking intangible, sensory responses in humans (12). The embodied and emplaced sword asks further questions of this evocation. Are these responses brought about through a human projection onto the passive object, or does the object itself bring them about by representing its own attachments?

Famous historical humans and their exploits are a common source of pride for Japan's regional places, particularly when they can be aligned with nationally renown historical narratives. These regional retellings of famed figures act as a conduit for locally-bound values (Arn 1979, 4), on other words, as a potential source of pride. One would not so readily dismiss the sense of pride brought about via attachment to these past human lives. So, too, should we consider the potential for still existing objects to act as socially-emplaced conduits of regional identity. The object, just like the historical human, is constructed in relational and intangible terms. It is embodied in a non-human shape that nonetheless has the capabilities of an historical actor and potential local hero.

I explore the notion of hometown civic pride with swords forged by the sword-smith Sengo Muramasa [千子村正] and the sword Kuwana Gou [桑名江]. These swords have hometown attachments to Kuwana City in Mie Prefecture. These attachments provide not only a means for the inhabitants of the city to promote their local history alongside nationally-resonant narratives, but to re-frame and reappropriate the symbolic imagery associated with these swords in the promotion of Kuwana as a place of significance for Japan's wider cultural landscape.

THE HOMETOWN PURIFICATION OF SENGO MURAMASA AND KUWANA GOU'S 400-YEAR HOMECOMING

What makes a sword's hometown? Largely, the designation comes from where a sword was made, the working area of its sword-smith, or even simply a place where it has strong, long-standing relational ties that have impacted on its life trajectory. These are the reasons for designating Mie Prefecture's Kuwana City as a hometown for the swords of the sword-smith Sengo Muramasa and the aptly named Kuwana Gou.

These swords have accumulated social ties with the place of Kuwana and its current and former residents. These attachments are recognised by Saniwa and other actors, validating the

notion that swords are objects that have a social, as well as tangible, existence, as well as directly locating that social existence in a setting of human engagements. Put simply, this is an act of recognition for the sword that reflects the ways a famed human figure is emplaced in their own hometowns. Like the historical or current-day human celebrity, the sword (or its intangible substance) emerges as a resident entity of its locality, and provides a means of communicating locally-derived interpretations—or the locally-derived pride—of the area.

The swords of Sengo Muramasa provide a strange example, but one that reveals the ways in which an examination of the current activities around swords cannot explained purely through the explanation of Touken Ranbu and a pop-culture bound "sword boom". This is due to the fact that there is no Touken Danshi directly inspired by a single Muramasa sword. Nonetheless, Saniwa and other emergent actors have supported Kuwana City, its efforts related to its local swords, and its position as hometown for the works of Muramasa.

Kuwana City is a regional township that, like many others in Japan, claims a long-standing historical past. One aspect of this past is the area's association with the sword-smith Sengo Muramasa, whose works have across Japanese literary history gained a reputation as dark and cursed objects. An article on one such sword, called Myōhō Muramasa [妙法村正], published by Kuwana City Museum explains that Muramasa swords' reputation as objects with a predisposition for dishonourable violence emerges from popular media of the Edo Period [c.1603CE-1868CE], and is situated amongst the power dynamics of the various Tokugawa families (Sugimoto 2018, 45). This reputation is, in part, an act of social positioning for Muramasa swords and their actions. Few Muramasa swords are present in historical documents evaluating sword collections, and none have the modern-day designation of National Treasure or Important Cultural Property (Sugimoto 2018, 45; Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1997).

This cursed reputation has lasted across time, and informs the characterisation of Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa. Unlike other Touken Danshi, he is not the clear personification of a singular sword. Rather, the character acts as a representative amalgamation of multiple swords made by the infamous sword-smith. Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa is no less individual: he is simply an entity whose physical manifestation contains multiple internal experiences, the primary of which is a chaotic and disruptive expression of the swords' dark reputation. Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa describes himself as a yōtō [妖刀], or cursed sword.

Despite their infamy, Muramasa swords can be found across Japan's institutional collections, and have their own value attached to both their make and their cursed reputation. The wide-spread display of Muramasa swords, combined with the Touken Danshi manifestation lacking a clearly identifiable origin, may make it appear difficult to designate them a particular hometown.

Nonetheless, through the combined activities of Saniwa and cultural actors in Kuwana City, the area has over the past few years become increasingly visible as the swords' hometown.

This designation transforms the regional Kuwana City into a central point in the network of Muramasa swords spread throughout Japan. While each of these individual swords has their own life trajectory, they can be traced back to the place of their forging in this township in the north of Mie Prefecture. Kuwana City as a central gathering point for Muramasa swords is a form of attachment similar to those described by proponents of civic pride initiatives. This attachment is reinforced by local actors in Kuwana City, seen most clearly in the Kuwana City Museum's 2020 exhibition, Mie Swords' Travelogue: The Revived Sparkle of Muramasa" [三重刀剣紀行-蘇る村正の煌めき-]. This title evokes an active movement of Mie's swords, framing their ownership by warriors all over Japan in terms of travel to and from their originating home area. Exhibitions like this one, supported by Saniwa and other social actors, frames the locality of Kuwana City as valuable for those who wish to explore the pasts of Sengo Muramasa and his swords.

Since 2015, Kuwana City has hosted a number of sword exhibitions. In these exhibitions and their surrounding activities, local actors are positioned to not only connect with this aspect of the area's past, but to form and promote a local understanding of place supported by the promotion of a local historical resident. Swords, in this instance, do not only tie this former resident's time to our own, but emerge as their own kinds of emplaced, inhabiting actors. The actions of human actors are tied directly to ongoing sword lives, in particular, through the Kuwana City Museum's publications reminding human readers for the active care needed for a sword to be preserved (Ito, 2020; Kobayashi, 2020). This exhibition practice both centers Kuwana City in a historical network of human and non-human actors, and ties conservation efforts of the present day into the maintenance of this network, in turn supporting a sense of civic pride tied heavily to the contemporary sword and its potential future.

In 2016, shortly after the launch of Touken Ranbu, a limited exhibition of Muramasa swords in Kuwana City drew nearly 15,000 visitors, with an average of 466 per day. In comparison, other exhibitions that year saw between 1000 and 3500 visitors, with roughly 30-50 per day (Kuwana City 2022). Examining the city's records of exhibitions prior to 2016, historical works are most commonly presented in tandem with famous time periods and events, without any clear indication of exhibitions showcasing the works of Sengo Muramasa (Kuwana City 2022). However, in the years following 2016, the annual exhibition schedule has featured at least one sword exhibition, frequently focused on Muramasa swords.

Here, we can see an increased focus on Muramasa's swords alongside the emergence of the current sword phenomenon. This cannot be taken in isolation as this increased focus is occurring

alongside other activities managed by independent actors, such as those of Saniwa and their research into their favourite swords.

The correlation of increased Muramasa exhibitions with the years following the launch of Touken Ranbu should not lead to a dismissal of importance, or an assumption that these exhibitions are driven purely by pop-culture consumption. To do so would overlook the constructive ways Muramasa exhibitions and their associated human actors are building on the growing interest in swords and their hometowns.

Institutions such as Kuwana City Museum are central in the top-down constructions of civic pride and local identities. However, there are other aspects at play, emerging from the grassroots level. This can be seen in the independent creation and sharing of area guides detailing Kuwana City's historical and cultural sites, as well as recommended stops for food and souvenirs. These guides, when made by Saniwa, are often accompanied with visuals of the Touken Danshi associated with Kuwana City—such as Sengo Muramasa and Kuwana Gou—acting as their own 'guides' to their home area. There are multiple introductions to Kuwana City and its cultural heritage put forward by Saniwa on social media, however, there is one in particular, called the GO! To Kuwana Map [桑名へ GO!まっぷ], that is frequently updated and re-shared whenever there is an anticipated increase in Saniwa visitors to the area. This Saniwa-made map acts as a living document for the area, highlighting both historical sites and local businesses recommended by emplaced local actors. This is a designation of important sites emerging from the grassroots level, and is only one independent initiative that shapes the relationships between swords, their pasts, and actors of the present day.

Another initiative can be seen at Kuwana Sōsha [桑名宗社], a shrine regularly highlighted in Saniwa guides to Kuwana City. This shrine owns a Muramasa sword designated a cultural treasure of Mie Prefecture. In 2020, the shrine's custodians launched a successful crowdfunding project for the ongoing preservation of the sword, an endeavour supported by many Saniwa (Kuwana Sōsha, 2021). Alongside monetary donations, Kuwana Sōsha received donations of material items: figurines and other merchandise from Saniwa, depicting Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa.

These donations and their human-shaped representations of the "cursed" Muramasa provides not only a point of connection between shrine custodians and visiting Saniwa, but a means for local actors to re-negotiate the nationally-renown reputation of Muramasa swords. Kuwana Sōsha, when explaining the value of Muramasa's swords, makes reference to their cursed reputation (Kuwana Sōsha, 2021). With the characterisation of Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa leaning into this reputation, one might assume that the shrine's presentation of their donated merchandise would follow in this portrayal. However, their displays stand in direct juxtaposition to the cursed framing.

Kuwana Sōsha's figures and dolls of Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa are dressed in pure white, traditionally-styled clothing made by the shrine's staff. Instead of a murderous blade, he wields the purification prayer wand of Shinto ceremonies. The embodiment of Sengo Muramasa's swords, as seen by the local custodians at Kuwana Sōsha, is one that engages in ritual and spiritual practice, and is not purely a cursed entity. Their own Muramasa sword has a role in the shrine congruent with acts of protection; and so, too, do their representations of the human-shaped Muramasa, despite the swords' infamy and popular construction. Here, the personed sword is not just an object to be feared or admired. It is an entity with the potential to inhabit varied social roles, enacted through locally-determined negotiations of use and value.

This re-negotiation has been made possible through the donation of merchandise, the acceptance of these donations, and the subsequent re-acceptance of the shrine's presentation of Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa by Saniwa visitors. In October 2021, a caretaker of the shrine explained to me that their female visitors had increased in recent years, particularly concentrated around the periods when their treasure Muramasa was displayed, or when there was a sword-related exhibition at the nearby Kuwana City Museum. During these periods images of the shrine's Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa, in his dress and role as a shrine attendant, are shared on virtual gathering places by Saniwa as they comment on how the entity has taken to its new role. It stands to reason that the Muramasa that inhabits Kuwana Sōja is not considered by its caretakers to follow the common narrative of the cursed sword. In recognising swords for their capacity to engage in social roles, such as that of shrine custodian, the image and impression of Muramasa swords shifts from that of cursed weaponry to a wider notion of existence in its hometown.

The swords of Sengo Muramasa have been embodied and emplaced in their hometown, enacted through the tangible presence of these swords and the social spaces they occupy, as well as through the notion that ones in other collections are in the midst of their away-from-home travels. I now turn to one such travelling sword, with its own hometown attachment to Kuwana City: the sword called Kuwana Gou.

Kuwana Gou [桑名江] shares its name with Kuwana City [桑名市]. While it was not forged here, its naming has given rise to a hometown attachment between sword and place. Perhaps this object could be called one of the "travelling swords" so described by Kuwana City Museum. Alongside Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa and a spear owned by Honda Tadakatsu, former daimyo of Kuwana Domain, Kuwana Gou is a member of what Saniwa term Kuwana-gumi [桑名組, Kuwana group], or a collective descriptor for swords that have attachments to contemporary Kuwana City.

This hometown attachment arises from Kuwana City's significance for the sword and its life trajectory. Kuwana Gou, forged in the 14th century, is one of the extant swords made by sword-

smith Gou no Yoshihiro. There are two common explanations of the sword's name. The first is that the sword had been found in the possession of a wealthy farming family in Kuwana Domain, and takes its name from its co-habitation with them. Kuwana City Museum disputes this, arguing instead that the sword's name comes from its ownership by the daimyo of Kuwana Domain. No matter which explanation one prefers, the sword, through its name, is tied to a particular geographic area and events that took place there.

This naming forms contemporary attachments between Kuwana Gou and Kuwana City that are directly constructed by current-day actors in emotive and personed terms. This was seen clearly in October and November of 2021, when Kuwana Gou was scheduled to appear in an exhibition hosted by the city, in an event celebrated as its first homecoming in over 400 years.

The use of the term homecoming is deliberate, and presents the sword with language one would use for fellow social persons. It was readily employed by exhibition organisers and unofficial promoters, appealing to the notion that an object can not only have a home, but that its return is something to be celebrated. This phrasing was also used by Saniwa sharing their excitement at the opportunity not only to see the sword, but to see it in context with its attachments to place.

"Kuwana Gou's homecoming, after 400 years!" [桑名江 400 年ぶりの里帰] and similar phrases quickly spread amongst Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts across social media. These were met with supplementary comments of "congratulations!" and "welcome home!" [おめでとう, おかえり]. Staff at the Kuwana City Museum recognised and reciprocated this celebratory feeling, with entrance and information boards at the museum decorated with images of Touken Danshi Kuwana Gou and the message "Welcome Home, Kuwana Gou!" [おかえり桑名江！].

The exhibition Kuwana Gou was scheduled to appear in was designed to celebrate the establishment of Kuwana City through the activities of its former daimyo, the Honda family. In this context, Kuwana Gou's display aligns closely to that of objects positioned to evoke a historicised sense of pride as a conduit for the actions of a former human actor. But to describe the exhibition's accompanying activities as a conduit for human existence is to overlook the direct subject of these celebratory messages: the sword Kuwana Gou.

The emotional dimensions of Kuwana Gou's display are centred in the contemporary sword and its attachments, which feeds a reciprocal feeling of celebration as to its long-awaited return. This is most clearly seen in the use of the phrase *satogaeri* [里帰り]. This translates approximately to 'homecoming', and was used by official organisers of the city government and museum level, as well as volunteer and independent actors in their own commentary. Satogaeri is commonly used to refer to a human entity returning to a place of their own hometown attachments. Across my field sites, I frequently encountered the phrase 'satogaeri' used alongside the display of swords. At each

instance, I asked curators and organisers whether it was unusual to use a term commonly used to describe the movements of humans for objects. The answer was, uniformly, "no". At least for those organisers that I spoke to, using language that describes both physical movement and social, relational ties to place was not jarring when applied to a 'thing'.

The notion of home for the human actor is theorised not just as a personal identifier but as one that ties to the individual a sense of social cohesion and collective identity (Rico & Jennings 2012, 725). With this in mind, the use of 'satogaeri' becomes more than decorative language for the sword's display. It serves as a way to consider how non-human, object actors have their own attachments, and do not just symbolise those of former owners. The Honda family cannot, in the present day, return to Kuwana: but Kuwana Gou can.

By framing Kuwana Gou's exhibition as a homecoming, its life trajectory and the path it has taken to the current day can be seen in an alternate light. The emotional aspects of its display in Kuwana City have the potential to foster a wider sense of pride for others who identify with the area as their home.

Kuwana Gou is currently in the collection of the Kyoto National Museum, and has been displayed several times in recent years as part of national blockbuster exhibitions. In 2021 this was in the exhibition "Umetada" [埋忠], showcasing sword-smith Umetada and other objects related to his works. In 2022, Kuwana Gou was exhibited at the Tokugawa Art Museum alongside their own swords. It is not necessarily difficult to see Kuwana Gou as an object of typical institutional display. However, the sword's frequent exhibition does not soften the impact of its homecoming. Rather, it allows for a greater realisation of important place-attachments, evoked by Saniwa and other locally-placed, independent actors.

Seeing Kuwana Gou in its hometown is an event that is unable to be replicated at other sites of display. An unofficial account promoting Kuwana City's cultural endeavours called the sword's two-week display "a social world [society] of green and yellow" [ほんま"緑黄色社会"やったな] (Kuwana-shi Hakubutsukan Ōen Account, 2021), in reference to the colours associated with Touken Danshi Kuwana Gou and the sense of lively cohesion its display evoked in visitors and local custodians.

The display also provided an opportunity to re-explore place for local Saniwa. While many visitors came from afar, others were more locally situated: one explained to me that she was a local of northern Mie Prefecture, where Kuwana City is located, and the exhibition had prompted her current visit. Another explained it was her first time in Kuwana City, despite living in a neighbouring one. Social attachments to the entity of the sword here has prompted an exploration of local place, and a re-evaluation of its significance. These anecdotes show the potential for Kuwana Gou's display to prompt local visitors to provide their own interpretations of place, in a similar

manner to the pride-evoking activities of local treasure hunts (Love 2013). Local Saniwa and frequent visitors to the exhibition also frequented the city's other cultural sites, recording their multiple visits to Kuwana Gou on social media to share with Saniwa who were unable to make the journey. Such locally-situated visitors are key contributors to the resources that build on the wider value of their hometowns, and simultaneously increase their own attachments to the place and its value.

The local Saniwa here takes on a role normally assumed by top-level actors in shaping and presenting the city's tangible landscape, choosing what to highlight in providing a guide for curious visitors. This practice aligns with other forms of independent tourism amongst fan communities in Japan, such as the Otaku Pilgrimage (Okamoto, 2015; Ono et al, 2020; Katayama, 2013; Sugawa-Shimada, 2015). However, it is not only a means of facilitating tourism. It is also a relational way to construct the cultural landscape. Following the Saniwa-made Go! To Kuwana map on my own visit, I ran into a fellow Saniwa nearby one of the city's monuments, a large statue of former daimyo Honda Tadakatsu. At this place, created by top-down actors to signpost aspects of historical pride for the city, we talked about Kuwana Gou and other sword hometowns. The Saniwa I spoke to, in listing the other places she visited, struggled to remember the name of Mito City in Ibaraki Prefecture, instead explaining it as "where Micchan [Shokudaikiri Mitsutada] is". Here, the notion of a sword having and inhabiting its hometown is directly tied to the ways in which Saniwa experience place, and perhaps even understand relational ties in Japan's contemporary landscape.

Thus, with the combination of Saniwa-made guides and Saniwa-led, independent expeditions, swords emerge as contemporary residents and not merely pop-culture artefacts of blockbuster exhibitions. Rather than presenting local regions from the perspective of "characters", as with the Yuru Kyara, the use of Touken Danshi and swords as inhabitants arises as a means to communicate locally-inspired place making. In this case, a hometown is not merely a designation of where a sword is or was made. A hometown entwines interpretation of a sword's life and its renown as an object of value with the values that contribute to contemporary place-identities.

At Kuwana City, the local treasure evoking civic pride manifests through intangible senses, whether that be the renown of Muramasa swords, or through an object that, for a large part of its existence, is not directly located in the city. These are swords that nonetheless have an inhabiting presence and their own attachments to place and people, manifesting in their own evocation of hometown pride. The display of Kuwana Sōsha's treasured Muramasa sword, their presentation of the shrine-actor Touken Danshi Sengo Muramasa, or even the exhibition of Kuwana Gou itself, may on the surface appear as typical curations of objects and memorabilia in a historicised context, disconnected from use in the present day. However, the activities surrounding these typical acts of display—the messages of homecoming, or the affirmations of Shrine-attendant Sengo Muramasa—

give insight into the deeper dimensions of meaning that is being communicated between local and outside actors. These activities are sustained and ongoing, and may serve to further increase local human, as well as object, attachments to place.

In 2022, Kuwana Sōsha facilitated donations to assist with shrine operations through the normative action of displaying lanterns adorned with the names of donors or their affiliated companies. In this year, however, many of the lanterns were adorned with the names of swords—"Muramasa" and "Kuwana Gou" clear among them. The attachments of these swords continue to support the cultural endeavours of a township's gathering place. As such, the designation of hometown points to a view of object provenance beyond their material legacy, in an exploration of regionalised treasures experienced through the object's own being, its own attachments to place, and its own evocation of civic pride.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PERSONED OBJECTS

In acts of regional revitalisation, or the use of cultural resources to evoke local pride, the material things or legacies of historical humans are negotiated into signifiers of value. The human actor, in voicing these attachments, positions aspects of their locality to evoke emotions in others, and to resonate with their own sense of attachment and place/person value.

The typical approach to the display of swords can render them as an aspect of this process, in a passive signifier of local value where the object is subject to the human memories projected on it. In an exploration of nostalgia in Japanese museums, the objects on display—whether they be comics from one's childhood, or the household utensils of a time gone by—acted as a conduit for the human actor to express their own past experiences (Anderson, Shimizu & Campbell 2016, 5). Similarly, the labelling of swords as "soul of the warrior" places them as communicative tools, where value is expressed through the memories of a famed historical actor, and not that of the object itself.

In these instances, and explanations similar to them, the object is passive. It is *given* place- and people- attachments, rather than being recognised as its own holder of social ties. I have already discussed how this framing contradicts aspects how swords and their existence are understood in the emergent phenomenon. Swords, in the alternate framing, are a tangible object that acts as a vessel for an intangible, social substance. This intangible substance, when recognised and related to by human actors as its own entity, and not a projection of human memories, has the potential to become an inhabitant of place with its own 'home' or 'hometown'. As such, how objects are positioned in movements of civic pride can determine when a sword is and is not considered a social person.

Much has been said on the ethics of display in museum and heritage studies. This relates to the notion of civic pride through the way objects are frequently used to evoke attachments between people and places across the boundary of time. One example is Teradaya in Kyoto, a tangible heritage site once inhabited by the famed historical figure Sakamoto Ryoma. This site not only maintains its aesthetic structure to remind visitors of its attachment with persons of the 1800's, but also utilises objects to tell a story that connects that past to the building's present. Through photographs, memorabilia, and other similar objects commemorating past visitors, connections are forged between similar kinds of human actor in a sense of continuity. This re-enforces Teradaya's place-value while commemorating those who have inhabited it, past and present (Prough 2018). These kinds of object tableaux are subject to human manipulation and projection, designed to evoke emotion and connective ties amongst human actors.

In another sense, the moral or ethical dimensions to display and the culturally appropriate use of objects in tableaux brings to light the responsibilities of institutional actors when they seek to foster local pride or attachments. This leads to the question of whether or not certain objects should be displayed at all. This is most important in regards to objects with colonial pasts, and how their use in institutional displays separates them from social processes—or their cultural owners and contexts—while rendering them static things to be admired. This continues colonial structures, rather than allowing for the objects to speak on diverse interpretations and aspects of social living (Tanudirjo 2013, 79; Sweetnam & Henderson 2021, 6).

I position the potentially personed Japanese sword to both the ideals of civic pride and the discourse of ethical display. The sword is a thing that can be both 'passive object' and 'active person', and emerges as an interesting measure for what is and is not appropriate for the display case or attachment-evoking tableaux. An examination of sword display (or lack of display) also provides insight into the ways objects and their attachments can be recognised even without their tangible presence.

In previous chapters, I outlined the ways Saniwa's fan works transform exhibition halls into homes for swords, re-contextualising fixtures of display into the furnishings of living spaces. Connected to this is the imagining of spirit-like aspects to swords placed in a social community of objects that inhabit museums and galleries. This relational construction of the object's social potential has also been put to non-typical sites of display. Sword-entities in fan works are imagined wandering the halls and gardens of their heritage-site homes, or even acting as guides for visitors to the sights of their respective hometowns.

The evocation of a sword's being as a guide has even been employed by actors closely aligned with top-down activities. The city of Mishima in Shizuoka Prefecture, when hosting its sword exhibitions, is regularly signposted with unofficial images of Touken Danshi providing

directions to the city's cultural sites. Thus, we have in this phenomenon a layered notion of the sword in its 'home', which starts in the exhibition case and extends to cover an entire township. In these evocations, the sword is not a passive entity. As such, complications arise when its being, constructed and related to in potentially personed terms, is transformed back into a passive asset. The personed sword, emplaced in its home context, has to confront the nature of contemporary object ownership, particularly that of fragile historical properties.

Swords are owned by both institutions and private owners. Their movements and times of display are not uniform, but are influenced by the decisions of human actors. This puts forward one largely uncontroversial aspect to their display: a sword may not be able to actually be in its 'hometown', or met with in the context of its social attachments. This is due the object's ownership and concerns of cultural preservation, largely understood as necessary to the continued existence of swords and their life trajectories. When swords are displayed in a place of social attachments, this becomes an opportunity to explore the emotions of togetherness and separation—for example, with the celebration of homecoming for Kuwana Gou. However, things become less simple when it comes to transferals of ownership, particularly when this transferal impacts on the social context inhabited by the sword. This gives rise to discourses regarding the care of the object as an object, and of it as a social being.

I explore these complications of display and ownership with the example of Ashikaga City and the swords Yamanbagiri Kunihiro [山姥切国広], a borrowed object with the potential to become a permanent resident of Ashikaga City, and Hotei Kunihiro [布袋国広], one whom already inhabits the local Ashikaga City Art Museum. In doing so I further connect the activities of civic pride and the designation of object hometowns, alongside exploring the tensions of employing the sword as a cultural resource in the context of recognising it as a socially embedded, emotive entity.

HOTEI KUNIHIRO, YAMANBAGIRI KUNIHIRO, AND THE OWNERSHIP OF LIVING ARTEFACTS

The past social contexts of the swords by Sengo Muramasa and Kuwana Gou inform how their hometowns (and their presence in them) are made in the present. The places designated as home extend the sword's place of social habitation from the battlefield to include arenas that reflect their co-existence with other social beings. This inclusion of a range of social spaces allows for designations of home to be made through present-day events, as well as those of the past.

Today, the social human person is more likely to encounter a sword in the museum display than the battlefield. Inhabiting their displays, swords of the present day accumulate new attachments to place. This may lead them to become a famed inhabitant of their hometown, as their long-term presence builds to give the sword status as a known entity. In this manner, treasured or

famed objects of a place have the potential to impact manifestations of civic pride. However, this is not necessarily a simple process, particularly when dealing with objects that are valued for their presence outside of the display, as much as they are within it.

Put simply, it cannot be assumed that a sword's hometown and role as an object of display is uncritically accepted by human actors, when that same sword appears in top-down economic and cultural initiatives. The inhabiting sword is not merely an object that has existed in place for an extended period of time. It is made an inhabitant through the recognition of its social ties and responsibilities. As such, as much as homecomings are celebrated by human actors in this phenomenon, there may be other attachments held by the object that mediate one's desire to see it as a permeant resident of its hometown.

This gives rise to the question of how diverse human actors relate to and recognise swords: are they social beings, with their own attachments, or are they merely passive conduits of human ones? And, if it is the former case, what moral or ethical responsibilities do humans have towards the display of potentially living objects?

This discussion involves the use of famed objects and persons in regional promotional activities. The setting is Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture. In early 2022, Ashikaga hosted the "100 Years Since the Establishment of Ashikaga City Commemorative Exhibition" [足利市制 100 周年記念特別展]. Highlighted in this exhibition's promotional materials were two hometown treasures: the swords Hotei Kunihiro [布袋国広] and Yamanbagiri Kunihiro [山姥切国広]. Both objects and their promotion align with the ways that objects have been used to evoke the attachments of person to place elsewhere in Japan.

Touken Danshi—in particular, Touken Danshi Yamanbagiri Kunihiro—featured heavily in the targeted promotions of this exhibition. This adds an additional element to the use of a famed object in regional promotion, which is tied to fictional depictions and popular media imageries. Similar promotional activities can be seen elsewhere in Japan. For example, votive objects left at the main Shinto shrine of Shirakawa-go in central Japan are decorated with images of and messages to the fictional characters of the franchise *Higurashi no Naku Koro Ni* [ひぐらしのなく頃に]. This franchise is set in an equally fictionalised township that uses the real-world Shirakawa-go as its base inspiration. Fan travellers, in using objects and leaving them in-place at Shirakawa-go, enact a form of negotiation of place-value that recognises the experiences of fictional residents (Andrews, 2014), while also providing opportunities to engage with real-world ones. Similar use of votive objects and tangible messages occur in other settings throughout Japan, where the attachments of social persons—fictional or otherwise—are evoked through their embodiment in present-day objects (Shimada, 2015).

Images of Touken Danshi could be considered in this context as visual representations of fictional characters, engaged in a form of place/popular media association to promote Ashikaga City to a broader audience. However, it bears remembering that Touken Danshi are not purely fictional. The swords they are inspired by are real, tangible objects that themselves occupy physical space. Thus, the concerns at play at Ashikaga City are not about an overlay of fictional imageries over real-world space. They are instead drawn from discussions on the appropriate use of these real-world objects in portraying and maintaining the sword's social attachments alongside their cultural and economic value.

I base this argument on the fact that the hometown designation and renown of swords is primarily derived from the object's own history and experiences, rather than Touken Ranbu's narrative content. As such, I tie Ashikaga City's use of sword-objects in their commemorative exhibition to other forms of top-down regional promotion that may at times marginalise the concerns of inhabitants and their interpretations of social space (Derek et al 2016; Larson, Lundberg and Lexhagen 2013). I extend these concerns not just to how promotional activities are made in local space, but in how they are further discussed by those who engage with swords outside of the immediate local area. A sword's use in promotional strategies does not just involve its tangible display. Rather, the discourses surrounding its display can bring to light notions of inhabitation and the social role of objects that further emplace the sword away from the imagined past, and towards diverse settings of the present.

The Resident Sword, Hotei Kunihiro

Ashikaga City is located in the mountains of Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo. During the Sengoku Period [1467CE-c.1603CE] it was the home of the Ashikaga-Nagao family. A member of this family, Nagao Akinaga, was present at one of the Sengoku period's final major conflicts, the Siege of Odawara. It is here that this historical person's experiences overlap with those of another important to Ashikaga City: the sword-smith Horikawa Kunihiro. This smith, explained the director of Ashikaga City Museum, was commissioned by Nagao Akinaga to forge the sword now known as Yamanbagiri Kunihiro during the Siege of Odawara. After the war had ended and in a time characterised as one of peace in popular consciousness, Horikawa Kunihiro, now residing in Ashikaga, forged another sword: one with an etching of a sleeping Buddha, called Hotei Kunihiro.

Both of these swords with attachments to Ashikaga City were displayed at the Ashikaga City Art Museum in early 2022. While Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, as both sword and Touken Danshi, drew a significant amount of attention to this exhibition, I wish to first discuss Hotei Kunihiro, a long-term inhabitant of the city. Its ownership by Ashikaga has granted it a long-term presence in the area, and contributed to a sense of habitation and hometown attachment for the object.

As an historical and cultural asset, Hotei Kunihiro is displayed at and cared for by the Ashikaga City Art Museum. Unlike its slightly older counterpart, Hotei Kunihiro is not in Touken Ranbu, nor does it have a Touken Danshi design. This small sword was nonetheless framed by actors in Ashikaga as an important co-inhabitant of their shared social space. It is here that the sword's display brings to light the ways in which swords in general—and not just those with fictional, humanised forms—inhabit place, and undertake social roles in the present day. For Hotei Kunihiro this social role lies in its display, as a thing to be met with in the site it has long inhabited.

Hotei Kunihiro embodied this role in the Ashikaga City's 100th anniversary exhibition. In this context, the sword inhabits a typical social space for historicised objects. Its place in the exhibition room speaks to the craft and art of past human actors, whose creations are celebrated in the present. Its presence, however, was also felt outside of the exhibition room. Ashikaga City's 100th anniversary celebrations were spread throughout the city. While the most obvious connection to its sword inhabitants was through the large, brightly coloured banners, flags, posters, and playful tableaux depicting Touken Danshi Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, Hotei Kunihiro also appeared regularly in the promotions and celebrations of local actors.

More than 90 local businesses joined in the city's celebrations, arranging their own specialty items in connection to the Ashikaga City Art Museum's exhibition (Ashikaga City, 2022). These were food sets, hand-made crafts, and other specialties of the business. Some evoked Yamanbagiri Kunihiro: but a significant number also celebrated the local sword that has not made its Touken Ranbu debut, Hotei Kunihiro. In this manner the sword-shaped sword, with its long-term presence in a particular place, is recognised by human social actors and celebrated for the way it speaks to both the past and present cultural activities of Ashikaga City.

Hotei Kunihiro's status as an inhabitant of the city can be further seen in the direct interactions between Ashikaga residents and visitors seeking to engage with its local culture. I attended Ashikaga City's anniversary celebrations with two other Saniwa. The three of us had little knowledge of the sword-smith Kunihiro's other creations or his connections to the city. During the course of our visit, I parted with my companions briefly to conduct an interview at the Ashikaga City Art Museum. On reuniting, they excitedly pulled out souvenirs they had bought during our time apart. "Look!", they said, "a younger brother Kunihiro!".

This "younger brother" was Hotei Kunihiro, whose importance as a local of Ashikaga had been ascertained by my companions both passively, through the prevalence of its imagery in the displays of local businesses, and actively, through conversation with the owners of these same businesses as they explained the sword and its history. Hotei Kunihiro was quickly embraced by my travelling party, and spoken of in personed terms, for example, in immediately recognising it as the more famous Yamanbagiri's "younger brother". Hotei Kunihiro is not just as a sword, but an entity

with its own social and relational ties to Ashikaga that were actively recognised and shared by local human residents.

After enjoying the city's sights, we made our way through the exhibition that had prompted our visit. While there, we were drawn to the small sword in its display, finally able to meet with the object whose image and history we had seen at countless spots during the day. When we did so, our conversation and comments naturally continued the previous use of personed language, as we learned of its significance to Ashikaga through the museum's more formalised explanations.

Hotei Kunihiro is not a sword with wide-spread renown or enticing fictionalised narratives, as in the case of Sengo Muramasa's cursed swords. But it is, nonetheless, constructed by the residents of Ashikaga as an important entity of their social and cultural context. This recognition of the sword forms the basis of the social space and the social role it occupies in the present day, as a long-standing resident of the Ashikaga City Art Museum and representative of Kunihiro's craft. Hotei Kunihiro's emplacement in Ashikaga City's social dynamics is managed without the need for anthropomorphication—it does not have a humanised Touken Danshi form, and remains a sword.

When considered purely as a 'thing', Hotei Kunihiro acts in a similar manner to a museum treasure employed for civic pride (Deepak 2010). The civic value of these objects was not lost on the Ashikaga City Museum, which enacted specific measures to facilitate local attendance alongside the anticipated large numbers of Saniwa visitors. However, Hotei Kunihiro is not simply a 'thing' that sits passively in its case. It is actively related to and evoked by social actors as an entity with civic importance. Hotei Kunihiro, in its present day existence, undertakes a role similar to local celebrity, as much as it is a local treasure.

The Visiting Sword, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro

Hotei Kunihiro's status as local celebrity is supported by its ownership by Ashikaga City. It is more freely available for display and subsequent interaction with local residents. Its site of habitation has been established, and its management has been deemed adequate by related actors who recognise the museum as the sword's home. This is largely the case across Japan, where swords are the possessions of museum or municipal collections under a generalised banner of cultural heritage management. The translation of this management from protective ownership to an entity's 'home' is largely uncomplicated. The expected site of habitation, for an object like a Japanese sword, is in this context of cultural protection and management.

The protective ownership of Japanese swords does not appear to bring forward the same tensions regarding ethics of ownership as, for example, objects from colonial contexts do. As such, when there *are* tensions regarding a sword's display and the designation of its hometown, we are prompted to question what might have caused them.

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is, like Hotei Kunihiro, an important treasure for Ashikaga City. However, unlike Hotei Kunihiro, it is (at the time of writing) under private ownership. The divergent life experiences of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro and Hotei Kunihiro are not merely historical facts or trivia, but inform their current social roles and contexts that contribute to discourses of present-day object management.

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro made its appearance in Ashikaga City's anniversary celebrations on a request from the Ashikaga City Museum to its current owner. This was relayed to me by the Director of the Ashikaga City Art Museum, who recalled their request: "Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is a deeply important treasure for Ashikaga. We believe that, through the treasure Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, many people will be able to understand Ashikaga's history and culture. For this reason, we would dearly like to exhibit this sword. Please, lend it to us." [山姥切国広は足利にとって非常に大切な宝物です。私たちはこの宝物、山姥切国広を通して多くの人に足利の歴史、文化を知ってもらいたいと思います。そのためにぜひともこの刀を展示したいと思っています。お願いします、貸してください]. In this framing, the sword is recognised for its cultural value and the potential it holds as an ambassador for Ashikaga City and its local culture. The sword, in this instance, is a powerful object with the potential to communicate the activities of a past person. It is not, in itself, framed as a contemporary resident of Ashikaga. Its contemporary site of habitation, and associated social attachments, are with its private ownership.

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's status in the institutional display is similar to those of valued objects uncovered in Japanese rural treasure hunts, used to nurture civic pride (Love 2013; Nakamura 2018). The sword is, in this case, employed in display as a means of communication for the past and present of Ashikaga's cultural identity, connecting the area's historical past with its current civic form. The sword's central position in a major exhibition, and its promotion to actors outside of Ashikaga City, further frames it as an economic tool, valued for its provenance and current tangible form.

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's economic benefits can not be understated. It has been exhibited in Ashikaga City twice: once in 2017, and again in 2022. So many people came to the 2017 exhibition, explained the director of the Ashikaga City Art Museum, that they had started lining up at 5am just for entry. Visitors came from Japan, as well as internationally from the United States, Canada, Malaysia and China. For this small museum, which usually only saw 50-60 visitors per day, this proved an enlightening experience. The sword's value, in the traditional sense of museum displays, is unquestionable.

However, swords have intangible as well as tangible value. This intangibility—and its own ability to evoke empathy in human actors—draws on the object's attachments to past peoples and

places. This was expressed by the Director of the Ashikaga City Museum. In our conversation, he spoke of personal experiences with Yamanbagiri Kunihiro separate to those of the exhibition's curation and promotion. He recounted his daily routine during Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's display. He would check on the exhibition before opening, and during that time, would pause to look at his face reflected in Yamanbagiri Kunihiro. Over its 400 year existence, he said, this sword has reflected countless faces. He explained that swords may have an existence as weapons, but have other layers to their existence as well, as they "are filled with the feelings of so many people" [色な人の思いを籠った]. Underlying this anecdote is the emotive quality of a sword and its ability to accumulate social attachments: an attachment that the Director, too, is now part of. As such, while the treasured object's role may appear in a top-down capacity as an economic asset, the object itself has an additional role where it accumulates attachments as it moves through time and space. This role does not require the sword to be held in an institutional display, but is made through its passage in social exchanges and across different contexts of habitation.

It is perhaps in this space between treasure and social entity that set the basis for future conflicts surrounding the ownership of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, as understandings of the object as a 'thing' conflict with its construction as a social entity. Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is of undoubtable economic value to Ashikaga City. It was perhaps with this value in mind that the city put forward a proposal to its current owner in June of 2022 for the purchase of the sword. This proposal, made only three months after the conclusion of the city's anniversary exhibition, was announced with the language of satogaeri, or homecoming, for Kunihiro's masterpiece (Sankei News 2022). However, unlike other evocations of satogaeri this was met with apprehension, rather than celebration.

To understand this apprehension, it is important to understand the sword in the context of its life experiences, attachments, and social construction. It is not Hotei Kunihiro, an object with an established existence in an institutional collection. Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is, instead, one that has passed frequently through private ownership. This frequent movement does not inhibit its abilities to speak to its past person- and place- attachments. As such, when considering the social habitation of a potentially living sword, there is no underlying necessity that it be bought and owned by an institutional actor.

I here take a step back to early 2021, and the way Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, without being directly present in Ashikaga City, nonetheless had its place-attachments recognised in an emotive and empathetic capacity. Saniwa both inside and outside of Ashikaga recognise its importance as Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's former home. Saniwa's own relationship and engagements with Ashikaga City do not necessarily require the sword's tangible presence in a display: what they engage with is the intangible attachment the object already maintains with place. They are drawn by the meaning Ashikaga has for Yamanbagiri Kunihiro in its life trajectory.

The places visited by Saniwa are commonly framed as sacred sites [聖地], a term used for fan travels to places associated with their pop-culture idols. In early 2021, a number of these sites—in particular, the ruins of the former residence of Nagao Akinaga and Yamanbagiri Kunihiro—were damaged or destroyed by wildfires that affected the area. A local business owner, who had connections with travelling Saniwa, reported on this destruction via virtual gathering place: "Unfortunately, I have received news from those related to the situation that the Ashikaga Castle Ruins (Mitake Shrine), home of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro and Yamanbagiri Chougi's former owner Nagao Akinaga, has been completely burned." [残念ながら、山姥切国広、山姥切長義の元主の長尾顕長が城主の足利城址（御嶽山神社）は全焼との報を関係者より頂きました。] (Nihonryori Choya, 2021).

The fires were reported on by major news organisations, several of which mentioned the site's significance for fan travellers (Negishi & Sato 2021; Sawada 2021; Morishita 2021; Asahi Digital 2021). These reports characterised Saniwa as fans of a fictional media franchise, tying the value of Ashikaga's heritage sites to their capacity to act as desitnations of consumption in tourism. This runs contrary to the emotional message of the business owner's message to Saniwa, made not in terms of economic asset, but through relaying an emotional message of the loss of a place of importance for Yamanbagiri Kunihiro.

Saniwa shared the initial tweet over 13 thousand times, accompanied by a number of empathetic statements highlighting the emotional significance of Ashikaga's cultural sites for both Saniwa and the sword Yamanbagiri Kunihiro. One common, recurring sentiment was that "the Shrine [at the castle ruins] will be OK, because Saniwa will help rebuild it!" [神社は大丈夫、審神者が建て直すから]. This proclamation did not come without critique. However, it captured a wide-spread sentiment of responsibility amongst Saniwa to maintain the place once inhabited by Yamanbagiri Kunihiro.

These feelings manifest through social media calls amongst the fan-based community to contribute to Ashikaga City's *furusato nozei* [ふるさと納税] program—a form of taxation where those outside of a municipality can contribute their tax funds to its—bringing about an economic result born from the empathetic relationship between human and sword. On recalling this episode, the Director of the Ashikaga City Museum commented on *furusato nozei* as a way for those who have moved away from a place of residence to give back to their hometown. That Saniwa expressed the desire to contribute to this program, on behalf of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, ties this economic endeavour to their own construction of Ashikaga as the sword's hometown, despite its current ownership elsewhere.

The experiences of the 2021 fires show how Yamanbagiri Kunihiro does not need a tangible presence in Ashikaga to have its attachments established and acted upon by humans. As such, direct ownership by a municipal body, or direct habitation of a local display case, is not required for a personed sword to provide economic and social benefits to its hometown area—the social recognition of its attachments are enough.

The recognition of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's attachments to Ashikaga is made, as it is with Hotei Kunihiro, through actors of the present. That these place-based ties that manifest in differing ways highlights the individual nature of swords and their related social negotiations. It is understood that Yamanbagiri Kunihiro occupies other contexts while maintaining its hometown attachments. This understanding is crucial to the ways actors approach and critique the normative standards of artefact ownership and display. The apprehension towards Ashikaga City's purchase of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, and the debates that arose alongside it, draw on conflicting understandings of the sword, its attachments, and its role in contemporary social space. The understanding the processes of buying and selling for this particular artefact rely on a navigation of social, and not merely economic, concerns.

When is it moral—or even ethical—for a sword to be bought, and to enact a homecoming? Hotei Kunihiro's ownership and display at the Ashikaga City Museum is easily accepted. Why should this same situation be a cause of concern when it is proposed for its fellow sword, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro?

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's purchase was announced suddenly, in an online news publication that had previously reported on the more than 400,000,000 yen (approx. 3 million U.S. dollars, at the time of writing) the sword's 2022 display had brought to Ashikaga City. This confluence of events had Saniwa on social media wondering if the sword's attempted purchase was a decision made for profit, rather than care. Other factors, too, contributed to a quickly rising body of comments and criticisms put forward by Saniwa on social media. In response, Ashikaga City Mayor Hayakawa quickly published a letter on the city's homepage, emphasising that their purchase was intended to provide the object with a level of tangible care, utilising the language of cultural preservation. "There was a huge response to our comments on purchasing Yamanbagiri Kunihiro", the letter reads. "We wish to convey our desires to take responsibility for this sword, cherished for 430 years and with connections to Ashikaga, for future generations". [430年以上大切にされてきた足利ゆかりのこの刀を、私は責任をもって後世へ引き継いでゆきたいという思いをお伝えしながら、話し合いを続けたいと思います] (Ashikaga City 2022a).

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's private ownership is well known amongst those who seek out meetings with swords. Concerns for its purchase reflect the subjective and empathetic ways in which the sword is recognised as a potentially living object. As Saniwa have concern for the state of

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's hometown when impacted by fire, they hold concern for the sword itself and the motives behind its ownership. The transferral of ownership and promise of care for Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, as an entity with social attachments, cannot be justified entirely through typical notions of cultural preservation. The sword, presumably, already exists in a state of material care with its private ownership. What underlies the concerns of critics of the sword's purchase is instead its emotional, social existence. The potentially living sword's intangible needs must be considered alongside its tangible ones, and the notion of 'preservation' should extend to its social as well as tangible existence. If the sword is cherished and well cared for by its current private ownership, why is it necessary for it to be sold to a municipal government? Can this government owner give the sword that same level of intangible care?

It is perhaps apt to here re-state that swords are metal objects that only last through sustained, material care—otherwise, they quickly deteriorate. The debate of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's appropriate ownership combines concerns of tangible cultural preservation with the needs of an object's social elements. This highlights alternate dimensions of cultural heritage preservation, and brings forward ethical and moral concerns regarding object purchases made for economic or pride-based endeavours that may not be visible when considering the object purely as a passive 'thing'.

The debate of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's purchase did not play out between official cultural custodians or heritage workers but amongst Saniwa, with their own diverse approaches to swords. Three main arguments emerged on social media. The first follows with typical notions of care and preservation for material artefacts, and argued that purchase by the city would allow the sword to be protected with the increased resources of a large-scale institution. The second argument brought into question whether or not the city would continue to fund the sword's protection once its visible economic benefits had diminished. For Saniwa, rather than short-term economic goals, the long-term continued existence of swords remains the highest priority. This argument draws on the idea that public institutional actors may be unwilling (or unable) to fund a single object's preservation if there are no economic benefits to be had from its maintenance and display. Finally, there were those that were directly opposed to the sword's sale, which they positioned both as a taking-for-granted of Saniwa support, and an act that was contrary to the care of the sword's social connections. In this argument, Saniwa prioritised Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's emotional attachments, and its role not as a thing to be owned, but as an entity that exists in a relationship with its current owner[6].

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[6] To preserve the anonymity of the posters for these arguments and others mentioned in this section, I have chosen to not directly link to their private social media. However, debates can still be found on Twitter by searching for related keywords, eg. '山姥切国広' with '所有者' or '足利市'.

This last argument highlights the key difference in how ownership is approached between a personed and non-personed view of objects, and how this difference can result in an acceptance (or lack thereof) towards the use of objects in promotional endeavours. The non-personed view presumes that an object is a thing without agency or the ability to have its own attachments. The personed view prioritises the attachments held by the object. Yamanbagiri Kunihiro and Hotei Kunihiro share a place-attachment to Ashikaga—but Yamanbagiri Kunihiro has other present-day attachments with ongoing social importance, such as those it holds with its current owner.

The opinions of this owner, shared by Ashikaga City though an anonymised letter, use language that indicates an emotive and empathetic relationship between human and sword. The letter opens with a tone that combines the expected role of tangible object preservation with the emotional dimension of ascertaining that preservation. "Yamanbagiri Kunihiro has become too important to be left sleeping with us. To be honest, it is becoming impossible for us to protect [it]." [山姥切国広を私達の元で眠らせて置くには存在があまりにも 大きくなりすぎていて、正直守りきれなくなってきています] (Ashikaga City 2022a). The use of terms such as "sleeping" alongside the sword's designation as an "important" property gives Yamangabiri Kunihiro its own sense of emotionality. Rather than the decision of its sale being made through an objective assessment of assets and cultural preservation, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is treated as an entity that has both active and inactive states, or times of movement and times of rest.

The letter continues: "Although we let [it] go with overwhelming heartbreak, we visited the place that would look after [it], which has good temperature and humidity control, and security. It looked very comfortable." [手放すのは断腸の思いではありますが、保管されている場所 は私達も見学させていただきましたが、湿度、温度管理、セキュ リティもしっかりされていて、とても居心地が良さそうでした] (Ashikaga City 2022a). This assessment of the city's facilities, too, contrasts their objective qualities—resources put to cultural heritage preservation— with emotional elements of comfort for the sword and heartbreak for the owner. This once again highlights the empathetic connection between a beloved object, its owner, and that owner's desire for its ongoing existence.

The mention of "overwhelming heartbreak" [断腸の思いで] trended on Twitter alongside the letter's circulation on June 10th, 2022, and further heightened debate amongst Saniwa regarding their potential support of this particular homecoming purchase. The particularly emotive language used in the letter caused initial apprehension to extend outside of this single purchase, as participants put forward additional concerns that the purchase of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, tied to economic endeavours, would put pressure on other private owners who might now be reluctant to release their swords to public display, lest the attention lead to a similar situation. While we cannot

know whether this thought was actually going through the minds of other private sword owners, the concern regarding its possibility is another way that the personed aspects of the current sword phenomenon are revealed. Swords in this phenomenon have a social role that requires meetings, that is, their place in human/non-human relationships is conceived of terms of social engagements, rather than that of commodity value. If the value of swords is rendered into one of economic resources, it may make it even more difficult for Saniwa to meet with the already elusive swords that are in private or highly protected ownership.

This flurry of active debate, concentrated over the two-day period of June 6th to 10th, 2022, does not just bring forward arguments of object ownership and museum collections. It is also a negotiation of what place, and what context, swords should inhabit in the present day. Many swords, such as Hotei Kunihiro, are comfortably placed in their museum collections and displays. Others in private ownership are unproblematically stored and cared for by institutions they are loaned to, as Yamanbagiri Kunihiro was in its limited display at Ashikaga. However, these are not the only social context for swords, which exist in an active, present-day relationships with a diverse array of owners.

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is still in the midst of its life trajectory. It undertakes ownership exchanges in the way that swords have in Japan's historical past. Underlying this particular sword's movements is the empathetic relationship between a human and non-human entity, which may be disrupted if the object is moved to a context where it is framed in a passive, tool-based manner— indeed, the movements of swords and their abilities to gather place- and person-attachments may become hindered if their interpersonal exchange comes to a halt through purchase and storage by a government institution. This transferal of an object with an active life trajectory to the museum display, while perhaps beneficial for tangible preservation, has an unexpected side-effect of potentially removing it from its context of ongoing social attachments.

The emotional and empathetic relationship between a sword and the person it is attached to is highlighted in the concluding line of the letter from Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's current owner, who states that "…from hereon after, we hope that Yamanbagiri Kunihiro can find happiness, and be loved by everyone even more." [今後、山姥切国広が幸せになり、より一層皆様に愛されること を切に願っております] (Ashikaga City 2022a). In this wish lies the notion that the sword— Yamanbagiri Kunihiro—is an entity capable of finding happiness, particularly as it relates to its abilities to meet with those who care for it. The sword's existence is separated from the idea of a purely historical artefact, whose role in society has long since ended: it is still active in social life, and those involved with it with for it to find happiness in the present and in its future.

The prioritisation of active happiness for the sword is rendered in language that is unlikely to appear in the descriptions and labels of institutional actors—in fact, the emotive language of the

owner's letter appears in stark contrast to the more formalised letter of the Ashikaga City Mayor. Yamanbagiri Kunihiro is not just an artwork or artefact, to be employed as a passive tool of regional promotion and economic benefits. It is an entity with a habitative existence, in the past in Ashikaga City, and in the present with its current owner. That the conflict surrounding the potential sale of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro arose so suddenly, and with such fervour, only further highlights Japan's swords as having an existence beyond that of mere historical artefacts.

Thus, considering the potential personhood of an object is not only to look at how it is constructed by its fellow hometown residents and those it shares a social existence with: it is to also question how objects are treated by differing kinds of human actors. Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's treatment as an asset, supported by notions of preservation and the protective resources afforded to institutions, has brought economic and civic benefits to Ashikaga City. However, these same activities have the potential to disrupt the empathetic attachments between objects and their fellow social persons, if they remain unrecognised by top-level, institutional custodians.

THE TREATMENT OF NON-HUMAN OBJECT-BEINGS

A sword's habitation of place is not only a tool of regional promotion, but an act that utilises social and emotional attachments to negotiate place-value for all kinds of inhabitants, human or otherwise. Can Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, once guarded by an institutional actor, continue to freely accumulate its emotive attachments as it has done with its current private ownership? Questions such as these arise when considering an object's value beyond what is evoked in the pursuit of civic pride and the management of cultural resources.

Personed and socially alive objects are valuable inhabitants of the areas of their past and present. They have significant potential in facilitating the promotion of and negotiation of local cultural interpretations of these areas through their relational ties. However, they must also be recognised for how they themselves are conduits for place-value through their status as inhabiting entities, and not merely inanimate tools.

The sword in its display is an object enthusiastically visited by those not just from Japan, but all over the world. When displayed in regional institutions, the sword serves as a means by which place-value can be made, shared, and promoted against the dominant cultural capital of metropolitan centres. The inhabiting sword can promote individualised local perspectives and support reconstruction and local economic endeavours that may otherwise be overlooked by actors of the densely populated metropolitan centre. The sword, as a boundary object, and as a gathering object, facilitates human interactions that centralise experiences in the regional periphery.

However, we must not lose sight of what lies beyond urban development, and consider the treatment of non-human entities when they are incorporated into profit-centred enterprises. These

are objects that gain their social significance through their movements in life. The swords of Sengo Muramasa have a birthplace, which they remain related to despite (or perhaps partly because of) their subsequent ventures in other places. Hotei Kunihiro is equally valued by its fellow Ashikaga residents, as it sits in its home collection. Kuwana Gou has its hometown designation drawn from its movements through space and time, and, for four hundred years, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's life trajectory has interwoven it with numerous owners and their respective contexts. Thus, what emerges as key to understanding swords is their longevity and movements as socially engaged objects.

Decisions as to ownership and display of these kinds of socially engaged beings do not fall neatly into the ideals of cultural preservation or the accumulation of regional assets: indeed, it may be that the living quality of a sword is diminished if removed from its trajectory, and its ability to accumulate the experiences that inform its intangible qualities (Ingold 2020). While 'living' swords bring to light engaging aspects of their hometowns, to recognise them as capable of inhabiting these places is to further recognise their abilities to act as entities with attachments beyond tangible and material presence.

4.2 Regional Networks of Object-Beings

The place-attachments of swords, whether they be expressed as hometown or simply as a site of significance, have impact beyond the local notion of civic pride. Places and their attachments serve as a means of network-building that is based on the life experiences of swords and centred on the places of their habitation. Networks of sword-related places have two elements: one comes from the travel paths of Saniwa, independently designed to cover destinations related to individual swords, and another from the ways in which institutional and volunteer actors enact their own cross-regional connections based on the attachments of swords. This two-fold approach to regional network building is particularly aligned with the work of grassroots actors, as they pursue the connections of sword lives as an alternative means of heritage and tourism promotion that lies outside of major, top-down initiatives.

In the previous chapter, I looked at how the hometown attachments of swords and their recognition by locally placed actors is a key aspect in relating to objects in the context of our social lives. I did so with reference to the notion of local civic pride. Here, I extend the concept of object attachments to broader cultural engagements and travel activities that impact more than the singular regional locality. In particular, I tie the exploration of sword lives to the equally explorative activities of fan travellers, as they engage in their own relationships with local actors and undertake their own forms of place-making.

In doing so, I seek to further emphasise the notion of the sword as an inhabitant of place. Inhabiting place is more than merely existing in it: it is a making of place- and person-relationships, as one accumulates the attachments culminating in a social existence. Inhabiting can be enacted through an entity's tangible presence in a particular place. It can also be seen through an entity's movements, as the social person gathers, maintains, and recognises relationships with dispersed aspects of land and other social beings (Ingold 2020).

Movement as a means of accumulating attachments, or as an aspect of social existence, has been examined in a number of contexts relating to human social life. Urban New York's social space is negotiated through the daily traversals of the city's residents (Schäuble 2016, 5-6). Similarly, attachments to the landscape of post-colonial Australia are re-negotiated through embodied movement and the active re-integration of the social self and its related ties to significant spaces (Gibson 2014, 4-5). Movement, as well as being, is central to the way places are experienced and made into socially alive settings.

I here apply movement not only to human travellers, exploring the networks of cultural and historical content tourism in Japan: but also to the sword. The sword's movements can be seen in the deployment of Touken Danshi imagery and official collaborations with tourism initiatives

throughout Japan. But these movements are perhaps more directly drawn from the tangible sword itself, its life experiences, and the attachments it has accumulated over its hundreds of years in existence.

Sword-centred fan travel combines engaging with the tangible and intangible aspects of swords with additional connective acts between the traveller and the human residents of their destinations. These connections are the basis for larger network-building across Japan's cultural and historical landscape, and are particularly apparent when they reach into regional and periphery places. These networks are influenced both by the movements of a sword, and the movements of sword-like entities (such as the image of a Touken Danshi). To examine both the sword and Touken Danshi-based aspects to network building in this phenomenon, I provide the example of Musical: Touken Ranbu's 2021-2022 production *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* [ニッカリ青江単騎出陣, Nikkari Aoe Solo Expedition], a narrative work that deals with the journeying of Touken Danshi Nikkari Aoe.

This one-man show aimed to visit every prefecture in Japan over a two-year period, unusual for a stage production of this style and scale. The travelling aspect of the production was followed by audience members, who engaged in a practice colloquially termed oshi-tabi [推し旅], or travels undertaken to interact with one's favourite media personality. The oshi-tabi of Saniwa are not limited to human idol-like celebrities, and their activities are not bound to the activities of media productions. A sword can be a Saniwa's oshi [推し], or the target that motivates their travel.

Similarly, even in a situation where Saniwa are travelling to see a performance, as was the case with *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*, their fan-based activities are not restricted to the performance venue. Saniwa's oshi-tabi and other forms of travel come hand-in-hand with learning of a destination's cultural history, shared and promoted by locally-emplaced Saniwa and larger scale regional promoters. As such, I do not analyse the activities around this musical performance and its fan travellers as an act of media consumption tied to tourism: I instead aim to bring forward the ways in which the movements of these inspired actors contributes to the social construction of place and place networks.

The act of travel here covers several different aspects, entities, and actions. The first is the movements of the sword itself, as a socially attached entity. While the *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* musical production visited every prefecture in Japan, there were several destinations of particular interest to audiences due to their established connection to the sword Nikkari Aoe and its life experiences. The second key aspect of these movements lies with those of audience members themselves, who do not simply consume pre-set itineraries, but actively search for destinations with attachments to swords and their life experiences. Finally, there are the pathways of movement for human and sword, expressed in the present day as regional networks that are created and maintained

by human actors. These actors are independent Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts, who utilise their forms of communication to promote local place. Also involved in this network-making are top-down and volunteer groups who create opportunities for connection, and the accumulation of additional place- and personed- ties, among the wider body of actors.

These ties connect the experiences of contemporary Japan and its regionalised identities to the memories and attachments of long-lived sword beings. As such, the aspects of movement examined here show a productive and explorative approach to travel that is not entirely captured by a tourism-focused lens. This is a form of movement that integrates the interests of the presently-placed Saniwa and their favoured swords with the processes of value production for regional and periphery places. Through the movements and attachments of travelling swords, the localised histories of these places, too, find a space amongst other promotional actors, and forge new relational ties across Japan's cultural and historical landscape.

TOURISM RESOURCES AND THE SOCIAL NEGOTIATION OF PERSON/PLACE VALUE

Before delving into the specific example of travel tied to *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*, it serves to examine the context of tourism in Japan, in particular, the forms of tourism that are motivated by historical and popular content. Saniwa's movements align closely to those of heritage tourism and fan travellers. They are interested in historical sites and experiences, which they engage with via practices commonly aligned with the concept of contents tourism [コンテンツツーリズム], or tourism inspired by popular 'content' that relates to a real-world destination.

I start with heritage tourism. The typical heritage tourist seeks out the places associated with their favoured historical figures or time periods. Saniwa and other independent actors seek out those associated with their favourite swords. Swords, as still-existing entities, bring an alternate dimension to heritage-related travel practice, with the potential to directly tie contemporary experiences of regional places to the exploration of their pasts.

Heritage tourism regularly deals with ideas of the past that are explored through the things that remain in the present. These things that remain form the historical resources for localities that, in Japan, are employed in tourism endeavours that reflect national trends in cultural promotion and value. For example, in the regional area of Maizuru, local government-level actors have positioned and re-positioned the area's heritage-listed red brick buildings in combination with local historical narratives to align with national trends in tourism and heritage discourse (Uesugi 2019, 223). The status of these buildings and the narratives they are framed by shift in accordance with wider discussions on cultural and historical value. In this manner, top-down city managers employ tangible aspects of the city's past to reflect local experiences, fostering attachments of residents to

their localities, while also appealing to travellers by promoting Maizuru's cultural heritage in connection to events of national importance.

In the Japanese context, heritage tourism overlaps with what has been termed contents tourism, a form of travel that draws on the proliferation of images and narratives of places to appeal to the outside imagination. This kind of movement emerged in the late Edo and early Meiji periods [c.1800's], with the production and dissemination of popular cultural 'content' to appeal to travellers and inform them of their (potential) destinations (Mohri 2016). Similar to the ways Maizuru's tangible heritage has been mediated by national discourses, the imagery that appears in early contents tourism 'content' is often aligned with nationally-renowned images and famed persons, appealing to a mass popular base as it curates the destination's place-identity in the minds of those who engage with it. Contents tourism and heritage tourism undertake a similar use of a place's cultural resources when seeking to draw in potential visitors.

Contents tourism is, at the present, most commonly associated with travel inspired by contemporary pop-culture media. Research of contents tourism regularly looks at the travel patterns of fan communities, which includes those inspired by historical fiction and its related media. As such, it may seem simple to apply these theories to the movements of Saniwa, with their interest in Touken Ranbu. However, this focus on popular culture does not adequately explain their travels. The case of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro in Ashikaga City alone shows the varied dimensions of social debate related to sword placements, movements, visitation, and the emotional depth present in sword displays that extend beyond primarily economic concerns of top-down tourism initiatives. Rather than categorising these movements entirely as contents tourism, I argue that the travels of Saniwa are part of a process where the sword takes up a social position in the localities of its past and present. Through this, those same localities engage in a co-production of place value with visitors, locals, and swords.

It is for this reason that I use a broader notion of the term content tourism in my analysis, and combine it with the processes of heritage tourism. The 'content' of content tourism is not restricted to pop-culture. It is inclusive of any material and media that creates an imaginary, sensory ideal of place. In the Edo and Meiji periods this appeared in travelogues, travel guides, and other visual and textural materials with mass market appeal, shaping the ideas of place and its identity with those outside of it (Mohri 2016). In subsequent decades this material content developed in new media forms, such as the ballad films of the early 20th century. These films not only played with concepts of nostalgia and modernity in the periphery and metropole, but directly tied these concepts to movement, travel, and the socially-mediated experiences of place (Wei Lewis 2013). As such, what inspires contents tourism is not merely contained in the media itself, but is also influenced by wider ideas of movement, travel, and the social boundaries and allowances to these actions.

I use the notion of movement to consider contents tourism beyond the frame of pop-culture, and to explore how the imagery of a destination impacts is subsequent place-value and the perception of place itself. These perceptions are key in the actions of the traveller, who have their own understanding of a destination and its past shaped by the top-down curation of these place imageries.

This can be seen outside of Japan in the ways that particular destinations become associated with singular imageries, shaped and curated in tandem with targeted forms of place-value made by top-down actors. For example, Tahiti has long held a position as a tropical paradise in the global imagination. This position was largely cultivated by Europeans in the 19th Century, through their production of promotional media depicting idyllic sceneries and an othering idealisation of the local residents—the 'content' that informed Tahiti's place imagery (Kahn 2000). The image of paradise is continued through ongoing production of carefully curated photographs and postcards (Kahn 2000). Photographs, postcards, and similar paraphernalia emerge as the material content that shapes one's impression of (and desires for) the destination. However, these are not passive materials disconnected from their local social and political context. It is here that we can see how travel content is embedded in the negotiations of social life, whether that be to determine the value of the place, or the value of the persons who inhabit it.

Tahiti's popularised image of paradise is one developed by its colonial French government (Kahn 2000, 11). In response to local political tensions, non-government actors from the indigenous Tahitian population undertook their own constructions of place by manipulating popular paradise imagery to reflect their own lived experiences, making apparent the social realities of the island (Kahn 2000,19). In this case, the material content of travel, aimed at creating a particular top-down evaluation of place, is actively embedded in the negotiations and contestations of social life.

Tourism materials are not disconnected from other aspects of social life. As such, it is with this in mind that I approach the sword-inspired travels of Saniwa with an expanded consideration as to what constitutes 'content', and to what constitutes a recognised social actor. While the context of sword travel is not as politically wrought as that of the indigenous Taihitian population against a colonial government, it nonetheless involves a similar distinction between the top-down envisioning of place, how it is made by independent actors, and how it features in wider networks of places based on its assumed cultural standing.

The case of Tahiti shows the difference in perceptions of place between the outside visitor, or the international tourist seeking an idyllic destination, and that of the local, subject to social struggles that the temporary visitor does not need to concern themselves with. This creates a dichotomy of actors. This division of local/visitor is mediated by the local's employment of material content to communicate with those disconnected from the realities of living. Although

local and visitor actors occupy differing social spaces, the communication facilitated by material content creates a pathway to understanding that can then form attachments to inhabitants of other places facing their own social concerns.

The Saniwa traveller provides an interesting example for the 'traveller' side of the traveller/local dichotomy, in that their own movements are derived separately from the imageries promoted by top-down tourism actors. Saniwa are in frequent contact with volunteer promotors and others with a specialised consideration of place that is drawn from the social being of the sword. As such, the forms of communication and the networks they produce differ subtly but importantly from those of established heritage and content producers.

The communication networks of Saniwa and their local interlocutors speak not only to the experiences of humans, but to those of objects as well: that is, to those of the sword. Swords are, largely, framed by top-down actors as historical objects. As such they act similarly to heritage sites as tangible objects that can be used to promote regional travel. Including heritage aspects to evaluation of contents tourism practice is not unique in explorations of Japanese domestic travel. Heritage sites and objects are resources that can be designated as 'content' of their own, particularly when they are connected to nationally renown and frequently re-told historical narratives, such as sites related to the conflicts of the Sengoku or Bakumatsu [c.1853CE-1868CE] periods (Nakamura 2018; Seaton 2015). When used in this manner, the value of heritage-related places is made through the production of guides and information provided by management and other top-level tourism and government bodies that support and fund their preservation. This guided, curated form of heritage contents tourism can be seen clearly when considering movement associated with historical Taiga Dramas [大河ドラマ] produced by the Japanese National Broadcaster, NHK.

These television dramas have, since the 1960's, inspired travel to the sites referenced within them and to others associated with their historical protagonists (Nakamura 2018). Taiga-inspired travel occurs on a mass scale, to the extent where NHK, when preparing for a new drama, provides advance warning to regional municipalities of the anticipated tourism boom (Nakamura 2018, 25). This results in a co-curation and recognition of place value by top-down actors from both the national broadcaster and municipal governments. Guides and itineraries are put in place for the anticipated tourists, highlighting particular historical sites and destinations based on an assumption of the cultural value attached to them. This has the potential to be contradictory to local interpretations of place-value, such as in cases where top-down tourism curation highlights select heritage sites to the detriment of other aspects of local history (Grydehøj 2010). It is for this reason that, while there is a level of local participation in the curation of tourism sites related to Taiga Dramas, we must still consider the implication of top-down designations of important cultural places, especially when these designations are made in reference to nationally-renown narratives.

Taiga Drama-related tourism, as explored in previous research, often deals with places associated with well-known narratives of famous historical persons. Seaton (2015) looks at the heritage content of sites associated with the life stories of the Shinsengumi, a well-known group of samurai from the late 1800's. Their story was dramatised in 2004's Taiga Drama, *Shinsenugmi!*. Seaton's study also looks at sites associated with Shinsengumi contemporary Sakamoto Ryoma, and tourism related to 2010's Taiga Drama *Ryomaden*. Nakamura (2018) considers tourism to heritage sites through the lens of 2012's *Taira no Kiyomori,* a Taiga Drama focused on (and named after) the Heian Period politician Taira no Kiyomori. This small sample shows an interest in exploring the life narratives of particularly famed historical actors, not only through dramatized retellings of their life stories, but by physically moving to the places associated with them. Top-down direction of the resulting tourism, such as in itineraries based on collaboration between media and tourism producers, focuses interest in these lives to a singularly directed sense of a wider social narrative. In addition, it prioritises the imagined figure of the past, which may in turn marginalise the experiences of the present.

When opened to a wider range of actors, the curation of place destinations and the telling of past life stories can expand on the way heritage is understood and experienced. This can, in turn, uncover sites and stories that exist tangentially to the more renown central narrative, creating opportunity for the promotion of local histories and the local interpretations of those histories. This emerges in the experiences of travellers and locals themselves. For example, one Taiga Drama-related initiative included volunteer-led walking tours of the respective destination (Nakamura 2018). This engaged the local population and provided an opportunity for a different kind of curation or exploration of contemporary space, with reference to events and lives of the past. In addition, these tours created a high level of interaction between visitors and their volunteer guides, establishing connections and relationships that feed into a wider-spread social network. These kinds of activities reported a high level of satisfaction from participants (Nakamura 2018, 31). In these actively engaged movements supported by volunteer actors, there is the tie to an inspiring historical event or person, the formation of a relationship with a similar person of the present, and an exploration of present-day place that allows for its current situation to be placed alongside its historical renown.

Touken Ranbu-inspired tourism is not at the same scale as that of Taiga Dramas. Nonetheless, it engages with similar heritage content, and is inspired by similar historicised narratives of persons and their social lives. It is not, however, focused on long-dead humans, but the experiences of still extant swords. The object, in this case, engages in the same connective movements and relationships that emerge in volunteer-focused Taiga Drama tourism initiatives. Due to the scale of the franchise and the relative size of its audience, a great deal of Touken Ranbu-

inspired movements take place in the volunteer realm, rather than in those directed by large-scale, top-down producers.

While there are top-down collaborations between Touken Ranbu producers and potential destinations, Saniwa as travellers are more closely aligned with the emerging domestic tourist, who prefers self-determined itineraries rather than simply consuming curated, pre-made tours (Katayama 2013). Their activities also align with otaku travel practices, or those of fans undertaking their otaku pilgrimages [聖地巡礼, *seichi junrei*]. This term has been frequently used by news media and academia to describe the niche of contents tourism inspired by animation, comics, and video games (Okamoto 2015). Otaku travellers are highly active travellers who use self-curated itineraries. These itineraries are made and reinforced through fan-community negotiations and the connections otaku make with local residents of their destinations (Okamoto 2015, 19, Ono et al 2020, 6-7). Using their own networks and their own determinants of what makes a place valuable, Saniwa and other otaku travellers create travel paths and place networks that align with their own standards, and do not necessarily align with heavily promoted travel paths assumed to be the main avenue of interest by top-down actors. With an increased focused on sites of interpersonal rather than national relevance, the possibility of co-exploration and co-curation with a destination's local residents increases.

Saniwa movements take into account a number of the issues present in contents tourism, heritage tourism, and the activities of independent travellers. They are inspired by stories they have encountered in popular media; they explore space through the life experiences of a social entity; and they curate these experiences with the tools and communities available to them, without necessarily relying on those of top-level tourism promoters. It is in this space of interest in non-typical persons and their experiences, supported by independent itinerary curation, that the local actor—the volunteer guide, the independent promotor, or other such social entity—has a space to not only engage with Saniwa and their interests, but to form connective ties with others like them throughout Japan.

At the centre of these connective ties is the sword, an entity that is both heritage content and personed actor. Its tangible presence is a resource for local communities; and its intangible experiences provide a means of exploring place- and person-attachments. It is through the dynamic exploration of these attachments that travels to places inhabited by swords provide the opportunity to establish regional identities and unexpected networks of actors.

OSHI-TABI FOR THE PERSONED SWORD

The historical protagonists of NHK's Taiga Dramas have their life histories explored through travels to the real-world places they have attachments to. So, too, does the personed sword. One example of this is the sword Nikkari Aoe [ニッカリ青江]. Nikkari Aoe was forged in the

Nambokuchō Period [1336CE-1392CE] by Sadatsugu of the Aoe sword-smithing school. Like many other swords, it has moved across space and time in the years since its creation, accumulating attachments to owners, caretakers, and the places it has inhabited. These attachments form the basis of Saniwa movements in the present day, as they undertake their own journeys in connection with the life experiences of Nikkari Aoe.

Nikkari Aoe's attachments are understood in a typical manner—that is, through the information and curation provided to historical artefacts by institutions. It is frequently displayed at the Marugame City Museum located in Marugame, the former command of the sword's Edo-period owners the Kōgyoku family. Understanding of the sword's attachments is also made in a less typical manner. For example, Saniwa have identified place-attachments for Nikkari Aoe in distant Kanagawa prefecture, made through the discovery of the sword's registration as a National Treasure while it was owned by residents of the area. These attachments have manifested in a social media account called Hama no Aoe [浜の青江, Aoe of [Yoko]hama] that acts as a "remnant" of Nikkari Aoe, a being who once lived in past Yokohama (Hamanoaoe 2022).

These kinds of place-attachments, recognised by contemporary actors, come from both institutional and independent sources. This range of sources used to explore a sword's attachments allows for an equally wide range of place-relationships and subsequent place-networks of value for both the human and sword person.

Following a sword's threads of attachment, and recognising its place-relationships, is the contemporary sword enthusiast. As many of these actors are in frequent engagement with popular media spaces, it is not unusual to see their movements categorised as an oshi-tabi [推し旅, Oshi/Stan Journey]—the journey of a fan in the footsteps of a favoured person. Oshi-tabi and related travels have been categorised in terms of their economic potential (Nayama, 2021). However, rather than this economic focus, I draw attention to the ways in which the oshi-tabi recognises the places non-human swords have social attachments to.

Oshi-tabi is common amongst Saniwa, but is particularly visible amongst those with an interest in the franchise's stage productions. These Saniwa follow the shows to major stops on their tours, to support its run and experience the regionalised modifications made to each performance. This kind of Saniwa's oshi-tabi is not limited to the performance venue. Their travels also provide an opportunity to explore places they might not have had a reason to visit otherwise. In doing so, they seek out the historical and cultural content of each place, increasing its potential renown.

As with many Saniwa activities, the oshi-tabi emerges as a collaborative process. For example, Musical: Touken Ranbu's 2022 production *Kousui Sankanoyuki* [江水散花雪] was unusual in that its first shows were not held in Tokyo, but in Toyohashi, Aichi Prefecture. A number of Tokyo-based Saniwa took this opportunity to travel. Anticipating this, locally-based

Saniwa and those familiar with the area quickly posted recommendations of historical sites and places with a historical atmosphere for their visiting fellows to enjoy. These included the local castle ruins, museums, shrines, concurrently running festivals, and aesthetic cafes, accompanied with images of the Touken Danshi appearing in the musical as though they, too, were enjoying their chance to travel. In this manner, the popular culture aspect of oshi-tabi overlaps with independent, locally-based promotion of a destination, and creates connections between similarly positioned actors of differing geographic locations. The locally-based Saniwa can promote their hometown and its own expressions of historical culture on the basis of a common interest to Saniwa nation-wide.

Here, I focus on the oshi-tabi spurred by Musical: Touken Ranbu's national tour of the one-man show *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*, which visited every prefecture in Japan and was performed in a large number of regional venues. The internal narrative of this work draws on the sword Nikkari Aoe's fictional experiences, furnished with references to its historical past. The production's external, meta-textural narrative delves deeper into the notions of movement and travel. The character of Nikkari Aoe is positioned as undertaking a journey through Japan. His travel destinations are recorded by official social media accounts, highlighting the specialties and historical content of its destinations. Alongside the official records of Nikkari Aoe's travels are those of the audience. This is the element of oshi-tabi, where independent actors undertake their own journeys to see the musical and explore the cultural contexts of the respective venues localities.

In their explorations, these travellers regularly come into contact with local regional promoters. Primary amongst these promoters is the volunteer group Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai [ニッカリ青江友の会], based out of Marugame City in Kagawa Prefecture, the current place of habitation for the sword Nikkari Aoe. These elements of production, audience, and regional promoters have made it possible to re-interpret regional areas and establishes a connective network amongst places of the periphery.

To understand how the movements of Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts support these regional connections, it serves to understand the context of Nikkari Aoe and its place- and person-attachments. These attachments inform both the musical production and the general fan understanding of its existence, and as such also create the basis for Saniwa's oshi-tabi and potential points of connectivity.

Nikkari Aoe is currently owned by the Marugame City Museum. The Museum describes it briefly in its exhibition materials as a sword forged in the 14th Century by the sword-smith Sadatsugu of the Aoe school. More extensively, they detail its status as a treasured object of the Kōgyoku family. They conclude with a brief re-telling of the folk-tale that gave the sword its name (Marugame City Museum 2015). "Nikkari Aoe" is an unusual name, even for a sword. Part of its name is conventional: "Aoe" [青江] ties the sword to the Aoe sword-smithing school. "Nikkari" is

less conventional. It is written interchangeably as ニッカリ or にっかり, giving the sword's full name an intriguing combination of Japan's written scripts. The story of this name, as explained by the Marugame City Museum, is as such. One night, the sword's owner was walking down a dark path, when he was set upon by a grinning (*nikkari warau to* [ニッカリ笑うと]) female ghost. Frightened, he slashed at her with his sword, before fleeing. The next day he returned to the site of the encounter, but could only find a stone lantern, cut in two. In recognition for protecting its owner, the sword gained the name "Grinning" (Nikkari) for itself.

The sword's institutional framing places its connections to famed historical persons—that is, the Kōgyoku family and their relationship to the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, who gifted them Nikkari Aoe—in the position of greatest detail and prominence (Marugame City Museum 2015). Second is the sword's naming folk tale, and finally, the brief mention of its sword-smith and school. In this presentation by top-down actors, Nikkari Aoe is firmly emplaced in Marugame through its long history of association with the area and its attachments to prominent persons of the city's past.

This idea of value for the sword permeates from the institution through to local residents in their own engagements with cultural heritage. This was the case for the founder of the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, a volunteer group that endeavours to promote Marugame City and its local culture. When deciding how to present this group, the founder explained to me that "I wanted something that would represent Marugame City, and the name of the sword is unusual. I was always fascinated by it". Nikkari Aoe's usual name, and the story attached to it, appealed to the imagination of a local resident eager to engage with the area's historical culture. In doing so, the sword has become a representative of the city it currently inhabits.

The fascination with Nikkari Aoe and its unusual name is shared by actors outside of Marugame. Its story forms the basis of Touken Danshi Nikkari Aoe's characterisation, and the sword's ghostly connections are prominent aspect of 2021 and 2022's touring musical performance. This production also re-enforces the sword's place-attachment to Marugame: the final performances were scheduled to be held not in the typical metropolitan centre of Tokyo or Osaka, but in Kagawa Prefecture, to which Marugame belongs. As the final performances are the most highly anticipated by audiences of this particular theatre genre, this provided an impetus for travel amongst Saniwa from all over Japan. In this manner, the sword Nikkari Aoe and its attachments are enforced by institutional actors, promoted by volunteers, and recognised by independent persons who grant these attachments social recognition through their movements to a place significant to the sword's contemporary existence.

I here take a step back to consider how movement has been conceived of by the Musical's producers and built upon in the oshi-tabi of its audience. *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* was staged during the COVID-19 pandemic and, due to the numerous barriers to movement, aimed to bring the

experience of theatre to Saniwa across Japan who may not be free to move themselves. An element of this idea of travel lies with the Instagram account titled "Aoe Journey", which showcased local theatres and the historical and cultural content of each prefecture where the show was performed (Aoe Journey, 2021-2022). In doing so, the production mimics the normative activities of Saniwa travellers undertaking their pre-pandemic oshi-tabi, and provides the experience to those unable to undertake cross-prefectural movement during the pandemic.

While the story of the musical itself is tied primarily to the experiences of Musical: Touken Ranbu's characterisation of Nikkari Aoe, its storytelling structure provides an element of transgression between stage and real-world place, further mirroring notions of travel and movement experienced by its audience. Juxtaposed to the production's internal narrative of ghost-killing and warrior violence are asides and anecdotes made by Touken Danshi Nikkari Aoe that highlight his attachments to place and people made through travel, in a manner familiar to the 21st century audience. These asides were changed across each venue, drawing on local specialties and travel experiences that could be experienced by humans of the present day, emphasising a shared sense of enjoyment from exploring place between the entity on stage and those of the audience.

While *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* was primarily aimed at bringing the musical to regional areas and local residents, there was nonetheless a contingent of its audience that undertook their own journeys, following the production across its two-year tour. This is their oshi-tabi. The term oshi [from osu/推す, meaning to push one's support], is commonly used in reference to idols and other touring performers. With the meta-textural and travelling elements of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin,* this term appears, on the surface, to be related to the performers and actors who embody the stage Touken Danshi. However, for Saniwa, the term oshi encapsulates the existence of the original sword as well. As such, the oshi-tabi of this audience are not only made to follow in the footsteps of the production and its performer. Saniwa's interest in the sword positions these audience members to engage with presentations and framings of Nikkari Aoe and its attachments promoted by institutional actors such as Marugame City Museum, volunteer ones such as the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, and those made apparent through the community knowledge of Saniwa themselves.

While undertaking my own travels for this investigation, I met a number of Saniwa in the midst of their oshi-tabi related to *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*. While a great deal of attention was given to the performance's final shows in Kagawa, there was a particularly noticeable contingent of traveling Saniwa at the production's October 2021 performance in Okayama Prefecture. Okayama's city centre and historical sites were filled with visitors dressed in Nikkari Aoe's colours of green and blue, and carrying merchandise related to the sword and it's Touken Danshi actor.

The Okayama performance of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* was significant for more than one reason. It was highly attended not only due to the rarity of these performances being held in regional areas, but also due to the area's significance in the life trajectory of Nikkari Aoe. It was in what is now modern day Okayama where Nikkari Aoe was forged, and as such, the modern city has a birthplace attachment to the still extant sword and its travelling Touken Danshi aspect.

Saniwa travellers congregated in the city centre—as one might expect of those visiting to see a stage production. However, they also ventured elsewhere. Of particular significance on the itineraries of these travellers was a site distant from the performance venue, but closely related to the life attachments of Nikkari Aoe, called Aoe Shrine. This small, usually unmanned shrine is a 20-minute train ride followed by a close to 40-minute walk from central Okayama City. On the days surrounding the performance, Aoe Shrine was visited by approximately 300 people—a little less than 1/5th of the full capacity of the venue hosting the sold-out *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* (Aoe Shrine, 2021).

I visited Aoe Shrine on the day of the performance, engaging in conversations with other visitors dressed in Nikkari Aoe's colours of green and blue. When conducting my field work, I often found it easy to converse with other travelling Saniwa. That was the case here. However, unlike at other venues, the visitors to Aoe Shrine were more concerned about the pacing of their journeys, worried that they would be pressed for time in visiting all of the sites related to Nikkari Aoe and still managing to return to central Okayama before the start of the musical's performance. It emerged as important, for these travellers, that they have the time and space to fully engage with the places significant for the sword Nikkari Aoe, as well as to engage with the media inspired by its life.

I met with one visitor as I made my own return-journey to Okayama's city centre. We returned to the nearest train station together from Aoe Shrine, and on the way, she shared the experiences of her day with me. She was in the midst of her own oshi-tabi. She regularly travelled to see Musical: Touken Ranbu's performances, and when she did so, she always looked up the historical sites close to the venues. These could lead to chance encounters in places far from the expected tourism paths. This had come to happen in her search for Aoe Well, a natural water well close to Aoe Shrine that is said to have been the source of water for the area's sword-smiths. As water is crucial in the sword-smithing process, it could be said that this well is also significant in the creation of Nikkari Aoe. She explained her search for the well, into the wooded hills surrounding Kurashiki City on ill-defined pathways. It was a journey of much effort, she explained. In the process, she had come across another Saniwa, and they'd undertaken their search together. Finally, they had found the well—the only two there!—and enjoyed the destination before making their way back to the more urbanised streets of Kurashiki. Her oshi-tabi was undertaken far from the

urbanised centre of Okayama, and far from the performance site itself: but was still a positive experience, and a form of connection not just to the other Saniwa, but to the birthplace of Nikkari Aoe.

Okayama would not, however, be the final stop for many travelling Saniwa. The next scheduled performance was for nearby Kochi Prefecture. Conveniently, right between these two locations is Kagawa Prefecture, and Nikkari Aoe's home of Marugame. Saniwa travelling from one venue to the other stopped briefly in the city, where Nikkari Aoe was on display. I spoke to Saniwa here, too, in a more relaxed atmosphere than the packed day in Okayama. These Saniwa were from all over Japan, even coming from as far away as Tokyo and Saitama—a nearly four hour journey on the Shinkansen. Despite the distance, engaging in an oshi-tabi was an enjoyable experience for them, with one even mentioning that it was her fourth time to visit Marugame, and to meet with Nikkari Aoe in its display.

Here, we can see two elements of movement at play: one that spurs a reason for travel, as is the case of the specific journeys made in connection to the Touken Ranbu musical, and a kind of journey that is sustained, repeated, and made in direct connection to the tangible sword. These kinds of journeys are not distinct, but overlap. Many of the Saniwa I spoke to at Aoe Shrine mentioned they had visited, or planned to visit, Marugame City. In Marugame, Saniwa said they had seen the Okayama performance of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*, or were preparing to travel to its next show in Kochi. Thus, the audience's oshi-tabi not only runs alongside the actions of top-level producers, but is further inclusive of sites and experiences outside of them, to places with an attachment to the sword Nikkari Aoe and the subject of their 'oshi' travels.

It is this element of the sword as a central actor in oshi-tabi that gives this phenomenon its potential power in creating new travel paths and cross-prefectural connections. Sustained, returned visits to Marugame, or to Aoe-related sites in Okayama, increase the possibilities of connection and connectivity between distantly placed actors and those local to these regional areas. This is evident in the activities of the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, who have significant presence in managing Saniwa-oriented experiences at sites related to Nikkari Aoe. I will go into more detail on this group's activities in the next section: here, I wish to simply make note of the presence of grassroots actors in the repeated movements of Saniwa in their oshi-tabi.

The Saniwa oshi-tabi's exploration of 'content' is not restricted to the popular performance stage or an abstract notion of historical resources, but is directly tied to the social presence of the sword in present-day places. As such, when we look at the movement inspired by Musical: Touken Ranbu's tour, it is not enough to assume that the only purpose of travel is to view the musical itself, or that oshi-tabi is undertaken in reference to purely human actors. Rather, the combination of the production's movements with the normative explorative actions of Saniwa draws out the local

historical and cultural content of these oftentimes periphery destinations. The repeated visits of Saniwa, combined with their own inter-community promotion of historical and cultural sites, reinforce the community attachments Saniwa have with each other and with locally-emplaced actors. In addition, the direction of their movements recognise the place-attachments of their favourite swords and their own potentially social experiences. The activities of Saniwa's oshi-tabi increases the potential reach and value of regional places, and provides travellers with experiences and memories that they could not attain if their journeys were restricted to the venue hall or the ordered and pre-determined itineraries of top-down actors.

VOLUNTEER ACTORS AND THE PROMOTION OF SWORD ATTACHMENTS

I look now at the destinations of Saniwa's oshi-tabi, and how this phenomenon draws travellers into direct contact with independent regional promoters through their shared understanding of the place-attachments held by the personed sword—in this case, Nikkari Aoe. I return to October of 2021, when the musical production *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* was scheduled to perform in Okayama Prefecture.

In the months and weeks leading up to the musical's performance, the community group Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai established a satellite branch in Okayama Prefecture's Kurashiki City. In addition, they coordinated with the management of the local Aoe Shrine, pre-emptively recognising the importance this place would hold for visiting Saniwa. Nearby, just across the Seto Inland Sea, the Marugame City Museum undertook their own activities related to the sword, with their exhibition of Nikkari Aoe undertaken in collaboration with Touken Ranbu producers. This flurry of activity drew Saniwa to the area, eager to watch the performance, experience the places once inhabited by NIkkari Aoe, and to meet with the sword for themselves.

It would be simple to view this weekend in October from the lens of top-down media promotion, initiated by government actors and franchise production. These kinds of official collaboration between media producers and city governments and their cultural sites are not uncommon in the pop-culture promotions of Japan (examples of similar initiatives related to Taiga Dramas can be seen in Nakamura, 2018 and Seaton, 2015). Marugame City's collaborative exhibition was well attended by Saniwa, with a representative from the museum explaining that their long ownership of Nikkari Aoe had made them quite proficient at organising this form of top-town regional promotion. However, to focus solely on official activities would be to miss the independent and volunteer activities that connect Marugame to Okayama, and to other sites across Japan. These activities and their connective abilities are not made on the back of top-down organisation but through the recognition of a sword, its attachments, and the eagerness of others to meet with it.

In the days leading up to the Okayama performance of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*, Saniwa circulated their travel recommendations on social media. The Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai also participated in this information-sharing, as an independent body acting on the potential of Saniwa connections. The recommended sites included dominant places of historical tourism, such as Okayama Castle, Korakuen Park, and the preserved Bikan Historical Quarter in Kurashiki City, bordering central Okayama City. Also present, however, were small and unassuming sites: primarily, Aoe Shrine and the nearby natural water Aoe Well. Both of these sites are associated with the Aoe sword-smiths, and as such, are key destinations for any traveller seeking to engage with important places for the life of Nikkari Aoe.

The shrine and well are located in the north of Kurashiki City, itself a heavily trafficked tourism area of Okayama. Kurashiki's preserved Edo period mercantile district of Bikan Historical Quarter is a major tourism draw for the prefecture, with an information booklet released by the Okayama Prefectural Government highlighting it as the second "best" tourism site of the prefecture when ranked by visitor numbers: around 1,465,000 annual visitors, second only to the much larger (in area) Tamano and Shibukawa districts, located on the prefecture's picturesque coastline (Okayama Prefecture 2022, 29).

The Bikan Historical Quarter operates for the tourism market, showcasing aspects of local manufacturing from the long-standing tradition of Bizen-yaki pottery to more recent industries such as denim manufacturing. The area situates its museums and businesses amongst aesthetically preserved streets that harken to widespread imagery of the bustling, urban Edo Period. It speaks to a form of historical 'content' reminiscent of Edo-period travelogues and the imagery of a distant place for the engaged traveller. While not tied to a specific historical person, the positioning of this heritage resource evokes ideas of past lives and lifestyles of Japan in a manner supported by top-level tourism, conservation, and government actors.

What is not as overtly represented in these top-down promotions and the curation of the preserved historical district is Kurashiki's sword-smithing past. To Saniwa and similar travellers it is this aspect, tied to the respective place-attachments of Nikkari Aoe and other Aoe swords, that are of the most interest. Neglected by top-down constructions of Kurashiki's historical imagery, travellers interested in this aspect of the past instead find their guides in the informal networks of information sharing. Through these, Saniwa and others engaged in such movements are directed away from the well-signposted rotes to Bikan Historical Quarter, and instead head for Kurashiki city's edges.

When engaging with these destinations, located in the peripheries of already regional destinations, access and the facilitation thereof becomes an important point of connection between the locally-emplaced actor and their potential visitors. This is certainly the case for visitors to Aoe

Shrine. Amongst the online information-sharing occurring in Saniwa communities, additional information—including how to access the dispersed Aoe-related sites—was shared by the main and Kurashiki-based branches of Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai. Working together, these volunteer actors organised and facilitated access to Aoe Shrine on the days coinciding with Touken Ranbu's musical performance (Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, 2021). These notices were not just posted and left for consumption, but were part of ongoing rapport with visitors: after some Saniwa reported difficulties in directing Kurashiki taxi services to Aoe Shrine, the Tomo no Kai amended their previous posts with suggestions of local features to use as signposts for taxi-drivers, and alleviate communication difficulties (Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, 2021a).

With this simple question of destination access, three layers of connections are made: between Saniwa, the original Tomo no Kai, and its representatives located directly in Kurashiki and Okayama Prefecture. These connections, and their potential for expanding on the knowledge of local historical content, are only deepened when the traveller and local's exploration of place occurs alongside the destination itself.

I followed the directions to Aoe Shrine on foot, an approximately 40-minute walk to the edges of Kurashiki City. Set amongst the hills at the city's borders, small shrines such as Aoe Shrine are not framed as tourism destinations. They are locally situated, and do not expect constant visitors. Aoe Shrine lacks dedicated staff and sales desks, common features of larger tourist shrines, and is normally unmanned outside of specially designated festival days. Nonetheless, on an otherwise unassuming Thursday—the day of the Okayama performance of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*—the shrine was alive with an almost constant stream of visitors, many dressed in Nikkari Aoe's colours of green and blue. I spoke with these shrine visitors on the day of the performance, who had made the trek out to this small, local shrine in the hours before curtain. While there, they were invited into the shrine's main building by its attendants, engaging in conversation about Nikkari Aoe and the operations of the former Aoe sword-smiths.

Conversation flowed between the predominately female visitors and the older men who managed the Shrine, as they discussed history of the area gleaned not from tourism pamphlets, but direct interaction with custodians of these locally-positioned sites. A make-shift desk, manned by both a shrine attendant and a small figurine of Touken Danshi Nikkari Aoe, sold protective amulets and commemorative calligraphy [御朱印, goshūin] of the shrine's name and stamped with an image of the sword Nikkari Aoe. In these interactions, several layers of knowledge are shared between the locally emplaced shrine attendant and the visiting Saniwa, centred on a shared interest in Nikkari Aoe and the history of the Aoe district of Kurashiki. In my own conversations, one such attendant showed me photographs of the shrine in the past, and pointed to a signboard outlining its history—

aspects of tangible heritage drawn out by an independent guide, that would have been missed if my travels had stuck to more well-trodden tourism paths.

Elements of the personed sword's intangibility were at play in facilitating connections between the Aoe Shrine attendants and visiting Saniwa, establishing not only the significance of the area's history, but its ongoing attachment to swords and the works of the Aoe sword-smiths. At the shrine building's far end, where one would dedicate a prayer to its *kami,* sat a replica of Nikkari Aoe. Accompanying this replica were signs indicating to visitors that they were free to photograph the sword. Many did so, arranging their own dolls, figurines, and plush toys of Nikkari Aoe and other Touken Danshi around this sword-shaped form. Along with the Shrine's own attendant Nikkari Aoe, these objects populated the shrine, representing swords and their attachments as they accompanied their human owners on their journey. These object companions feature heavily in the posts made by Saniwa on social media to record their visits, evoking their own kind of intangible attachments. As such posts are circulated so, too, does the image of Aoe Shrine and the words of its attendants reach a wider audience that may one day enact their own travels. This small, periphery place is one promoted by informal modes of communication, and shared amongst potential visitors who recognise the emplacement and attachments of objects.

"A lot of people would want to come here today," explained the founder of Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai as we spoke inside the shrine building. He had come to assist with the shrine's special opening, and had made efforts to ensure it would be accessible on the day of the musical performance. We spoke next to a small display promoting Marugame City, his own hometown, paired with fundraising initiatives aimed at repairs for the recently damaged Marugame Castle. This small assemblage, alongside others throughout the shrine focused on Nikkari Aoe, represents the cross-prefectural attachments had by the sword that are built upon by human actors.

The presence of Marugame-related materials at Aoe Shrine reinforces a local network of cultural activity between Marugame and Okayama, made by the volunteer actors placed in both locations and their own communicative activities. In turn, the historical and cultural heritage of both areas gain more opportunities for promotion to visitors, as they are not restricted to their direct place of origin. It is here that the grassroots nature of this phenomenon, and its ability to cultivate networks amongst sword-related actors, opens new avenues for the exploration of historical and cultural content.

This could not, however, exist without the acceptance of their target audience in their endeavours: the sword enthusiast, and Saniwa. Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai's connectivity with Saniwa led to its founder's awareness of their interest in obscure sites, and he saw potential in being able to connect these sites to this eager audience. Touken Ranbu, he explained, was a particularly flexible form of media, based on notions of "freedom", making it particularly useful for the

promotion of local activities and periphery cultural content. He theorised that the malleable nature of the franchise, unbeholden to rigid or expected historical social structures, extends to how its audience experiences real-world space. In this space, their freely determined movements can take them to previously unknown destinations, based not on top-down designations of value, but on the life-attachments of swords. This, he explained, was why the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai worked so closely with Aoe Shrine. His interactions with Saniwa had revealed their interest in obscure places, and as such, he positioned the Tomo no Kai's activities as a way to guide visitors to sword-related places they may not have known of otherwise. In volunteer group's engagement with Saniwa in their informal circulation of sword knowledge, both Kawaga's Marugame and Okayama's Kurashiki becomes central in this form of experiencing Japan's cultural and historical landscape.

It is important to note that the success of these events, and the strength of these regional ties between localised actors, is made through a shared understanding of the relationships the sword Nikkari Aoe has with each respective place. Saniwa consider Kurashiki's Aoe Shrine and the nearby Aoe Well significant due to the attachment between these places and Nikkari Aoe's own existence. Those who continue to promote and maintain these sites have their own attachment to place, and through the personification of Nikkari Aoe, as well as their own sword-shaped decorations and tableaux, connect with visitors and locals alike. This is a form of grassroots promotion that is reflexive and responsive to actors on both sides of the typical visitor/local dichotomy, and is further made through collaborative work between 'locals' of differing localities. As such, rather than an act of tourism promotion and a speaking across the visitor/local divide, this phenomenon emerges as one made by a coming together of actors who inhabit multiple social spheres, inclusive of the non-human.

THE CONNECTIVITY OF JOURNEYS

The multiple attachments of promotional actors and their social settings contributes to the expansion of this phenomenon beyond regionalised networks of places situated closely to each other. The travellers associated with *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* came from all over Japan, and as the musical's tour itself travelled the length of the country, so too did actors seeking to promote their local areas converge and network with each other, facilitating connections across geographic space.

These actors were facilitated by the non-human sword, and the idea of its movements: however, they were also supported by another non-human. Central in the activities of the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai is a replica stone lantern, based on the one that features in Nikkari Aoe's folktale of ghost-killing. Originally designed to draw visitors to Marugame, and to provide a prop or set-piece in visitor's commemorative photographs, the lantern undertook its own journey in 2021 and

2022 as it was hired to volunteer actors organising their own events around local performances of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*. This was called the Stone Lantern Haunting Expedition [石灯籠単基出没]. Through the travels of this lantern, we can see the far-reaching nature of regional ties when made in reference to the current sword phenomenon.

One early stop of the stone lantern's journey was Okayama's Kinshi Kaikan [禁酒会館], a historical building located close to the performance venue of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*. It was displayed in a small courtyard attached to the building, and ran concurrent to the day's activities at Aoe Shrine. This event was overseen by the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai's Kurashiki branch, managed by an Okayama local who is also involved in volunteer groups surrounding Okayama's own sword-smithing culture. She explained that the event location had been scouted with assistance from other Okayama-based sword enthusiasts, revealing the crowd-sourced and grassroots nature of the day's activities.

The lantern's display was eagerly attended by Saniwa. The Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai representative explained her surprise, when she had arrived to set up earlier that morning, that there were already Saniwa waiting in line to enter the event space. On my own visit, I observed a number of Saniwa gathering in the small courtyard, situated against one of the supporting walls of Okayama Castle. Using the replica stone lantern as a base, they arranged their dolls, figurines, and other memorabilia depicting swords and Touken Danshi on top of it, and took their commemorative photos. Engaging in the creation of their own tableaux, assisted by 'merchandise' that organisers are increasingly referring to as visitor's small companions [小さいお連れ様], creates an engagement between event participant and event space that becomes its own kind of involved, commemorative artefact.

The lantern was not the only aspect of this event: merely its drawing card. Once they took their photos, the Saniwa in attendance would engage with the event's displays facilitating donations for Marugame Castle's restoration works—another example of the connectivity between Okayama and Marugame's volunteer actors. Alongside this was an array of locally made and designed objects for sale that were tied more directly to Okayama's own sword culture. The representative from Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai explained to me that, while she currently lived in Kurashiki, her hometown was in another part of Okayama Prefecture. Her hometown is called Osafune, a place with its own long-standing history of sword-smithing. Actors in Osafune formed their own volunteer groups to promote their townships cultural heritage, and their efforts were on display: embroidered works, small items for use by visitor's equally small companions, reusable bags, produce, and other items whose sale would support the township's ongoing activities. Facilitated by Nikkari Aoe, other swords of Okayama prefecture and their own regional hometowns were

represented in the prefecture's capital, and through the lively events of the day, were connected to Saniwa travellers from all over Japan.

Marugame and Okayama are fairly closely situated in terms of geographic distance, and are within an easy day-trip's travel from each other. The Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai's haunted lantern, however, has undertaken far further-flung journeys. In doing so, it has taken the potential of regional network-forming and the facilitation of local cultural promotion to other periphery places in Japan. This potential is well known by the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai's founder, who realised that the lantern's display wasn't just a fun opportunity for first-time visitors, but one that people were willing to go out of their way to see multiple times. In sharing the lantern's display with other volunteer promotional groups, they have an additional resource that can draw attention to their own little known or overlooked destinations. The haunted lantern has been displayed as far away from Kagawa Prefecture as Ishikawa Prefecture of Japan's western coastline, drawing attention to a local temple alongside the prefecture's own blockbuster sword exhibition, and in Tōhoku, north-east Japan, highlighting both cultural sites and local businesses in the region. This is an object with its own sword-adjacent trajectory of movement, connecting actors from Marugame City to others throughout Japan.

This is particularly evident in its 2022 movements, coinciding with the last leg of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin's* nation-wide tour. Between 2020 and 2022, what started as a local initiative in Marugame to draw visitors to the city's local cultural heritage expanded, not just to nearby Okayama and the hometown of the Aoe sword-smiths, but further afield. It did so through the support of Saniwa's own communicative networks. The ghostly lantern visited serval performance sites in 2022. This saw the establishment of another satellite representative of the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai in Fukushima Prefecture in Tōhoku, which made its own gathering events similar to those in Okayama. The lantern also went to Mie Prefecture and Tokushima Prefecture, promoting shrines and cultural sites along the way. It finally returned, along with Touken Danshi Nikkari Aoe, to Kagawa Prefecture, the current-day home of Nikkari Aoe. In this manner the movements of an object, made with attachment to Marugame and the life story of Nikkari Aoe, further gathered attachments across Japan and created potential new networks of actors in the contemporary cultural and historical landscape.

The lantern's haunted itinerary took it to the Tōhoku region of north-east Honshuu. It had been here before in early 2022, guided through the sights of the area—museums, regional tourism activities, the homes of local producers, and restaurants and cafes—and displayed at the Nisshinkan in Aizu-Wakamatsu, a historical building that had once served as a school for samurai (Minamisōmanba, 2022a). Its guide was a Touhoku-based Saniwa who uses the online handle Minamisōmanba, tying their name of a regional area (Minamisōma in Fukushima Prefecture) with

the nickname for the Touken Danshi Yamanbagiri Kunihiro (Manba). Designated as the Tōhoku representative of Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, this volunteer actor encapsulates their existing place attachments in their form of naming, whilst traversing the landscape of the region and accumulating more.

The lantern's local travels were captured in photographs as it, like the sword that cut it, became an integrated actor in the realms of human social living. They were further integrated into the travel paths and communicative language of Saniwa through the contributions of the organiser's own Saniwa-based contacts, who commemorated the lantern's travels in illustrations gifted to local business owners (Minamisōmanba, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). These illustrations of the lantern's movements were at times accompanied by spirit-like aspects of swords, visualised as Touken Danshi. They reveal not only the attachment of the sword to its haunted lantern, but make physical the attachments between Saniwa which are extended and offered to locally-based actors outside of the fan sphere. In this manner, actors engaged with sword activities and their attachments create networks in their own localised regions which extend to other areas of Japan.

On the lantern's return to the Tōhoku region in late 2022 its guide organised further collaborative activities between the lantern, sights of Tōhoku, and the performance site of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin*. This time, the lantern was located at the Mogami Yoshiaki Historical Museum in Yamagata Prefecture, coinciding with the musical's performance (Minamisōmanba 2022d). Once again it engaged in a public, event-based display supported by local actors, including the Saniwa acting in partnership with Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai. Through their activities, regional promotion of both contemporary and past culture is tied directly to the wider fan community, making use of its own forms of communication: social media, fan-styled photography, and a shared interest in the movements of object beings. Marugame is around 900km from Yamagata—nonetheless, the main branch of the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai and its representative in Tōhoku worked together to showcase their regional area's specific historical sites and local businesses. In doing so, they showcased a region and its local specialties to a nation-wide, and potentially even international, audience.

Following its movements in Tōhoku, the haunted lantern travelled to Mie (Minamisōmanba 2022e) and Tokushima Prefectures. While not as distant from Marugame City as Tōhoku, these places made their own contributions to the object's growing network of attachments through the activities of their respective volunteer promoters. Here, too, actors used the communicative networks of Saniwa to promote and facilitate access to local cultural sites and their surrounding facilities.

The Mie performance of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* was scheduled for Kuwana City: and so the lantern followed. As in Tōhoku, its display was promoted by local Saniwa in tandem with

other local entities. One of these Saniwa promoters was no stranger to facilitating access to Kuwana's cultural sites: they have previously contributed the Go! To Kuwana map of the city used by Saniwa visiting local sword exhibitions (Sakisakey0407 2021). This map was subsequently re-shared by institutional actors at the lantern's site of display (Kuwana Sōsha 2022). The lantern was displayed at Kuwana Sōsha. Alongside this display, the shrine also held a special exhibition of its treasure swords by Sengo Muramasa. As with the activities in Okayama, local promoters here use the movements of the haunted lantern to directly share aspects of their own local sword culture, creating another layer of attachments for the lantern the sword, and human managers.

If one was to speak of the popular historical tourism destinations of Mie Prefecture, the first thought is likely to be the long-standing Ise Shrine, further to the prefecture's south. However, Saniwa are primarily interested in the locations with attachments to swords. This is reflected in the musical production's choice of Kuwana City as its performance venue, but also in the enthusiasm with which Kuwana Sōsha and Mie-based Saniwa shared and promoted their own local knowledge and assets. This combined act of promotion between institutional and grassroots actors reveals a sense of connection between the places chosen to host swords and sword-related events, not through historical human actors, but through the social attachments of the swords themselves.

These sword-derived attachments were extended further as the lantern moved to Tokushima Prefecture. Its travels were supported by another local Saniwa, who used the image of Tokushima-based sword and Touken Danshi Hachisuka Kotetsu as their acting proxy. The lantern was displayed at Tokushima's NPO (Non-Profit Organisation) Noh Society building, following the pattern of historically-aligned places of display from Okayama's Kinshu Kaikan, Aizu's Nisshinkan, and Mie's Kuwana Sōsha.

As with Kuwana Sōsha's co-promotion of the lantern with its Muramasa swords, the Tokushima event used local sword attachments in its promotional activities. The lantern's display paired it with the intangible entity of Hachisuka Kotetsu [蜂須賀虎徹], a sword owned by the former Tokushima daimyo the Hachisuka family. Hachisuka Kotetsu's image was evoked in ikebana [生花, flower arrangement] displays at the Noh Society (Tottokotokushima 2022), and was supported by tableaux of Touken Danshi Hachisuka Kotetsu in its small companion form. As well as the ikebana and other imageries of Hachisuka Kotetsu, the event's Saniwa promoter utilised Hachisuka Kotetsu's position as a local resident of Tokushima to share information of the area's cultural activities, and to promote the merchandise of local businesses. Once again, the notion of a sword as a living entity with its own place attachments is paired in acts of regional promotion, where it acts as representative for a social realm it has long inhabited.

As with each step of the lantern's journey, Tokushima's promotions of local cultural content were made through Saniwa's communicative networks. Organisers utilised photography and

targeted hashtags on social media in providing guidance and promotion of their events. The use of these common forms of Saniwa information-sharing, inclusive of their recommendations of historical sites, sites related to swords, and recommended amenities, ties the promotional activities of volunteers to a social community of independent actors outside of mainstream travel paths.

The lantern's final stop in its haunting expedition was Kagawa Prefecture, current-day home of Nikkari Aoe. It was displayed close to the venue of the final performances of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin.* This event was supported not only by the main branch of the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai, but by the Saniwa promoters from Tōhoku and Tokushima, bringing together these dispersed volunteer actors at the final stop of Touken Danshi Nikkari Aoe and the haunted lantern's respective journeys. Accompanying the display of the lantern were further efforts to connect Kagawa Prefecture to its neighbours—namely, in a tour bus hired by the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai to facilitate Saniwa's visits to Okayama and Aoe Shrine. In doing so, the connection between these places is sustained and reinforced by contemporary human actors through the recognition of their value for Nikkari Aoe, and the attachments of other locally-emplaced swords.

What culminated at Kagawa Prefecture at the end of the two-year run of *Nikkari Aoe Tanki Shutsujin* was not only the final performance of this production; it was also a coming together of an expansive network of volunteer, regional promoters, who used their connectivity with Saniwa, fan communities, and to persons of their localities to create an experience of travel centred on sword attachments. In doing so, they highlighted places and experiences outside of well-trodden travel paths, and more directly connected visitors to the products and cultural activities of their respective localities. The connectivity of journeying and movement is, in this instance, not limited to the small-scale of a single person's movements and experiences. Instead, this utilisation of an object's movements connects dispersed actors across the length of Japan's main island of Honshuu and its neighbouring island of Shikoku.

THE SOCIAL EMPLACEMENT OF AN OBJECT-BEING'S TRAVELS

Sword-related journeys are not made to single fixed destinations, but with reference to the distribution of swords throughout Japan. As such, while a visitor may be an 'outsider' in one journey, they may be 'locals' in another. The nature of these movements, focused on the locations that contain and are related to swords, grants a wide number of volunteer and independent actors the opportunity to be their own local representatives. As such, the travels of Saniwa, using sword attachments as the loci of movement, are not so easily defined by terms such as heritage or contents tourism. They are not tied to a particular expression of the past or time-period, nor are they restricted to the collaborations or singular place-settings of popular media. Instead, the movements

of these travellers are constantly evolving as they engage in a long-term practice of travel with ever-shifting destinations that facilitates the creation of cultural networks in contemporary Japan.

This can be seen in the event-based promotions supported by the Nikkari Aoe Tomo no Kai and their representatives and fellow volunteer organisations in prefectures throughout Japan. These initiatives were not born from thin air, but accumulated over a years-long period, shifting and responding not only to the interests of their targeted audience, but to the manner in which local promoters highlight and engage with their surrounding cultural context. This is often made in collaboration with event 'audiences', as organisers are involved in the communities of sword fans and enthusiasts, and actively engage with Saniwa travel practices. The creation of events through grassroots endeavours and their attendance by those interested in swords allows for a reconsideration of place-value, particularly when that place is of the periphery.

The activities described here have been made possible not just through the efforts of human organisers, but through their underlying inspiration: the sword Nikkari Aoe and its social attachments to humans, swords, and physical places. Nikkari Aoe is a sword with a long life trajectory. If treated in the same manner as other forms of historical content-based tourism, this trajectory—its forging, the story of its name, and its ownership by prominent warrior families—speaks to ideas of past events and persons. However, the event-based activities it inspired in 2021 and 2022 are grounded in the present. Its attachments to place and people gave prominence to contemporary Aoe Shrine, Marugame, and a variety of other locations spanning from northern Honshuu to the island of Shikoku. In doing so, new ties are created by the human actors engaging in their own contemporary movements, forming their own attachments to place.

Many of the destinations frequented by and of interest to Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts, when considered from the lens of top-level tourism initiatives and national heritage sites, are relatively minor locations. However, with their attachments to the lives of swords and locally-emplaced human actors, they emerge as key in itineraries of movement. Through its attachments, the sword-as-actor (or even the haunted lantern-as-actor) has the potential to facilitate localised interpretations of culture and history, shared by visitors to their own networks with the same importance as official tourism initiatives. As the places inhabited by Nikkari Aoe are recognised by grassroots endeavours, and as their culture- and place- ties are extended to other sites through the movements of the sword's haunted lantern, so too do human actors engage in the creation of relationship networks that overlap with, but are not entirely dependent on, typical paths of travel.

4.3 Object Life Histories in Historical Narratives

Throughout this work, I have emphasised the present-ness of swords, and their re-emergence in spheres of contemporary social engagement despite their common 'historical' positioning. Swords inhabit places of the modern day and have their lives constructed through ongoing events, however, they are frequently placed by their institutional caretakers in the historicised context of artefact collections and displays.

 History and its impacts are interwoven with the present-day lives of swords. How histories are understood are, just like swords, products of present-day existence. The processes of historiography, while often aiming to be objective and empirical, are nonetheless influenced by present-day perspectives, framings, and concerns. This is not a fault of historical research, but rather, an acknowledgement that the arrangement of historical events in a comprehensible manner is, as with other products made by socially-embedded humans, negotiated within an author's own context. While we may envision history as existing in a binary divide between the past and present, they are entwined with each other.

Thus, as swords inhabit physical space, they also inhabit the narratives of past and present. It is here that their recognition as individualised entities with life experiences has impact beyond the interpersonal, one-on-one interactions between swords and their visiting Saniwa. Swords emerge as actors in historical narratives, a narrative process that speaks to ideas of identity, nationhood, and place-making (Karlin 2014, 18; Osamu 2020, 96; Buchholtz 2011, 422), and in doing so, contribute to the social reproduction of cultural value. Typically, historical narratives are centred on human actors. The inclusion of the sword as an actor into historical narratives expands the scope of the past and present-day perspectives they communicate.

The inclusion of the sword as an actor in historical narratives is supported by Saniwa and other independent actors, whose position outside the production of major and national narratives provides an alternate position of engagement with historical storytelling, and even potential counter-narratives to dominant perspectives. Established historical narratives and their counter-narratives are subject to tensions of the present-day and the actors who inhabit it (Falola 2022, 186). Creating counter-narratives, or even simply extending the established narrative beyond its typical focus, is a way in which the person of the present can negotiating social standing. This process is similar to that of negotiating personhood, with the adoption or rejection of particular perspectives of the past as one might accept or reject a particular kind of social actor.

In the sword context, typical and established historical narratives by institutions have been made with an assumed audience of middle aged and older men. The primacy of this audience in typical (pre-2015) sword exhibition practice was made clear to me by institutional representatives at

nearly every field site I visited in my investigation. To fully understand the impact of Saniwa and the framing of swords as socially alive on these established narratives, we must first consider the nature of historical storytelling in Japan, both in the context of 'empirical' historiography, and that which permeates in popular culture.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE MAKING OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

I use 'historiography' here to refer to the process of writing history, not only in an academic context but in the broader notion of non-fiction retellings of the past, for example, in the ways historical content is presented by government bodies, heritage organisations, and in other contexts that assume a sense of factuality in the information provided. This institutional, public-facing presentation of the past lies close to the ways in which objects are historicised and made into 'valuable artefacts' by other top-down bodies. Despite this veneer of authority and authenticity, the top-down negotiation of historical narratives in the writing and presentation of history is a process of negotiation undertaken by various actors and stakeholders.

This is particularly evident in Japan, where the emergence of regionalised historical narratives and subsequent regionalised identities coincide with the creation of public histories and their promotion in municipal tourism initiatives. For example, the local and regionally-specific museum is a common sight in the Japanese cultural landscape, as is the notion of the regional specialty [地域特産物] in foods and crafts. In terms of local historical content, visits across Japan regularly bring the traveller face-to-face with top-down presentations of a locality's historical narratives, through sculptures, monuments, banners, and other forms of civic decorations depicting historical figures or commemorating significant historical events. Thus, the historical narrative is not merely a product of books and writings on the past, but is integrated into the physical spaces of social and civil engagement.

The regionalised historical narrative does not merely serve local identities, but also provides a point of connection to national mythos by relating the presently-made, presently-experienced place with the narratives of other places in Japan. This use of historical writing can be seen in works of the Meiji Period [1868CE-1912CE], which used established historical narratives in their negotiation of modernity (Karlin 2014, 18) against a backdrop of transition from one political structure to another. These negotiations designate imagined roles for past actors, such as that of winners, losers, and the ubiquitous hero of the past, a practice which has repercussions on the presentations of the past that are still felt in present-day Japan (Karlin 2014, 79, Wert 2013).

For example, public and local historical writings surrounding the Bakumatsu [1853CE-1868CE] figure Oguri Kozukenosuke Tadamasa have been actively used to negotiate both the historical significance and contemporary local identities of Kurabuchi village in Gunma Prefecture

and Yokosuka in Kanagawa Prefecture (Wert 2013, 128, 131). As an actor in the social developments of the Bakumatsu period, the veneration of Oguri Tadamasa as a local figure in regional places such as Kurabichi village brings notions of modernity—more commonly located in metropolitan histories of places such as Tokyo (Wei Lewis, 2013, 101)—to the 'rustic periphery'. Thus, the writing of public history makes relevant the places and peoples that are not automatically included in dominant or nationally-centred historical narratives.

Similar uses of historical content can be seen in relation to the sword. For example, Ashikaga City's 100th anniversary exhibition explicitly drew out the locality's ties to events of the Sengoku period in its exhibition of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro. This ties a local personality, of the sword and its owner Nagao Akinaga, to a well known and well celebrated historical event frequently framed as significant in the unification of 'Japan'. This utilisation of local narratives highlights the 'locality' of Ashikaga while attaching it to a sense of pan-Japanese historical consciousness. In doing so, established narratives are followed, in the evocation of the Sengoku period, but also made in counter to it, with an emphasis on local actors who appear as relatively minor in nationally-focused retellings of this past.

Ashikaga's use of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro as a relevant entity for Sengoku history gives the sword its own identity. Its existence is re-negotiated from 'object' to 'actor'. As such, the framings of historical narratives are not merely a retelling of the past, but a process by which identities and existences are made and contested. Within this contestation is the ever-shifting present-day, captured in both narratives and the emergence of counter-narratives. Counter-narratives are frequently evoked alongside the negotiation of human personalities, such as the symbol of modernity Sakamoto Ryoma. The writings of history have the potential to make and designate categorical interpretations of actors and their achievements, tied to the goals of the presently-placed writer. Sakamoto Ryoma, while largely minimised in early writings of the Bakumatsu period, has grown in renown in subsequent decades as a counter to the (then) established and venerated figures (Wert 2013). This may be, in part, due to what Ryoma represents: a figure who encapsulates ideas of progress and modernity, nebulous concepts that remain ever-popular and ever-relevant as they can be interpreted and re-interpreted to suit the mores of the current day (Prough 2018, 565). In this manner, a figure originally minimised has shifted from a counter-perspective to one that, today, is dominant in presentations of the Bakumatsu period.

These interpretations are made relevant in tangible space. Ryoma's image is evoked even in places such as Hakodate in Hokkaido, an area he did not visit during his own lifetime, but that have nonetheless crafted a narrative of connection to the long-dead figure alongside their own positioning as an early modern town of progress (Seaton 2015, 92). Ryoma's enduring popularity may not be for who he *was*, but in how he *is made*. In such writings of Ryoma, the concerns of

history are not necessarily tied to his status in his own day: rather, there is a making-object of a human, in service of historical narratives that tie local renown to that of a wider historical imaginary.

HUMANS TO OBJECTS, OBJECTS TO PERSONS

In the use of historical humans for their symbolic and representative potential, we see a writing of actors of the past in a manner that is similar to how historical objects are positioned by institutions and other top town actors. As the museums of the Meiji period made notions of modernity tangible through their presentation of object displays, contemporary writings of the period venerated heroic and masculine figures in constructions of the ideal modern man (Karlin 2014, 79). The idealistic construction of warriors such as Minamoto no Yoritomo, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, themselves figures of transitory historical periods and credited with a form of national unification, is evoked in historical writings of the Meiji period alongside works dealing with more recent figures of political development such as Saigo Takamori, Katsu Kaishuu, and even Sakamoto Ryoma himself (Karlin 2014). In doing so, the person of the (recent) present is associated with a representative 'object' of the past.

For all these figures' representational value, they are unproblematically recognised by humans as a social actor, and an entity of their respective social realm. Following this, it may be that swords can also transcend the arbitrary divide between object and actor to become their own person of their own narratives, despite their inorganic existence.

To view swords in this way necessitates a counter-narrative to the dominant framing of sword-value that is derived from their role as tools and artefacts, and requires a further disconnection from their position as an extension of the warrior's self. Swords, particularly when evoked alongside the heroic figures of transitory political conflicts, appear in a masculinised realm of authority, and a narrative of strength that highlights a gendered divide in prominent social actors. Thus, to centre the object as its own personed actor in historical narratives is to counter not only the human/object divide, but the assumptions of value tied to masculine realms of action.

The writing of history centred on warrior exploits and male figures of the realms of authority crosses-over into the framings and valuations of historicised objects such as swords. The sources of authority used in historical writings are also employed in the modern display of these objects, and tie their designations of value to a perception of authority inherent in these masculine actors of the past.

For example, we might consider the frequent positioning of value for the Five Swords Under Heaven [天下五剣], Dojigiri Yatsutuna, Mikazuki Munechika, Juzumaru Tsunetsugu, Ōdenta Mitsuyo and Onimaru Kunitsuna, as having special status amongst Nihontō due to the designation

of their value by the Ashikaga Shogunate of the Muromachi Period [c.1336CE-1573CE][7]. The framing of these swords is its own historical narrative, where the (human, male, political) authorities of the past recognised them for their particular beauty, a designation that is upheld by the authorities of the present: the Tokyo National Museum, when displaying the swords Mikazuki Munechika and Dojigiri Yatsutsuna, labels both these objects as two of the Five Swords Under Heaven. Documentary sources that point to authorities of the past recognising particular swords for their artistic merit provides the modern institutional actor with a narrative of the object as significant for Japan's cultural identity, which has for centuries been regarded for its beauty—or so the story goes.

The narrative of artistic and cultural value for swords is supported by documentary evidence, such as in records of past family exchanges (Pitelka 2019), from which a number of extant swords gain their names and fame. Another example lies with the documents related to historical sword evaluators the Hon'ami Family, which are frequently paired alongside the swords they describe in institutional exhibitions, such as in the Tokugawa Art Museum's 2022 exhibition "Meibitsu" [名物] (Tokugawa Art Museum 2022, 15). In the exhibition space these documents highlight the material worth of the object and the prominence of their former owners; more often than not (and directly in the case of the "Meibutsu" exhibition) explicitly male actors.

These documents are employed in a narrative of swords as objects of cultural elites and their material worth. It is not my intent to dismiss this evidence, or analysis of it: rather, I seek to highlight how understanding the sword as its own actor, and not merely an artefact, provides space to negotiate a narrative counter to, or expanding beyond, these loci of authority in the interpretation of past lives.

Saniwa discussions of the Five Swords Under Heaven recognise their designation, and the empathetic nature of the swords' close and treasured relationship with the Ashikaga Shogunate. However, they also discuss a sword that (in its own narrative framing) is conspicuously absent from this list of most beautiful swords: Ōkanehira [大包平], an object with its own designation as a masterpiece, but is nonetheless excluded from this higher status of value.

The narrative of beauty in swords that derives from the repeated use of sources such as the Ashikaga Shogunate creates a categorical approach to the objects, placing their value in descriptive rather than embodied terms. But when swords are considered as individual and personed entities, the arbitrary nature of these categorisations becomes apparent, as does the socially-constructed nuances to their application and valuation. When Ōkanehira is an artefact, it is one of a particular

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[7] I enquired with the Tokyo National Museum, who frequently display Dojigiri Yasutsuna and Mikazuki Munechika with this designation, as to the origins of the term Five Swords Under Heaven. Interestingly, their response referred me to documents from periods other than the Muromachi, and they were not able to provide an extant source from the Ashikaga Shogunate.

categorical designation. When considered as an individual entity, it emerges as a being who can voice concerns on its own classification. From this starting point, further questions concerning the classification of objects can emerge: why do these categories exist? Who decided them? What are the implications of their use? What does it mean for an object to be excluded, and what could happen to mediate this exclusion? Does a categorisation based on past authority undermine the abilities for an object to be valued in the present? As human historical heroes become a means by which to negotiate modernity and nationalised identity, swords such as Ōkanehira become a means by which to negotiate the categorisation of objects and their own existence beyond symbolic representations.

The personed sword does not exist separate from existing historical writings, but rather, provides another viewpoint through which counter-narratives and alternate framings can emerge to question the conventional designations of value derived from masculine narratives developed in the writing of history since the Meiji Period. Human actors in historical narratives provide points of connectivity and commonality to widespread understandings of the past, rendering them into object-like subjects of stories made in the present. As such, it serves to also consider the way objects can themselves appear in similar narratives, made into personed subjects of similar historical stories by which identities are made, managed, and interpreted for the present day. This consideration can already be seen in institutions that engage heavily with Saniwa, particularly those that have undergone shifts in the presentation of swords away from masculine histories and narratives of warrior strength. Such framings provide a counter-perspective to assumed notions of history and historical tellings.

POPULAR CULTURE AND HISTORICAL FICTION

The writing of history in the Meiji Period [1868CE-1912CE] regularly saw works combining both 'factual' and 'fictional' approaches to the past (Karlin 2014, Wert 2013). The storytelling element of historical narratives in the Japanese context has precedence in works such as the Heike Monogatari, ostensibly based on a real-world conflict, and in popular historical entertainment such as jōruri, identified by Saniwa as a source for the sword name Azuki Nagamitsu appearing in popular historical consciousness. This practice continues in the post-war formation of modern historical heroes. The 1960's work *There Goes Ryoma* has been credited with a revival of interest in the person of Sakamoto Ryoma and subsequent historiographic and history-adjacent examinations of his life (Wert 2013, 128). Throughout writings on history, historical figures and their heroics have appeared regularly in fictionalised tales.

When these tales deal with warrior heroes, they are also inclusive of their swords. As in direct histories, the sword as present in historical fiction has meaning that is adapted and negotiated

alongside the context of its writers. This can be in the context of nationalising mythologies, such as the legendary sword Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi [草薙剣] providing legitimacy to the institution of the Emperor in the Asuka [c.530'sCE-710CE], Heian [794CE-1185CE], and even Meiji [1868CE-1912CE] periods (Selinger 2009). 'Historical' swords also appear in tales of their heroic owners, tied to notions of authority and power in their respective contexts. The amendments to the *Heike Monagatari* which include the *Sword Scroll* [剣之巻], for example, position its own famed swords alongside the historical narrative of authority evoked by Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi in establishing the legitimacy of the Kamakura Shogunate (Selinger 2009, 67).

With these frequent evocations of swords alongside rulers and warrior leadership in popular narratives of history, it is no wonder that a symbolic mythology has been built around swords, emphasising their inseparability from the lives of masculine, warrior authorities. This has bled over into works more strictly contained to the realm of historical fiction. The sword-as-symbol embodies the sense of masculinised power for idealised figures such as Samurai or Rōnin, imageries of which have spread world-wide through the broader consumption of media. This has impacted on localised interpretations of swords and their meanings separate to a context of warrior power and conflict. Locally-based custodians and promoters of alternate perspectives of sword cultures frequently deal with these heroic and warrior-based imageries, as explained to me with a tired frustration by one curator of the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum in Osafune, a town known for its sword-smithing culture: "We always get asked [by overseas tourists], 'Can this kill? Is this for seppuku [ritual suicide]?'".

The sword-as-symbol for masculine, warrior authority has thus permeated through wider national and international consciousness through its frequent use in historical literature and other fictional works tied to notions of strength and tenacity of the idealised samurai. Even the spaces of historical institutions, focused more on connecting local histories to national narratives through famed human heroes rather than the craft of the sword contribute to the construction of this warrior imaginary through their presentation of swords as the "soul" or "heart" of the warrior. In this manner, as the writings of non-fiction history are moved to social space through the display of civic decorations, civic institutions adopt the framings and messages used in historical fiction to highlight the value of their collections.

Such a process, argues Watabe (2021), is part of the idolisation or sanitisation of history that separates objects and peoples of violence from the realities of their actions. He argues that Touken Ranbu, as a fictional work dealing with past historical figures and featuring their swords, is also positioned within this context of a symbolic whitewashing of Japan's violent past. While this is an argument that deserves further attention, it is also one I wish to question. The assumption of a swords existence solely through its symbolic meanings assumes the use of this symbol is done

without negotiation or counter-negotiation by actors who view them otherwise. That is, it assumes that those engaging with swords uncritically accept their symbolic construction.

This argument further assumes an uncritical reading of fiction and fictionalised histories among audiences that simply accepts masculinised imageries of strength, power, and authority, without granting them their own autonomy to re-negotiate the use of actors in historical works. This is a dangerous assumption to make, when a work has a primary audience base that occupy a marginal social space. Watabe themselves brushes over the largely female audience of Touken Ranbu, instead focusing on the male scenario-writers of a game whose narratives make up only a small portion of the larger franchise and its active negotiation by its audience (Watabe 2021, 19).

It cannot be assumed that the audiences of historical fiction, particularly those that deviate from the assumed norm, share the symbolic understanding of swords with franchise producers. Not only does this overlook the long-standing practices of audience negotiation of media in Japan, as I have previously outlined in connection to dōjinshi and fan works, but further overlooks a very important point: the present-ness of the resurgence of interest in sword cultures, which coincides with the emergence of a female audience and their perspectives of *swords*, and not their human owners, as significant actors in their historical narratives.

Sugawa (2017) notes the prevalence of young women at sites related to historical losers. This attention, inspired by fictional works, makes relevant the previously irrelevant figures of the past. This not only acts contrary to the writing of history and historical fiction that celebrates the male conqueror, but highlights women as their own participants in the production of historical narratives. They provide alternative emotional interpretations to the symbolic use of figures of the past, derived from their own status of social precarity, while also supporting local events of commemoration and their associated historiographic material (Sugawa 2017, 187). The historiographic material produced here is a counter-narrative to that of heroic conquerors that does not just cover the concerns of locals, or the concerns of female audiences, or the concerns of history: all are interwoven in an exploration of developing historical narratives. Thus, instead of asking what the sword means in its symbolic capacity in historical fiction, we might instead ask how the sword's presence in fictional works has been impacted by the new voices and counter-narratives to the long-held norms of swords and sword cultures.

The sword names Masamune [正宗], Muramasa [村正], and Kiku Ichimonji [菊一文字] make frequent appearances in action-based, historically-aligned fictional works, ranging from novels to video games. Tales of Masamune and Muramasa swords stretch as far back as the early Edo Period, and are recurring items in long-running action video game series such as *Final Fantasy*. Similarly, the legendary Kiku Ichimonji is frequently evoked alongside Bakumatsu hero Okita Souji in popular media ranging from the post-war historical drama *Shinsengumi Keppō-roku* [新選組血

風録] to gender-bending visual novel games such as the *Fate* series of the 2000's. To list every instance of these particularly renown swords appearing in fiction a symbols of warrior renown would take far more space than is necessary—what matters is their ubiquitous nature in popular media as short-hand for a powerful and valuable weapon.

To this context, the Touken Ranbu franchise appears almost as an anomaly. Of its (current) list of 101 swords, only one is by Masamune. The vast array of Muramasa swords are contained in a singular Touken Danshi, whose own narrative status has been mediated by local actors in Kuwana City. The Kiku Ichimonji, frequently appearing as a set-pair with the historical figure Okita Souji, was introduced to Touken Ranbu five years after its launch—and the Touken Danshi representing this sword uses its voice to deny the historicity of his involvement in the famed samurai's life[8]. Even when focused solely on the narratives of the franchise, Touken Ranbu's Touken Danshi appear more as individuals asserting their own life histories, than as mere symbolic extensions of famed historical heroes. They provide a voice for the exploration of alternative narrative paths for these long-lived objects.

A secondary consequence of the Touken Ranbu franchise's relative lack of famed fictionalised swords is that its cast of characters provides a unique opportunity for lesser known, yet still socially valuable, objects to tell their own life stories. Saniwa embrace this aspect of the franchise, seeing it as an opportunity to learn of and meet swords they otherwise would not have been aware of. One widely-shared comment in virtual gathering places joked that rather than a game, Touken Ranbu—ONLINE— served more as an introductory course on swords. Another, made alongside the introduction of the 101st Touken Danshi Sasanuki [笹貫], drew attention to the number of Saniwa who realised they had already met with this sword, as it had been exhibited alongside one that they had visited in the past (Tōken Hōmon Blog, 2022). These Saniwa were excited to "meet him again" in their game files. The presentation of swords in Touken Ranbu is therefore not as a symbol, but serves as a starting-off point for the exploration of swords as entities and holders of lives outside of the game's content and its franchise narratives.

The fictional presentation of swords in Touken Ranbu provides an introductory basis from which additional narrative threads can be extended. And, rather than franchise authors, these threads are largely extended by Saniwa as they integrate the exploration and engagement with sword lives into their normative, everyday social activities. This counter-narrative of the sword-as-entity, rather

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[8] Similarly, the sword is not called Kiku Ichimonji, although it is clearly referencing this popular object: it is instead called Ichimonji Norimune, more closely following the conventional forms of sword-naming in object listings. This tendency for Touken Ranbu to use more documentary names for its swords and historical figures can also be seen in the Touken Danshi Ōchidori Jumonji no Yari, whose ownership is attributed to 'Sanada Nobushige' rather than the popular fictionalised name for this figure, 'Sanada Yukimura'.

than the sword-as-symbol, holds implications for the established framings of these objects through popular narrative.

It is here important to recognise that historical narratives are established with the voices of dominant actors (Hannoum 2021, 171). Until recently, for Japanese swords, this was the masculine image of the warrior and his interpretations of power. Nonetheless, historical narratives are a fluid, negotiable concept, enacted concurrently by both top-down and grassroots actors (Buchholtz 2011, 441). In this context the Saniwa emerges as a co-negotiator, providing alternate narrative threads to the long-held norm.

This is particularly relevant when Saniwa counter the masculinised assumptions of sword existences, and the closeness of this image to nationalist narratives. "We're not nationalists," emphasised one Saniwa I spoke with in June of 2021, as we sat in a cafe in Kyoto after a day of viewing swords in the city's shrines and temples. She brought out her tablet, to show me reports from early in Touken Ranbu's history where Japan-based Saniwa, responding to the concerns of those based in China, had assisted in protests as to the franchise's planned collaboration with the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. "The Chinese fans were really against this, and in Japan we also didn't want it. So the collaboration was cancelled, and they haven't tried another one."[9]. In this retelling, the controversial nature of Japan's military conflicts was not avoided, but recognised. Alongside this recognition came a desire to listen to the voices of fans outside of mainstream Japanese historical narratives, and to ensure their ability to continue to enjoy and explore the lives of swords. In this de-sanctioning of the ubiquitous association of sword imagery with nationalist symbols, Saniwa made it clear that they did not want their support of the franchise to be used to continue excusatory narratives of Japan's past.

This action in itself is one that can be more deeply analysed and examined. What it reveals, in this context, is an instance where actions of the past are negotiated by voices of the present from points of view that do not follow with the direct association of swords as sole symbols of military strength. This is not to say that Saniwa are free of the influences of pre-existing sword imageries: rather, that in their emergent position in sword discourses, and as actors who have not been granted space in this discourse in previous eras, provides opportunity to question the accepted meanings of swords and their symbolic, ontological value. The post-2015 interpretations of Japanese swords cannot be assumed to match those of prior decades: historical value and the stories attached to them are, after all, enacted with the present in mind.

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[9] Online records remain of this protest, such as at "'Online Criticism': A flood of criticism against the Touken Ranbu -ONLINE- collaboration with Yasukuni Shrine from Chinese and Korean users, leading to change." [【炎上】『刀剣乱舞-ONLINE-』の靖国神社コラボに中韓ユーザーから非難殺到→一部変更へ], Togetter, Accessed February 12th 2022, https://togetter.com/li/1088979.

This extends to the mythologising of swords in folklore and other tales. My conversation with this Saniwa moved from Yasukuni Shrine to other interpretations of swords tied to their spiritual qualities. In this, we discussed the differences between legends and history, and how engagement with one often led to exploration of the other. Indeed, Saniwa frequently discuss folkloric anecdotes alongside data from historical documents in their exploration of sword lives, easily making distinct the realms of reality and fiction whilst acknowledging both are vital to understanding the object as it inhabits the present. In this manner the variety of experiences, contexts, and situations swords have found themselves in become equally relevant, providing even further opportunities of exploration of historical narratives outside the typical norm. Other Saniwa become an audience-base for the promotion of these counter-narratives, that may otherwise flounder when put against established and popular retellings of male historical heroes.

The Touken Ranbu franchise and its impact on sword culture is commonly framed by Japanese news media as a "boom" or fad, just the latest piece of historical fiction to attract the presumptively short-term attention of Touken Joshi [刀剣女子, sword girls], Rekijo [歴女, history girls], or any other diminutive -'jo' ('girl') designation they ascribe to distinguish women from a more stable, long-term, 'normal' audience. Thus, it is not only the presentation of the sword in historical fiction that is negotiated by Saniwa's presence in sword cultures, but the idea of who these narratives were made for. Alongside historical narratives, the narrative of popular female audiences characterises these actors as a fleeting presence with no impact other than their short-term attention-spans. This, too, is a potential marginalisation of interpretative voice that calls for counter-narratives and more complex approaches to the engagements had between audiences and objects of history.

As such, as much as it is relevant to consider the symbolic use of swords in fiction, it is equally important to consider the ways in which swords are interpreted in the post-2015 historiographic context, as it encapsulates both the written and physical realm. The production of counter-narratives in the presentation of historical and cultural content brings attention to overlooked human actors, and here also brings forward a similar attention to the re-evaluation of swords. This is a shift away from strict readings of sword-as-warrior-symbol that expands upon, rather than deprives, the object of its ontological depth.

The sword appears in both historical narratives and in the telling of those narratives of the present. As it is embedded in historical social realms, its presence in those of the current day provides a space and an audience to which alternate understandings of its existence can emerge. Alongside historical associations with warriors, their exploits against monsters, their renown as artistic objects and position in the realm of social exchange, swords emerge as objects with shifting

ontological meaning that, with the actors of the current day, has the potential to become further diversified across Japan's cultural and historical landscape.

As Saniwa are recognised as their own actors and stakeholders, so too do their works, framings, and interests that centre the experiences of socially-alive swords in the local processes of narrative-making which, by extension, become resources for the ongoing writings of history. It is here that these emergent actors exist as more than the impetus of a short-term "boom": their actions are directly involved in negotiations of the present-day and its associated historical narratives.

I explore this firstly with the case of Setouchi City and the sword Sanchōmō [山鳥毛]. Setouchi City is a recently-merged municipal council, incorporating three smaller towns into a larger whole. One of these towns, Osafune, has a long-standing historical tie to sword-smithing. Through the purchase of Sanchōmō and subsequent interactions with Saniwa, the historical narratives and identity of Osafune in the present-day emerge alongside top-down initiatives in shaping and solidifying the place-meaning of a newly-made governmental entity. Here, the emergence of Saniwa has influenced the development of a local sword culture that appeals to more than the middle aged male sword enthusiast, and opens the local community to collaborative and grassroots action that engages with narratives of the past.

Secondly I turn to Kyoto, and its current-day status as a city of dedication to historical preservation. Kyoto is not, like the other sites referenced in this research, a place of the periphery. However, many of the historical sites within the city are privately managed and thus compete for historical relevance within the city. I here highlight Daikakuji, a temple dating to the Heian Period, and Kitano Tenmangu, a shrine of the same period, and their swords Hizamaru (Usumidori) and Higekiri (Onikirimaru)[10]. Rather than evoking the distant past, Daikakuji's presentation of the sword is tied to narratives of the post-war period, centering the interpretation of Kyoto as a bastion of historical preservation. This narrative of sword-value tied to defiance of military demands has spread to other sites and operations in the city, and provides an insight into how Saniwa's interests in pursuing individualised swords can be taken up by larger historiographical concerns in the framing and promotion of the past.

THE STORY OF DEVELOPMENT: SANCHŌMŌ AND BIZEN-OSAFUNE

Okayama Prefecture's Setouchi City was established in 2005 through the combination of three separate townships into a single municipal body. Its recency as a municipal body provides an interesting example of how historical narratives are used to position regional areas and their

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[10] These storied swords are known by multiple names. In Touken Ranbu, they are called Hizamaru 膝丸 and Higekiri 髭切. Daikakuji refers to its sword both as Hizamaru and its alternate name Usumidori 薄緑, while Kitano Tenmangu uses both Higekiri and Onikirimau 鬼切丸.

significance in contemporary Japan. This positioning is, at Setouchi, undertaken by both government and community actors. On the side of the government are the concerns of sustainable social and economic promotion of the city. Locals hold similar concerns of economic sustainability: but beyond these is an interest in maintaining a sense of local cultural continuity. Central in these activities, enacted by both government and grassroots actors, is a recently returned resident: the sword Sanchōmō.

Sanchōmō was purchased by Setouchi City in 2019 after a successful fundraising campaign combining crowdfunding with Japan's taxation redistribution system, *furusato nōzei* [ふるさと納税]. What is of interest here is not only the sword's purchase, but in how this purchase was framed as the homecoming of a locally born entity-turned-city-ambassador. Sanchōmō is not, in this framing, a passive object purchased for display. It is present in the contemporary promotional activities of Setouchi City, supporting the development of the newly-formed municipal area with the strength of its narrative as a long-lived representative of the area's sword culture.

FROM ASSET TO PERSON, FROM TOP-DOWN TO GRASSROOTS NARRATIVE

"There are 111 National Treasure swords," explained a representative from Setouchi City's local government, as we met in October 2021 to discuss the city's purchase and promotion of Sanchōmō. "47 of those were made in Bizen Provence [roughly current-day Setouchi City]. Including Sanchōmō [previously displayed at Okayama Prefectural Museum], there are only three in Okayama Prefecture… swords are important parts of this prefecture's cultural heritage, and [if Sanchōmō were to be sold to a different municipality], there wouldn't be a single one left… but if we could bring Sanchōmō home, and put it in the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum, it would have a huge impact on the local area." [その大切な国宝が瀬戸内市からまたなくなって、まあ瀬戸内というか岡山県からなくなってしまう…そういったあの、刀が一振りもなかったというところで、でもしその山鳥毛がその里帰りして備前長船刀剣博物館に入るということになれば、地域に多大な影響があるであろうというところで、ぜひまあ、この、手に入れたいというところ].

This was the government's reasoning behind Sanchōmō's purchase (at nearly $5 million U.S.), combining modern institutional framings of value, the historical narrative of former Bizen Province, and the benefits it could bring to the area, encapsulated in the desire to "bring [the sword] home" [里帰り]. With the fundraising project for Sanchōmō's purchase, called the Sanchōmō Satogaeri Project [山鳥毛里帰りプロジェクト, Sanchōmō Homecoming Project], the local government embarked on its mission to bring the sword back to its hometown (Setouchi City 2018).

In doing so, the notion of sword-as-asset and sword-as-famed-figure combine in a narrative of cultural continuity for the recently formed municipality.

Sanchōmō, in a representative sense, acts as an embodiment of continuity for Bizen Province's historical identity tied to artistic craftwork, and connects this past to Setouchi City's present. This is enacted through the city's decision to display and maintain the sword at the Bizen-Osafune Sword Village, a collection of cultural institutions that includes a museum as well as a working sword-smithing area that directly uses the area's historical name in its promotion of contemporary sword-craft. The evocation of 'hometown' for Sanchōmō is given increased intimacy as it is housed at a site and a space that continues the physical, cultural, and historical narrative of sword-smithing in the present day.

Sanchōmō was forged in the former Osafune town, which is now one of the three townships of Setouchi City. It was made by the Fukuoka Ichimonji sword-smithing school, whose former working area remains signposted in the town's historical tourism guides. Perhaps more widely-known, however, is the sword's ownership by the Sengoku daimyo Uesugi Kenshin. Uesugi Kenshin, like many renown daimyo of the Sengoku period, is heavily mythologised in historical narratives. Sanchōmō has the ability to act as a conduit for this famed figure's life. It is this ability of the object to continue a human person's narrative that, when the sword was put for sale, Joetsu City in Niigata Prefecture (far to the north of Setouchi) entered into purchase negotiations with its owner. Joetsu City has its own historical ties to the life and life story of the Uesugi family, and their attempts to purchase Sanchōmō align with the typical institutional use of objects to propagate the stories of historical actors through the things they once owned. However, negotiations with Joetsu City fell through. This gave Setouchi City the opportunity to purchase the sword and use it in a slightly different manner: not in service to the narrative of a human life, but in one that evokes the object's status as a local of Osafune town. From this, the Sanchōmō Satogaeri (Homecoming) Project was born.

"Bizen sword-smithing's greatest masterpiece, beloved by Uesugi Kenshin. Bringing the National Treasure Sanchōmō to its birthplace, Bizen-Osafune", reads the Sanchōmō Satogaeri Project's promotional website, once again evoking multiple elements of a sword's value: its craft, its historicity, and importantly, for the personed sword, its hometown (Setouchi City 2018). In this manner, the Project appealed to potential supporters across Japan and throughout the world.

This Project appears in an easy continuity with the township's other narrative-making endeavours, such as the signposting and historical guides easily visible around Osafune Station that direct visitors to the former working areas of their local sword-smithing schools. The area's narrative of sword-smithing has subsequently been adopted by wider prefectural authorities, with the use of Sanchōmō and its striking artistic form in prefecture-wide tourism advertisements,

including on the cover of Okayama Prefecture's 2022 pamphlet showcasing its cultural sites and assets (Okayama Prefecture 2022). The sword is recognised, in an institutional sense, as an object of value that can attract the attention of those unfamiliar with Okayama and its cultural context, evoking a past of craftsmanship that aligns with government initiatives in tourism promotion.

It should not be assumed, however, that these images are just as readily embraced by local, grassroots actors. It is here that the development of historical narratives, even when they appear as a clearly-directed top-down initiative of cultural heritage and regional assets, are entwined with local responsiveness. Central to the responses of local actors, in this case, is the symbolic imagery of the sword, its position as an asset, and its potential to become a fellow Osafune resident.

"There were people who were against [the purchase]," explained a representative from Setouchi City government. The opposition stemmed from a simple concern: why spend so much money on a sword? Complaints included the practical, such as calls for more spending on local infrastructure, to the emotional: "why buy a sword that killed people?" [人を斬った刀をなぜ買うんだ]. These complaints highlight the pervasiveness of sword imageries derived from their use as weapons, owned by those of a status and a lifestyle separate to the concerns of contemporary actors. Alongside this is the perception that the community's needs were not being served by the crowdfunding project—despite the fact that the money for Sanchōmō's purchase was to come from voluntary contributions, and not the city budget. Finally, these complaints show a disconnect between the ambitions of top-down actors in promoting the narrative of Osafune's sword-smithing culture and the ways locals actually engaged with or value this past. The sword as evoked in these protests is an item that killed: not as a resident of the local area, nor as something that can benefit its development.

I turn now to the grassroots actors at Osafune, and their own ways of mediating Sanchōmō, the narratives of its past, and its position in the present. "People don't know the sword-smithing culture. We grow up here, but we know nothing about it." This was the explanation provided by one long-standing resident of Osafune town, a member of the local community group Ōwarai Ichiza [大笑い一座]. This group has been actively promoting cultural activities in Osafune since 2019, many of which involve the recently-purchased Sanchōmō and its shifting image from an asset to a similarly local resident.

Despite the voices of protest, and the apparent lack of concern in the township regarding the narrative of a local sword-smithing culture, Sanchōmō's purchase was successfully funded. And, perhaps surprisingly, the voices of protests quickly diminished. There was a "mood of support" after the purchase; and the realisation that this purchase could be "very good for the community", recounted members of Ōwarai Ichiza. These statements alone, however, do not adequately examine the seemingly sudden shift in attitude from some local residents towards the sword. Rather than

simply taking them at face-value, it serves to consider how members of this community responded to Sanchōmō's purchase, and the narratives that they supported with their own grassroots initiatives.

As noted, from the community perspective, there was a sense that growing up in Osafune did not necessarily mean one has an understanding of the area's sword-smithing past. This is something that the volunteer group Ōwarai Ichiza, and fellow group the Sanchōmō Ōendan [山鳥毛応援団 Sanchōmō Supporters Group], sought to righten in their community-driven events, aiming to connect both visitors and locals to Osafune's past.

These events constitute a mediation of place, past, and present identity undertaken by local groups that (re)-constitutes present-day social existence (Buchholtz 2011, 423-424). The sword Sanchōmō appears heavily in this mediation, evoked not as a passive object but treated as an aspect of social life in Osafune town. Here, the sword's involvement in social mediation informs its shift from 'thing' to 'person'.

Sanchōmō, as an actor in the current developmental activities of Osafune and Setouchi City, acts as an ambassador of its contemporary culture as well as a representative of its past. It could be considered in terms of a boundary object, facilitating connection between actors (for example the local and the visiting Saniwa) across social boundaries. I consider Sanchōmō's facilitation of connection not only as a coming together of human persons, but as a means of negotiation for ideas of place based on the potential personhood of the sword, in contrast to its symbolic construction as a killing tool.

Saniwa recognise Osafune as a hometown for many of their individualised swords, drawing on the strength of the area's renown in the narratives of sword-smithing promoted by the collections of Japan's major cultural institutions. With their prominence in the National Treasure registry and in national sword exhibitions, the swords of Osafune are easily accepted as objects of value. As such, Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts provide a potential audience-base for the historical narrative of craftsmanship for the tangibly valued sword. This is the value recognised by local actors who supported Sanchōmō's purchase. Beyond this, however, and through their own activities, these local actors shape the sword less as an object to be admired, and more as one that can speak to the area's cultural attributes.

Across the meetings and events of the Ōwarai Ichiza and the Sanchōmō Ōendan that I attended, it was common to hear the sword referred to in a personed sense. This was primarily by its name, Sanchōmō, but also by its nickname, either the shorter "Chōmō" or "Chōmō-san". The sword itself was not present at these meeting spaces, instead being held in the nearby museum's collection. Nonetheless, hearing it spoken of and referred to with casual terms of reference evokes its presence in these human social gatherings.

While both Ōwarai Ichiza and the Sanchōmō Ōendan work in tandem through their grassroots activities promoting Osafune's local culture, I spoke primarily with members of Ōwarai Ichiza. We met in common community-gathering settings, seated in the tea-room of the Bizen Osafune Sword Museum, and through my assistance with a community-run festival coinciding with the 2022 summer exhibition of Sanchōmō, held at the township's local shrine. These gathering spaces, whether they be the museum's tea-room or under the sun at local festivals, become sites of lively conversation and interaction between community organisers, government representatives, other residents, and Saniwa, united through a shared interest in Sanchōmō's homecoming. Through this connectivity, and in the bright and festive manner in which it is promoted, Sanchōmō's identity, too, shifts from one that tells stories of war and conquest to one that is more directly attuned to the cultural promotions of Osafune.

The events organised by these groups, explained members of Ōwarai Ichiza, were motivated by a desire to enliven the mood of their hometown through facilitating connections with residents and the cultural aspects of their local areas. They seek to do this through fostering awareness of Osafune town's past. In turn, their activities foster the historical narrative tied to the lives of Osafune's former residents—its sword-smiths and their creations.

The group's events do not only attract local residents, but when positioned alongside the notion of homecoming for Sanchōmō, act as a celebration of the contributions of those outside the immediate area, reinforcing the importance of the township's sword culture to all in attendance. This could be seen particularly clearly at the festivals organised by the two community groups in connection with local cultural custodians at Osafune's Yukie Shrine [靱負神社]. I attended this festival in August 2022, an event organised following the success of its 2021 iteration. It was arranged to coincide with the summer exhibition of Sanchōmō, and aimed its promotion towards not only residents, but to the Saniwa who would be attending the display. Sanchōmō's homecoming is central to this festival, evoked through the words and displays of organisers, and the festival's main events which celebrated the aspirations of visitors as they engage in wish-making at the shrine. Organisers easily and seamlessly switched from celebrating local and personal wishes to those that utilised the language of Saniwa, each accepted as valid and approached with equal levels of enthusiasm.

In this equal acceptance of the hopes of residents and the 'fan', organisers draw the experiences of sword-related travellers into local activities. The results of this are twofold. It validates the position of visiting Saniwa, recognising their contributions to sword-culture and communicating a support of their contributions in Osafune town. Secondly, it makes Saniwa activities and the perspective of personed swords visible to local residents, emphasising the potential the area's status as a sword hometown has for its present-day development. The dual

sanctioning of sword-related visitors and local residents creates a relationship population [関係人口] between the two kinds of actors in Osafune. This relationship is made up of recurring visitors who feel their support of Sanchōmō is valued by local actors, who in turn support the grassroots propagation of sword-craft in the cultural and historical narratives of the area.

Across my conversations with members of Ōwarai Ichiza and the Sanchōmō Ōendan, there was an agreement that the voices of protest against the purchase of Sanchōmō had diminished, once residents had become more aware of the sword's benefits to their community. The disconnect between top-down and grassroots ideas surrounding the sword's purchase derived not from the nature of the object itself, but in how it was understood to act in the contemporary social sphere. The efforts of these groups demonstrated the wide-reaching potential of embracing Sanchōmō and its story of homecoming, as their activities—involving actors ranging from contemporary sword-smiths, other craftspeople, those who like swords, and those who just wanted to join and have fun—brought both tangible and intangible benefits to the community.

Here, Sanchōmō is not just an asset or a passive means of gathering dispersed actors. It is, itself, a participant. On display at Yukie Shrine's summer festival is a version of Sanchōmō made of Bizen-yaki pottery, acting as protective sword for the shrine and positioned to watch over the festivities. The potter responsible for this work was in attendance at the festival, expanding his customer-base and discussing his attempts to 'forge' swords such as his Bizen-yaki Sanchōmō with locals and visitors alike. Alongside the festival stalls were songs and dances evoking Sanchōmō and recalling its origins in Osafune town, made and performed by local community members and school students.

The groups' events are not limited to the times of Sanchōmō's display, but are recurrent throughout the year, bringing knowledge of Osafune's sword-smithing past to directly to its local residents. Many of the planned events, at the time we spoke in August 2022, were aimed at the area's children, where they can have hands-on experience with various aspects of sword culture guided by local sword-smiths. This was explained as a direct attempt by grassroots actors to remedy their own lack of knowledge surrounding the township's past and cultural contributions. In doing so, their endeavours, centred around Sanchōmō and the new creations of Osafune town, supports local-level sanctification of the overarching narrative of sword-culture employed by top-down actors.

In their promotion of local producers, craftspeople, artists, and performers, particularly around the times of the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum's display of Sanchōmō, these grassroots events gather residents and connect them with the cultural landscape of Osafune town. Sanchōmō's purchase has here been expanded from a simple asset for the city's museum, aimed at drawing outside visitors to the area's tourism institutions. The sword has emerged as a facilitator of events

and the connective activities of human social actors. The use of the sword, its display, and its properties as a 'local' of Osafune highlights its potential as a social actor, and the ways in which it fosters social activities amongst the township's residents. Thus, the historical narrative of Osafune is evoked through two threads: the sword Sanchōmō, born in the town's distant past, and in the ongoing social activities and practices of the humans who inhabit its present.

BIZEN-OSAFUNE, THE SACRED GROUND OF SWORDS

The present-based nature of the sword phenomenon, and the emergent view of sanctifying the existence of individualised, potentially personed swords, connects with ongoing concerns of development faced by many periphery areas in Japan. One such concern lies with how to sustainably maintain regional areas in the face of depopulation. When these areas have a connection to swords and sword lives, Saniwa emerge as key actors in the building and maintaining of historical narratives that have potential to further the cultural and economic viability of regional municipalities.

Saniwa's presence in sword-related activities has provided a significant base of support for Setouchi City's establishment of Osafune as a 'sacred place' for swords, a designation that has been recognised by national cultural bodies in Japan (Setouchi City 2021). The establishment of this sacred place legitimises the overarching historical narrative of sword-smithing for Osafune. In turn, it acts as a means of projecting importance and value, signifying the ways the promotion of particular historical framings are entwined with contemporary social life and place development.

I take a step back from the community activities of Osafune town's residents, and return to their precursor: the purchase of Sanchōmō itself. Sanchōmō's crowdfunding started in 2018, prior to its implementation in Touken Ranbu as a Touken Danshi. While there are Saniwa who seek out swords regardless of their status as Touken Danshi, there is no doubt that to a large portion of the audience, the franchise itself serves as the clearest starting-point for their relationships with swords.

"Did [Touken Ranbu] boost the crowdfunding? Well, yes, it did. That was the 24th of December, 2019." The representatives I spoke to at Setouchi City government recalled the date instantly. This was the day Sanchōmō was introduced as a Touken Danshi. Shortly after, donations to the city's crowdfunding project quickly accumulated. It is important to note that there was no official Touken Ranbu promotion of Setouchi City's initial crowdfunding project on social media (although producers Nitro+ are listed as campaign supporters, and have shared collaboration exhibition information after the sword's purchase). Instead, what is likely to have been the source of this push are the normative actions of Saniwa undertaken when introduced to a new sword: the immediate search for information surrounding it, including where it inhabits in the present day.

Sanchōmō, after its successful crowdfunding, was first displayed in 2020. Reports from Setouchi City indicate that 83% of attendees to this exhibition were women, with 71% of that number being in their 20's, 30's, and 40's: a major overlap with the observable demographics of Saniwa (Setouchi City 2021). Referring to these women as an emergent and vital sub-culture of female sword fans, the city government undertook plans to transform their support into a developmental program for the city (Setouchi City 2021). This "sub-culture", as one that recognises the social habitation of swords, shifts the conceptual notion of 'support' away from fan activity and towards local cultural engagement. In doing so, this audience provides both an economic and *social* basis upon which the narratives of place, object, and people play out.

The Sanchōmō Satogaeri (homecoming) Project became the Sanchōmō Satozukiri [里づくり, town-building] Project. Thus, the narrative of Sanchōmō's life is not merely in its past creation in Osafune, but extends to its abilities to foster and support its hometowns development in the present. On the strength of support in returning Sanchōmō to its hometown, Setouchi City successfully applied for the national designation of Osafune as a "Sacred Ground of Nihontō" [日本刀の聖地]. This five-year development program, aimed around creating and revitalising the area's tourism infrastructure, is premised on a narrative of historical continuity in Osafune in relation to sword-smithing, supported by the body of women who so eagerly funded and then visited Sanchōmō across 2019 and 2020.

The designation of Osafune as a 'sacred site' positions the regional community's identity as entwined with a narrative of crafting objects that occupy a particular image within national imaginaries of the past. This monumentalisation of place lies close to similar initiatives that utilise the symbolic nature of historical persons, such as the memorialisation of the historical figure Oguri Tadamasa to evoke the narrative continuity of ship-building and global industry for Yokosuka in Kanagawa Prefecture (Wert 2013,131). However, rather than a human person, it is the personed sword who is central to Osafune's place-narrative. Sanchōmō exists tangibly, not ephemerally. Its abilities to act as a conduit for historical narratives and the telling of place-histories are subject to the relationships it holds itself. The sword's habitation of Osafune is central to the promotional and developmental activities of Setouchi City, which utilise the historical narrative of sword-smithing to support contemporary development. Thus, Osafune's designation as a 'sacred place' for swords is one that builds on a sword-related historiography of the township. This framing takes into account the local, but also the wider public, by directly incorporating Saniwa travellers as social actors with the potential to legitimise this reading of place and past. Sanchōmō, as resident, acts as a means to accumulate the necessary emotive and empathetic relationships between place and wide-spread persons that supports Osafune's historical legacy and ongoing acts of development.

Government officials consistently include their identified "sub-culture" of young women with an interest in swords in their narrative-making process. That this demographic is singled out by the city's proposal for Osafune's sacred-place designation highlights the importance of the emotional, empathetic, and immaterial aspects of social life in creating sustainable communities. In the previous section, I drew a connection between visiting Saniwa (the sub-culture of women referenced by Setouchi City) and the idea of the relationship population [関係人口]. This is a concept that recognises that, to combat the effects of depopulation in regional Japan, it is vital to include those who do not themselves live in that area (Tanaka 2021, 57). This conclusion was made after top-down initiatives focused on infrastructure or other large-scale projects were seen to actually increase depopulation and hasten decline (Tanaka 2021, 34-35). What these projects lack is the attachments between people and places, or the kinds of attachments facilitated by a shared sense of connection, and an empathetic understanding of the connections held by others.

When Saniwa visit Osafune, they are put into contact not only with the swords displayed in its cultural institutions, but the people who support them. When these people, too, speak of swords in an emotive and relational manner, a sense of commonality between the local custodian and supportive visitor emerges. Sanchōmō is one aspect of this commonality, as an object valued for its present-day existence by both visiting Saniwa and those who now manage its care. I experienced this for myself when visiting the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum in 2020, at the time of the sword's inaugural display. In speaking with the Museum Director after attending the exhibition, he asked: "What did you think of *our* National Treasure?". This use of collective language indicated to me an institutional approach to the sword as more than an asset in a display case; it was a valued co-actor in promoting Osafune's cultural heritage. This collective reference resonates with Saniwa notions of sword homes and of swords inhabiting their collections as members of the museum's social community. Sanchōmō has here been brought into a relationship with its new caretakers, which was (if jokingly) presented to myself in a manner where I, as a visitor, could validate its prominence in these activities.

This sense of relationship with Sanchōmō was extended to supporters of the Satogaeri Project, directly described by the Satouchi City Government as members of Setouchi's 'relationship population'. Donors to the Project were granted the status of 'owner' for Sanchōmō, and given free entry to Sanchōmō's display for a number of years after the Project's conclusion. This is felt as more than a simple perk and title. I spoke to one Saniwa in Nagoya while attending a separate exhibition in July 2021. Our conversation moved to other swords in other places, and she explained with pride her status as a Sanchōmō owner, and her ability to meet with the sword at the times of its display. This is a small part of a relationship population in practice. This Saniwa has a connection to

Osafune made through Sanchōmō's status as an inhabitant, and a hometown representative of Osafune's sword-smithing past.

Thus, while the Satogaeri Project and its subsequent shift into a place-building endeavour is made and legitimised by top-down government actors and authorities, there remains a sense that its success is tied to the abilities of place-narratives, and their emotional implications for personed actors, to create relationships between social entities. This is extended to other, more literal, expressions of 'sacred place' with their own narrative framing of their past.

Nearby the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum is the small Yukie Shrine. This normally unmanned shrine is open and staffed during the times of Sanchōmō's exhibition, and attracts a large number of Saniwa visitors. In the course of my investigation, I conducted brief questioning on what visiting shrines meant for Saniwa visitors. Many responded that visiting a shrine was an act of local connectivity in a community gathering space. Their attendance at the small Yukie Shrine may extend this sense of locality, and the subsequent relationship of person and place, to a site far from their normal homes.

Attention to Yukie Shrine is largely derived from Saniwa's interest in swords and sword-related places—that is, in how sites with sword-attachments feature in the narratives of their life. Invited into the Shrine building, attendants explain its history, the history of Osafune's sword-smiths, and their own sacred swords to their visitors, engaging in a community-based promotion of historical narratives. The Shrine's swords are made of metal and are accompanied by the Bizen-yaki Sanchōmō. Yukie Shrine's Bizen-yaki Sanchōmō is, to them, as valuable to them as the 'real', metal sword in the nearby Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum. It is in its own way an object that projects Osafune's narrative of craftsmanship. Saniwa were invited to examine this sword closely, and were free to take photos with the object-entity and their own accompanying Touken Danshi merchandise (their "small companions"). In doing so, they connect and interact with the pottery sword. They grant this object its own status of social habitation, sharing online their photos of their visit alongside summaries of the knowledge they have gained from the Shrine's custodians. This, too, is an act of legitimising the historical narrative of Osafune as a 'sacred place' of swords, supported in the propagation of this narrative in the knowledge-sharing networks of Saniwa visitors.

As with the top-down activities, seeking to sanctify and solidify the cultural and historical narrative of sword-craft for the area, local actors at Yukie Shrine engage with all levels of visitors to present the area's past and present in tandem, through the lens of emotive relationships. I visited this shrine once in 2020, alongside Sanchōmō's inaugural display at the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum. The priest there explained to me that he didn't quite understand the enthusiasm of these Saniwa visitors, nor the the 'anime' they seemed interested in. But he was nonetheless grateful for their support and the lively atmosphere they brought to the local-level shrine. "I wish it could be

like this every day", he confessed. While not exactly an every-day occurrence, by 2022, Yukie Shrine's position as a place of cultural and historical value had been well and truly established in Saniwa circles. The shrine attendants continue to foster this relationship, putting in a clear order of process to engaging with visitors that had developed far beyond the simple presentations I witnessed in 2020, to educate their visitors on the site, its swords, and the sacred history of Osafune.

"I hope for two things," explained a Shrine attendant to visitors in 2022. "For more people to come to enjoy swords and sword culture, and for those people to one day want a *mamorigatana* [守刀, used to mean spiritually protective sword] of their own". Using the visitors desire to learn about the township, and recognising that these visitors were motivated by an interest in swords, the Shrine's activities utilise the overarching narrative of Osafune as a sacred site in promoting the works of local crafts-people and their own interpretation as to the protective role of swords in contemporary society. This promotion comes hand-in-hand with connectivity to Saniwa. The attendant, in his pre-prepared spiel, acknowledged Touken Ranbu's abilities to inspire new fans of sword culture; and extended to that inspiration a desire to see a growth in support for these objects that are made "by the culmination of hopes" [願うをこめて] — hopes of the maker, the wielder, and maybe even those of a regional township seeking to establish its identity in the present-day landscape.

Sanchōmō acts as a representative both of the narrative Osafune, framed in a writing of history that emphasises the skill of the area's former residents, and as an entity that is, like the town's other, lesser-known swords, embedded in the social dynamics of the present. Its appropriation into the structures of economic regional development, as well as the subsequent application for the area of Osafune to become a 'sacred ground' for Japan's artistic swords, is not one made purely in top-down designations of sword value. What makes this area 'sacred' is not only in the tangible value of its swords, but in the narratives and experiences those swords are able to convey, or assist in conveying, as socially engaged objects.

THE SOCIAL SUPPORT OF SWORD NARRATIVES

Historical narratives emerge in a vast number of contexts, with a vast number of perspectives as to their telling. For Japan's swords, these narratives are just as varied as for human actors. Aside from the place-narrative of Osafune as a 'sacred ground' or 'hometown', Sanchōmō and similar swords engage with the historical writing process through their abilities to reference the diverse perspectives of their pasts. Understanding the multi-level aspect of historical narratives, particularly when they are negotiated by ground-level actors, is key to gaining a full picture of how they are embedded in contemporary social life.

I have written at length how Sanchōmō's purchase and the narrative surrounding its homecoming has been adopted and perpetuated by local actors, despite their initial protests to what was perceived as a disconnected, top-down appraisal of local community value. Here, I wish to look at how the wider-spread acceptance of Sanchōmō's homecoming has led to the development of alternate and counter-narratives of sword value put forward by these same local-level actors.

The historical narrative of a sword, presented in a categorical sense through the designation of Nihontō, follows a clear path of largely male ownership in a largely warrior context. Even when extended to include the craft of sword-smiths, this highlights male actors and can in effect hold an object's existence frozen to the point of its creation. For Sanchōmō, its historical ownership by the Uesugi is only one aspect of its 700-year long existence. Similarly, its creation is a single point in its lifetime. To this is the counter-narrative of Sanchōmō as an individual entity, which considers the entirety of its experiences. It is in this acceptance of the object as an entity with a past, present, and future, that its own life-story and those of the persons and places it has attachment to can be supported.

Explorations of place through the individual histories of former historical residents has spurred a re-discovery of historical content in tourism associated with Taiga Dramas (Nakamura 2018, 31). This may, in turn, help prevent situations of "uninherited" heritage (Grydehøj 2010) in the promotion of top-down historical narratives, where the focus of top-level actors unintentionally silences those with alternate and counter perspectives on the telling of the past. Setouchi City recognises the audience-base of women for sword culture. In doing so, it undertakes a differing assessment to their prospective audiences to the previously assumed norm, and includes these deviations in planning top-level promotion. The sanctioning of Saniwa interests has a knock-on effect of implicitly welcoming others outside of the assumed male, middle-aged audience to the negotiative space of sword histories at Osafune.

By nurturing this expansion of the audience base for swords, and the exploration of alternate framings of sword value, there is a subsequent openness to engagement with those who held a previous disinterest in swords. Social activities involving swords such as Sanchōmō, exploring the object's past and present life, supports diverse encounters and unexpected relationships with potentially personed objects. This is a significant, if easily overlooked, aspect of the development of Osafune as 'sacred ground' for swords, that is, the ways in which a diversification of audiences inclusive of Saniwa provides further avenues for local residents to negotiate their own historicisation of objects.

I once again turn to the community and grassroots actors central to the regional promotion of Osafune town. I met with members of the community group Ōwarai Ichiza at the Bizen-Osafune Sword Museum, in what seemed to be a fitting setting for a conversation related to my research of

Japan's swords. However, in this meeting many members confessed that prior to the purchase of Sanchōmō, they had little interest in swords and their cultural preservation. "I had no interest in swords. None at all!", one older member declared, before explaining that she now "understood" their appeal—Sanchōmō, she said, is not like "normal" swords.

This begs the question of what constitutes a "normal" sword, and why the typical framing of these objects would hold no interest to an older woman. Through our conversation, it came to light that the explanations of swords, their value, and their social relevance had, until recently, little connection to the social lives of these community members.

The group I met with was largely comprised of women. They spoke of Sanchōmō as a member of pride for the local community, and in doing so brought forward other elements of sword culture they had learned of through their support of the sword's homecoming. These aspects of knowledge were not overtly tied to the dominant narratives of swords and their use as weapon, artwork, or sacred dedication, but had a much closer connection to daily life, and the daily lives of historical women.

One such example lies with the group's proud recounting of what they termed *touken kotoba* [刀剣言葉], or words common in Japanese that derive from sword-smithing terms. The development of these words, whether applicable to Osafune or not, was nonetheless associated by locals to their hometown's narrative of historical continuity—Osafune is, after all, the sacred ground of swords. Alongside this exploration of sword-related words, they shared explanations of marriage-gift swords as they passed from mothers to their daughters. This included a tangential discussion on how one might use that sword to escape a dangerous marriage situation. In doing so, these women engaged in a counter-history to the assumed role of the sword in warrior lifestyles, placing it in the hands of historical women, not the samurai, and re-enacted the ways women of the past could use swords to determine their own agency and escape from abusive situations. The "protective sword" [守刀, mamorigatana] in this context is not the spiritual object as explained by the custodians of nearby Yukie Shrine. It is not devoid of its own violence, or granted a softness just because of its recontextualisation in the hands of women. Rather, these women engaged in an expansion of the sword's potential object history while connecting the experiences to a social life they themselves were familiar with.

This lively and free-flowing conversation opened a space for the consideration of an alternate historical narrative into the livelihoods of historical women and their own relationship with swords. This runs counter to warrior framings, and places the sword in a broad number of social realms: women's relationships with each other, as well as to their husbands or fathers. With the expansion and diversification of audiences for the historical narratives of swords, the narratives related to the historical past gain a diverse potential.

Sanchōmō, with its position as local treasure, is not like "normal" swords. Differentiated, and individually identified, its habitation of place in Osafune prompted local actors outside of the norm of sword exhibition audiences to consider what other swords have existed, in whose hands, and what experiences those objects might hold for lives outside of the masculine warrior narrative.

It may be tempting, in a brief examination of the expansion of sword audiences, to focus on the media-engaged Saniwa and her clearly visible ties to popular culture. To do so, however, overlooks stories such as these: other women who have gained an appreciation for the telling of histories that they previously held no interest in, growing from a desire to connect with their hometown culture and expanding to include possibilities of other historical life stories. From this perspective, the Saniwa's interest in supporting individualised swords such as Sanchōmō does more than provide an economic revenue stream for institutions. It shows to these same institutions a support of expansive interpretations of the lives and relationships held by objects. The narratives presented in exhibition and through civic engagement can deviate from the safety of traditional framings and still find an engaged, active audience.

Initially, the common narratives of swords as weapons, whose only use is in killing, did not resonate with the local community of Osafune. This influenced protests as to the purchase of Sanchōmō. However, with the integration and co-creation of a history for Osafune centred on its sword culture and supported by local actors, these protests lessened. This came hand-in-hand with the support of Saniwa whose emergence, alongside that of other new kinds of sword fans, has made it viable to explore (or may have simply made visible) narratives of swords that exist outside the assumptive norm. This expansion of perspectives has allowed for the purchase of Sanchōmō to be framed not in terms of "a sword that has killed", but as bringing home a productive member of Osafune's own social community. In doing so, we can once again see the position this object holds as an active component of contemporary social life.

"Of course [swords] have their historical part, but they have their role in the present too. With that, there are lot of different perspectives… or faces [to their meaning], aren't there?" [当然歴史の部分もあったら今の部分っていうのがあるので、うん、そういう意味ではいろんな側面…まあ顔があるのかなと思いますね]. My conversation with Setouchi City Government ended with this musing. In this final statement, it becomes clear that an explanation of the city's actions from the perspective of swords as an economic asset is insufficient. At all levels of activity in Osafune, from top-down project organisation to the elderly women in the town museum's community space, actors come together in their exploration, explanation, and sharing of historical narratives related to the lives of humans and swords.

Setouchi City seeks to position Osafune and its contributions to Japanese history through its swords as an identity- and place-forming narrative, tied to the contemporary promotion of the area.

In doing so, they also highlight the ongoing, present-day social lives of that area, both human and non-human. With additional recognition of travelling actors, the platform for the negotiation of sword narratives is expanded even further, to the relational community. Swords continue to be forged in Osafune, newly-made objects that, like Sanchōmō, are entities of the 'now'. In this way, the pursuit of a regional identity and development based on historical continuity is made not in isolation by top-down actors, but through active engagements with locals, visitors, and the personed presence of the sword.

THE STORY OF PERSEVERANCE: SWORDS OF KYOTO

Thus far, I have focused on swords and sword homes located in regional areas away from dominant metropolitan areas and travel paths. Kyoto is a city far from the periphery. It is known world-wide as a place of Japan's historical landscape, with its iconic tangible structures registered by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention as Historical Monuments of Ancient Kyoto. Kyoto, its present-day condition, and imaginaries of its past, are overtly present in Japanese historical narratives, particularly as a site of continuity for traditional culture. Nonetheless, a recognition of swords and their position in social life allows for the emergence of expanded and counter narratives, focusing on the experiences of singular sites within the larger setting of an already historicised city.

In particular, the present-ness and ongoing nature of swords as social entities allows for a shift in focus on the city's distant past to that of the post-war period and the framings of historicity that have emerged around it. When Kyoto is viewed from the perspective of its swords, it does not emerge solely as a city of courtly charm, as is highlighted by its renown as former Imperial capital, but as a battleground for these objects' own survival.

As with the narrative-building of Setouchi City and Osafune as a sacred place of sword culture, the framing of swords in Kyoto emerges through the telling of object life histories, the works of independent researchers, and the connections both sword and individual has with place and managing bodies. The swords that emerge most clearly as narrative actors in Kyoto are those in private collections, within and around some of Kyoto's longest-standing tangible heritage sites: shrines, temples, and others associated with the establishment of the city in the year 794CE. Thus, the narratives that emerge that deal with the lives of these swords enhance the present-based nature of the city's historical landscapes (Nakagawa 2020), by explaining the value of places associated with the past through experiences more closely related to the modern day.

In exploring the emerging narratives of Kyoto's swords, the narrative-making process is entwined with the ways objects are ontologically given meaning. The sword-stories told in Kyoto's shrines and temples are ones of potentially animate beings and their life experiences, and are not restricted to the distant past of myth and legend. These stories are not of nobility, aristocracy, or

warriors of the past: but on the immediate post-war period, and the threat of destruction to many of what are now recognised to be cultural properties.

The emphasis on the post-war experience of swords has a number of implications regarding the narratives of history, and the particular cultural importance put on 'artefacts' in the post-war period. For Saniwa, and others who approach swords as socially emplaced beings, the exploration of a sword's post-war life can be seen as a natural continuation of exploring its more distant historical life events. The approaches these actors take to swords' recent pasts have little obvious differences to those taken in the context of samurai and historical cultures, as the focus remains on the same entity undergoing its life trajectory.

For the institution, the attention to swords in the historical narrative of the post-war context (different to the body of sword research that was conducted in this period) gives these sites the potential to develop their own alternate historical narratives. This enhances the site's ability to frame itself and its endeavours through the lens of cultural preservation, and to integrate into larger discourses of preservation that have emerged in the past 60 years. However, these narratives may present a narrow view of Kyoto and its position in the war and post-war periods by highlighting its efforts in preservation to the detriment of other wartime experiences. In addition, it may arrest the sword itself in an unchanging state as a symbol of this preservation, diminishing its construction as a long-lived entity with a multitude of experiences.

This discussion of Kyoto's swords is a narrative born from post-war experiences and the development of the concept of 'heritage' itself. The Saniwa, in continuing their exploration of sword lives to more recent time periods, and the institution, seeking to engage with particular framings and values for their own forms of promotion, undertake a similar yet differing approach to the concept of the sword and its contemporary existence, which holds wider implications for ongoing heritage discourses.

THE GHQ AND KYOTO'S SWORD PROTECTORS

The story of Kyoto's swords in the post-war starts with the GHQ (General Headquarters) and the Arts and Monuments Division of the United States Military. This organisation sought to categorise Japan's cultural properties, which includes its artistic swords. In doing so, the notions of heritage become tied to a process of evaluation in a similar manner to the establishment of museums in Japan in the late 1800's. Being of the post-war period, and a time where swords were a component of soldier's equipment, many of these objects were subject to increased scrutiny in the categorisation and evaluation of cultural properties.

It is from this process of selection that the GHQ becomes significant in the contemporary narratives of swords and their lives. This body, alongside the Arts and Monuments Division,

evaluated Japan's cultural properties and determined their designation as valid cultural objects. These evaluators were not necessarily experts on Japanese artistic culture, but were trained in cultural antiquities of the West (Azimi 2019, 127). Thus, the metrics by which they evaluated and categorised cultural objects were not necessarily the same as those held by owners themselves. This has contributed to a colloquial, anecdote-based narrative of loss amongst current-day sword enthusiasts, where the value seen inherent in traditionally crafted Japanese swords was not properly considered by the GHQ evaluators.

Alongside the GHQ's efforts in object evaluation was a domestic re-negotiation of how objects and their display was to be valued, shifting away from the practices of cultural promotion established in the Meiji Period (Morishita 2010, 83). As such, the position of swords as objects of war, art, and culture, was being re-evaluated amongst a larger movement of social change towards the display and appreciation of historicised objects.

Domestically, the post-war period saw a re-negotiation of object and display values away from practices established in the Meiji period and its use of international modes of categorisation and appraisal. Amongst this social change is the contestation of different ontological approaches to objects. Are they passive things, without agency, to be categorised and managed? Or are they capable of having their own social meaning, and their own place in social life? These questions remain in heritage discourses today, and influence the varied approaches to swords and their engagements with the GHQ. To examine these conflicting perspectives, and their role in the formation of historical narratives, I draw on the sites of Daikakuji Temple and Kitano Tenmangu Shrine. Both of these sites have their origins in the early eras of Kyoto's history. They also house two swords of renown: Hizamaru, also known as Usumidori, and Higekiri, also known as Onikirimaru, which were both evaluated by the GHQ and have since come to be examined in the life-history research of Saniwa.

Higekiri and Hizamaru were displayed in 2021 and 2022 alongside their documents of evaluation from the GHQ that declared them as cultural properties. At Kitano Tenmangu, a number of their swords were, in 2022, displayed directly alongside their documents of evaluation. These documents do not only serve as documentation for evaluation or exist as records of historical events: they also provide insight into the different ontological approaches to evaluating swords and other cultural objects.

In their evaluation of antiquities, the GHQ confiscated a number of swords. Not all of these were from soldiers or the military, and the Akabane-tō [赤羽刀], named for their storage by the GHQ in Akabane, Tokyo, included those from the collections of shrines and temples. Here, the ontological value of the object is reduced to the assumption that it is categorised as a weapon. The swords of Kitano Tenmangu were subject to this evaluation, despite being objects donated and

dedicated to the shrine and kept by them for tens to hundreds of years. The documents of evaluation on display at Kitano Tenmangu ask for a list of the sword's battle history, the combat history of its owner, his military status, and a date for his demobilisation from service. An additional section asks institutional owners, "How long has this weapon been in possession?". The wording of this question and others on the forms of evaluation directly contextualise swords as weapons with a primary use on the battlefield by male owners, and build a narrative of their violent nature. Answers to many of these questions on the documents displayed by Kitano Tenmangu have been left blank, revealing a disconnect in the ontological understanding of a sword and its scope of purpose between the Shrine and the evaluators at the GHQ.

Azimi (2019) writes of anxieties had by those who submitted their cultural items to the GHQ and Arts and Monuments Division, particularly in regards to how these object's value would be assessed. Azimi argues that these anxieties ultimately proved unfounded: the Division was able to establish what the Japanese themselves couldn't in the designation and protection of Japan's cultural heritage (Azimi 2019, 161). This perspective, however, is contrary to that as told by Japanese institutions, which has permeated through general knowledge. Well known among Saniwa is the story of Hotarumaru [蛍丸], a sacred sword of Aso Shrine in Kyūshū lost in the turmoil of the post-war period and its object registration efforts (Hotarumaru Densetsu Project, 2016). Within the GHQ's narrative of the sword has having the primary status of weapon is the conflation of the mass-produced swords that made up military kit with individually crafted Nihontō. This is not to say a label of Nihontō prevents a sword's military use, or that Nihontō were not part of WWII soldier's possessions: merely that the GHQ has made equal objects have potential ontological differences, despite the assertion of these experts in Western antiquities that their role is to preserve Japan's cultural heritage.

In the present day, the GHQ's documents of evaluation act as material evidence in the contemporary narratives of Kyoto's swords, and the city's citizens efforts to protect their cultural heritage. This writing of the post-war past is, in this case, a twist on the presentation of GHQ documents, aligning the value of swords more closely with shrine and temple caretaker's interpretations of object value. This could be considered in terms of a counter-narrative to existing historiographical framings, and with institutional power behind this alternate approach to object interpretation, may in fact become the dominant narrative shared to a wider public.

Like Kitano Tenmangu, Daikakuji Temple displays its document of evaluation for the sword Hizamaru (called 'Usumidori' in the documents) alongside a historical document of the object's provenance dating to the Edo Period. With both these materials side-by-side, a narrative of existence is built for the sword that ties its post-war evaluation to a larger temporal narrative. This narrative has not been restricted to the temple's exhibition hall. It forms the basis of a documentary

on the sword produced by the NHK, airing in 2020. *A Treasure's Biography: The Phantom Sword Hizamaru Speaks on its 1000 Years* [名品の来歴「幻の刀"膝丸"が語る 1000 年」] (NHK, 2021) outlines the legendary and historical provenance of the sword, and frames its post-war experiences in terms of a spiritual protector of the city of Kyoto that was threatened with destruction by the GHQ; a fate staved off by the efforts of its direct Kyoto caretakers. The sword's GHQ evaluation is made an existential threat, and the arguments that saved it—that it is a sword that has not been used in battle for hundreds of years, and is instead a spiritual protector of the city—promotes an alternate ontological understanding of the object's value in contrast to the GHQ's points of evaluation. This perspective is one promoted to a national audience alongside the producer's framing of the recent past.

Daikakuji's promotion of Hizamaru alongside this narrative of cultural preservation in the post-war period has been taken up by other actors in Kyoto. After Daikakuji started to display its documents with Hizamaru, Kitano Tenmanu, too, made efforts to pair its own evaluation documents with its swords. These documents were absent at my visits to the shrine in 2020 and 2021, but overtly present when I visited in 2022. Alongside this shared approach to the framing of the Temple and Shrine's swords are the efforts of other tourism actors in Kyoto, such as MK-Group Taxis, who provide GHQ-focused tours for visitors that are directly targeted at sword enthusiasts (MK Travel, 2022). As such, we can see a concerted effort from institutional actors in promoting this particular historical narrative to their visitors.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that this framing of the city's role as a site of cultural preservation emerged alongside the rise of Saniwa visitors. These are audiences interested in the individual lives of swords, and their experiences as objects entwined in social life. Daikakuji and Kitano Tenmangu have frequent exhibitions positioned at Saniwa audiences, and MK-Group Taxis facilitates travel between the two sites in their own tour packages which utilise the colours, motifs, and imageries of Touken Danshi. Thus, while there is a top-down initiative to associate the sword with its recent, post-war past, it may be that the strength of this narrative and the viability of its spread is due to its co-creation by Saniwa and other independent actors who value the individualised lives of swords.

The sword in this context is constructed as an entity with a biography, and in the case of Hizamaru, is even depicted in its biographical documentary as directly speaking on its own experiences. In doing so, it becomes involved in the debates of post-war experiences and the values of cultural heritage preservation, as a subject of a narrative with focus on the domestically-ensured 'safety' of cultural artefacts.

As with the case of Osafune and its construction as a sacred site for sword culture, this use of objects as protagonists in the production of historical narratives has been made possible, in large

part, due to the interests of Saniwa and their own approaches, which are already positioned to view the life events of swords in a biographical and emotional manner. Between Kitano Tenmangu and Daikakuji, the latter site has particularly overt connections to Saniwa visitors. A significant portion of the temple's votive goods and souvenirs depict their personed sword, presented with the name "Hizamaru", as it is called in Touken Ranbu, rather than its registered name of Usumidori. Alongside this are displays of Touken Ranbu merchandise, donated by visitors and carefully arranged and maintained by temple staff. Daikakuji has a visible connection to Saniwa, despite a lack of overt connection to the producers of Touken Ranbu itself.

This connection to Saniwa can be seen even more clearly through two of the items they sell: research dōjinshi, or fan-made works, on the life history of Hizamaru and other swords of Kyoto. One of these works is directly tied to the evaluations of the GHQ, exploring the current day tangible existences of the city's swords. Despite the fan terminology and references made to Touken Danshi Higekiri and Hizamaru, these works are focused on the lives of the swords Daikakuji and Kitano Tenmangu hold in their collections[11]. They were written by a Saniwa who goes by the pen-name of Sayonosuke, and with whom I visited both of these sites and their sword exhibitions in 2021. Our time in these exhibition spaces was spent engaging with the specific framings of the exhibitions, themed around legends and mythological stories of swords, and discussing the use of these legends as an exhibition framework alongside historical narratives, tangible remnants of the events swords have existed through, and aspects of their pasts from the Heian Period to the present. Thus, while there is increasing interest in the activities of the GHQ from institutional promoters, and while this is a subject that Sayonosuke herself has spent a great deal of time researching and writing about, the Saniwa experience considers swords beyond one particular point in time.

While the overlaying of institutional historical narratives, made by site custodians and supported by other media bodies, draws on the work of Saniwa, it would be inappropriate to group both of these kinds of actors together and conclude that they both support a singular narrative of cultural preservation for Kyoto's swords. To do so is to overlook the expansive manner in which Saniwa construct their sword biographies, and their own narratives of sword lives. It may even be that the ontological approaches of independent sword enthusiasts are themselves subtly different to those of contemporary cultural custodians, similar to the ways that the values of the GHQ and local evaluators of cultural properties differed in the post-war period. Thus, with this push to position Daikakuji and Kitano Tenmangu as sanctuaries of post-war cultural properties in mind, I turn to how these same swords are envisioned in the historiographical writings of Saniwa.

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[11] Due to their legendary status, there are a number of swords claiming to be 'Hizamaru' and 'Higekiri' that are not associated with this particular narrative of the GHQ. In focusing these works on two specific tangible swords, they are further differentiated and individualised by their own life experiences.

It bears repeating that top-down negotiations of historical narratives tied to the image-building of institutions is not necessarily synonymous with, or wholly encompassing of, the understandings brought to sword lives by Saniwa. The existing framing of swords as belonging to the warrior hero, or even the more recent push to establish an alternate narrative centred on post-war object preservation, both focus on relatively small events and circumstances when compared to the sword's entire length of existence. Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts do not necessarily use this same bounded approach focusing on singular time periods. While these actors may have an interest in one or two significant events of a sword's life, these are objects that are understood as having an existence beyond the most famous stories of their pasts.

For example, the empathetic narrative of survival for swords in the post-Meiji period in Saniwa retellings extends beyond the evaluations of the GHQ and institutional actors. The person-based approach to the narrative of a sword's survival considers objects through the lens of life events that impact on their ongoing life trajectories. Loss through improper evaluation is only one of these existentially threatening events. Others of the 20th century include stories of objects such as the Mito Tokugawa Museum's Shokudaikiri Mitsutada, having survived after burning in 1923, or that of the spear Otegine [御手杵], ending with loss due to its own burning in the wartime fire-raids of Tokyo. Other swords have their own stories of survival in the post-war period that are separate from the evaluations of the GHQ: I have been contacted by Saniwa inquiring about access to historical documents moved to the United States in the post-war period. One of these would provide a lead for the ownership transmission of a sword with the status of National Treasure, lost in this same period, that has been difficult to locate in Japan's own document archives. Thus, the narrative of sword survival by Saniwa is not categorical in its approach, or restricted to debates of cultural heritage preservation and institutional evaluation. It is examined through the experiences of the objects themselves.

How, then, are the current existences of the swords Higekiri and Hizamaru explained by Saniwa's approach to historical narrative? To answer this, we must first examine how these objects are ontologically constructed by Saniwa and other actors who engage with the possibly personed sword.

Daikakuji's Hizamaru and Kitano Tenmangu's Higekiri are frequently referred to by these independent actors as brother swords [兄弟刀, kyōdaitō]. Just in this framing of the objects in terms of a familial relationship is an extension of their life narrative beyond recent history. It is a framing derived from their supposed co-forging in the Heian Period. The use of the term 'kyōdaitō' evokes the objects long-standing existence, and explains that existence in personed terms used in human social relationships. That Saniwa start their approach to these swords in this personed manner

reveals a subtle difference in how the pasts of objects are told and understood in their communicative style.

The narrative of brotherly relationship between the swords draws on their historical lives and experiences. They have an almost biographical history of connectivity, which has been used in traditional historiographic readings of the swords' ownership by literary and historical heroes. The *Tsurugi-no-Maki* of the *Heike Monogatari* [c.13thC] outlines the swords' co-forging and co-ownership by various famed warriors of the Minamoto family, where they have historiographic significance in establishing the legitimacy for the Minamoto Shogunate (Selinger, 2009). This culminates in their ownership by the brothers Minamoto no Yoritomo and Yoshitsune. It is important to note, however, that the swords' designation of brothers is drawn from their long-standing cohabitation, and not merely their ownership by these famed human brothers.

The biographical narrative of Hizamaru and its brother sword Higekiri from the *Tsurugi-no-Maki* is known to Saniwa, as the Touken Ranbu interpretations of these swords draw heavily on the story of their co-forging and the close companionship of their former owners. The term 'kyōdaitō' has been adopted by both Daikakuji and Kitano Tenmangu in their own promotion activities. This institutional sanctioning of the swords' brotherly relationship serves to strengthen the institutions connection to Saniwa activities, and by extension Saniwa audiences, for their own narrative framings.

Other elements of the swords' historical closeness are adopted by these institutions and their attachment to Kyoto's post-war narrative. In 2022, the swords' joint display was advertised throughout the city with the tag-line "Charge! Treasures of the Genji [Minamoto] and World Heritage" [いざ、源氏の重宝と世界遺産]. This line combines the treasure-value of the swords directly to Kyoto's position in post-war conceptions of global heritage. As such, their outreach to Saniwa audiences should not override the ways these independent actors forge their own narrative interpretations of swords separate to the goals of institutional promotion.

The Saniwa's expansive view of sword lives, drawing on personed language and focused on relationships between sword and human entities, brings light to other alternate and counter-narratives of history that are not necessarily represented by institutional actors. I return to the Saniwa Sayonosuke's dōjinshi, and how the biography of Daikakuji's Hizamaru, made in contact with institutional actors from the Temple and her own analysis of historical documents, highlights another episode of the sword's past beyond its ownership by warrior heroes and its status as cultural property evaluated by the GHQ.

In our visit to Daikakuji, Sayonosuke excitedly shared with me the news that a digital version of the *Tsurugi-no-Maki* had been made available on the online database of the National Diet Library. Interestingly, the sword Hizamaru owned by Daikakuji is thought to have been forged in a

period far later than that described in the *Tsurugi-no-Maki*, with the temple itself dating it to the 13th Century. Nonetheless, its past has a narrative strength in its connection to the Minamoto. Its former owner, the warrior hero Yoshitsune, is frequently evoked in its modern display[12], showing the strength of this particular narrative of ownership in the framing of this object's past.

Sayonosuke's dōjinshi *Daikakuji's Treasured Sword: Usumidori, its Legends and History* [大覚寺の宝刀薄緑その伝承と来歴] provides an example of a historical narrative centred on the experiences of the individual sword, and not its famous owner. It starts, as Daikakuji's own Edo Period document of ownership does, with legendary figures such as Yoshitsune, and includes the sword's more recent history with the GHQ. Between these, however, Sayonosuke has included a story often overlooked by conventional historical narratives centred on heroes or military violence: the sword as owned by a woman of the past.

This is the story of Keiko, a female owner of Daikakuji's Hizamaru from the Edo Period. While her name appears on Daikakuji's document of provenance, it was the research of this Saniwa that expanded on her role in Hizamaru's life history. Between stories of heroic and legendary warriors and the efforts of authorities in preserving cultural assets was one of a woman who had a deep fascination with the sword, who owned it in her own right, and through her own social interactions continued Hizamaru's story in her own day (Sayonosuke 2021, 42). It further elaborates on the social lives of women in the Edo Period, providing context for the experiences of Keiko, her sword, and the care put into its ongoing existence.

To cover this aspect of Hizamaru's past, Sayonosuke's research took her beyond the materials owned by Daikakuji and involved digging into local archives in search of documentation of a woman who did not occupy the same social status in historical narratives as famed actors of the Minamoto legends. Keiko's narrative as an owner, and as a significant person of Hizamaru's life, is one that is not only overlooked in conventional framings of ownership by heroes or the rescue of cultural properties, but is a story of human-object relationships specific to this individual sword and its experiences.

As dōjinshi, Sayonosuke's work circulates through the fan community in comics markets, online retailers, and even excerpts shared on her own social media accounts. As the dōjinshi is also sold directly by Daikakuji, they, too, have sanctioned and formalised her work alongside the Temple's own context of historical and cultural preservation. These kinds of historiographic dōjinshi, like communicative swords, are perhaps another kind of boundary object, transcending the barriers between actors and involving alternate perspectives, and alternate narratives, into analysis

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[12] This can be seen at Daikakuji, and at blockbuster exhibitions such as Suntory Museum's "Swords: Soul of the Warrior".

of Kyoto's material past. These materials, their content, and their positioning, should not be discounted simply because they are from a 'fan' actor for a 'fan' audience.

Sayonosuke's dōjinshi informs her audience of an episode in the sword's life history that is not overtly presented by its institutional owners beyond Keiko's name, one amongst many written on a historical document of provenance. In contrast, the lives of the Minamoto heroes and other heroic owners of the sword are heavily referenced in both object labels and contextualising elements of Hizamaru's display. Nonetheless, knowing of Keiko and her story drew me, in my own visits, to actively search for her name amongst the documents displayed at Daikakuji, and to think on her experiences with the sword she once owned.

The emotional experiences evoked by objects have been examined in terms of a conduit for understanding the audience's own life stories (Anderson, Shimizu, and Campbell 2016, 5), their relational attachments, and the position these attachments occupy in historical narrative-making. With the notion of the living sword, I propose an alternate perspective to this use of subjective and personal experience in object-narratives: that what is evoked in the context of display is not only the nostalgia of the viewer, but an extension of empathetic nostalgia held by the object itself. In the ontology of living objects, a greater knowledge of the object's own past has the potential to explore its position as historical actor, and to explore the audience's empathetic approaches to life-histories.

This approach is what allows these so-called historical artefacts to continue their social presence in the current day. As Keiko cared for Hizamaru while it was under her ownership, so too can those same acts be undertaken by women of the present. Daikakuji has made efforts to connect with Saniwa, seeking out this group as well as others to provide support for the sword's continued existence through crowdfunding and other fund-raising projects. This adds an additional dimension to the act of cultural preservation. While these funds are used in a practical sense, their physical manifestation resonates in a more emotional manner. The contributions of Saniwa are more than fundraising: they are a forging of relationships with institution and sword, extending to the object an act of care that ties its historicised past to a social action—and a continued social presence—in the present day.

One result of this crowdfunding is Hizamaru's current storage box, made with donation funds and emblazoned with the names of donors. Many of these names are recognisably female. "My name is here," said Sayonosuke on our visit, as we examined the object on display. On my other visits to the Temple, the box remained a key item of interest to visiting Saniwa, who would read and comment on the names that represent those who contributed to Hizamaru's on-going care. This box is both a container of storage, and its own conduit of emotive, empathetic engagements between the sword and those who ensure its continued existence. It provides the start of another alternative narrative for the future of the sword—that of the care of Saniwa and other contemporary

sword actors—which stands separate to the framings of heroes, and even to the historiographic narrative of institutional cultural preservation. Hizamaru's existence is entwined with the social life of the 21st century and the care afforded to it by regular human persons, as it was with the 20th, that of the Edo Period, and in its distant, legendary past.

Saniwa do not encounter, or necessarily seek out, a singular, temporally defined narrative of a sword and its value. Rather, they approach and involve swords in acts of social interaction, emplacing these objects in the present and in the social lives of humans. Again and again, I encountered Saniwa across Japan at the sites associated with the brother swords Higekiri and Hizamaru—Kytoto's Kitano Tenmangu and Daikakuji, Hyogo Prefecture's Tada Shrine, and at Kanagawa Prefecture's Hakone Shrine. At each of these encounters, there was an understanding of the historiographic positioning of the swords' tangible existences. But alongside this was a frequent and recurring an awareness of the individual swords and their ongoing presence in the present day.

Historical narratives are therefore not simply made with the historiographic framings of top-down actors. They are made by individual actors, whose valuation of objects and their stories do not necessarily fit a categorical valuation. I return, for the final time, to the emergent positioning of Kyoto's swords in line with the actions of the GHQ. It may be assumed that this narrative of loss and survival is one of human against human, debating the value of objects in the past and present. However, it is not necessarily humans at the centre of these narratives: when approached by those who engage with objects in a social manner, it is the sword.

Sayonosuke has herself written another dōjinshi, *GHQ and Swords of Kyoto* [GHQ と京都刀剣]. This work opens not with a rundown of the sociopolitical context of the post-war period, but rather, with an anecdote pointing to the author's initial encounter with this history: noticing a label on the sword-case of Kitano Tenmangu's Higekiri, written in English, and wondering where it could have come from (Sayonosuke 2021a, 6). Her subsequent writing on the relationship between the GHQ and Kyoto's swords is framed in terms of a shocking episode in the objects long, long histories (Sayonosuke 2021a, 8). In a similar manner, when a potential Akabane-tō was found in Australia in 2021, the social media response of Saniwa was striking in their construction of the sword's recent past. There was, of course, a thankfulness that the sword had been found and that its owner intended to return it to the Shrine it had been taken from, from the perspective of cultural preservation. Alongside this was a more emotional, interpersonal discussion: what experiences had this wayward sword gained in its years away from home? Was it fluent in English, some asked? Would it have an Australian accent, or American?

The sword, whilst part of the same historical narrative of perseverance and preservation of cultural objects and the GHQ as is utilised throughout Kyoto, is nonetheless approached from its individualised experiences. Its narrative is one of perseverance, not in the sense of cultural

preservation for the benefit of intellectual and traditional value, but of an individual and its own life story.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS

The group categorisation of swords in historical narratives—as 'craft', 'artworks', 'weapons', 'sacred items', or even as 'Akabane-tō'—paints a simplified picture of objects that are not granted their own status of individualisation. They are *kinds* of things, without being considered *individual* things. As such, the narratives that emerge around them, when enacted by mediators of objective cultural value such as the museum or UNESCO-sanctioned historical site, are constructed in terms of the sword as a representational artefact of particular past events.

The living sword differs from this representational framing in that it is central in its own story, which spans across time periods and is not restricted to particular human-focused events. It is the sword's ability to act as a central actor with experiences that span large swarths of time that allows municipalities such as Setouchi City to draw their sword-smithing past into the present, or for sites such as Daikakuji and Kitano Tenmango to re-negotiate their role as post-war cultural protectors. However, what swords as central actors also speaks to the wholistic view of the object's life held by Saniwa and other sword actors, who are concerned with the intangible and emotionally resonant aspects of the sword and its experiences. The writings of place and site histories, and the narratives that permeate through them, are not the wholesale work of top-down actors. Their characterisation of the actors in their narratives—in this case, of swords—remains a negotiable aspect of social interactions.

An object-centred approach to the thing's own life trajectory reveals the diversity of object contexts, uses, and experiences, and thus provides not only an alternate historical narrative but an exploration of existence that has the potential to speak to its ontological position. The existing narratives of swords such as Sanchōmō, Hizamaru, and Higekiri, based on their warrior ownership, limits their use to weapons. Similar single-focused narratives of creation or preservation limits their interpretation to a categorical approach of the sword as a valuable cultural property. In contrast, an object as seen from its life story allows for a comparison of its various social roles and the various social actors it has built relationships with.

The aspects of these narratives, and which of their episodes and responses are most widely circulated, act as another avenue for the social negotiation of cultural content. The authority of the institution and the communicative power of large, independently operating communities such as that of Saniwa propose their own perspectives and analysis of historical events, as they undertake the re-negotiation of sword meanings in their contexts of display. Thus, an examination of all

avenues of narrative negotiation can expand upon the complex nature of socially-embedded objects and their living potential.

The categorical kinds-of-things approach to social objects harkens back to the origins of the object biography where the 'thing' is a tool that makes human social relationships visible. At Setouchi, the 'thing' of the sword appears in a top-down narrative of creation and forging. At Daikakuji and Kitano Tenmangu, swords are spiritual 'things' that have been saved from the GHQ. But in the interpersonal interactions I have had with independent community actors and individual Saniwa, swords appear as 'things' with many, often contradictory, social roles. These roles come from the narratives of folklore, their status as gifts from mother to daughter, retellings of historical women and their love of individualised objects, and other stories that arise from the closeness in relationship between a human person and that of a sword.

Each sword has its own narrative, its own life-story, and its own historiographical possibilities that only further complicate, rather than simplify, designations as 'weapon', 'artwork', or 'sacred object' employed in institutional histories. The differing concerns of what a sword *is* will continue to be a site of tension, over-simplified by institutional actors, if these objects are not acknowledged as ontologically complex objects that occupy a multitude of social roles.

The 2022 exhibition "Heroes: Ukiyo-e and Swords" brought to Japan a 'homecoming' of swords from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. These objects, kept overseas, were making their homecoming along with the well-trodden narrative path of historical warriors. The exhibition curation at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo was memorable for the sword-enthused visitor.

The majority of swords on loan from Boston were crowded into a single room. More apparent, to one who enjoys encounters with the individual sword, was a lack of any individualising name on the object labels in this room beyond the sword's categorisation by smith. The object's individuality was removed, and with it, its potential to transmit its individualised historical narrative. The sword's value is assumed as apparent by the exhibition's curation without further clarification: as the title of the exhibition implies, the sword's status is derived from its ownership by male, warrior humans.

Instead of dismissing the historiographical and biographical writings of fan Saniwa as uncritically continuing these established, broad-strokes constructions of swords in both museum and popular media, it may be more productive to consider how these broad-strokes interpretations are challenged by alternate writings of the lives of individualised swords.

To present swords as unnamed in a mass of other unnamed swords, with value derived from human-centred historical narratives, does nothing to reveal the complex social realities these objects occupied and continue to occupy. Swords are representative of themselves. And it is this self that Saniwa and other independent actors, in context of community events, in pouring over archive

documents, in whispers huddled over an institutional display, or in lively re-enactment of the past at a museum's tea-room, pursue as they undertake their uncovering of a sword's social life.

5. CLOSING & CONTRIBUTIONS

I return now to the beginning: how do we quantify 'life'? With this investigation, I have sought to demonstrate life as it is connected to a social existence. This existence can be extended to beings that are not human, but are still embedded in human social processes—emotional engagement, habitation of place, and protagonists in their own narratives of being. Animal and other biological non-humans have had their own status of personhood evaluated and re-evaluated: here, I contribute to the ongoing discourses surrounding social life by including the material, man-made object. In doing so, I ask for a re-consideration of the role of objects in the social realm. This questioning is tied to the object's close contact with diverse human actors, and how this closeness results in their recognition as socially embedded beings. While this investigation focuses primarily on Japan's swords, their emergent audiences and the places of their habitation, I believe it provides a perspective on objects and object-use that will contribute to further analysis of other objects in other social contexts.

An Examination of Female 'Fans' as Cultural Negotiators

The sword's current position in Japanese society could not have been achieved without the body of largely women actors supporting their display, promotion, and preservation. Alongside this, these actors are active in the processes of recognition and reciprocation of a sword's life-like qualities in the periphery arenas of Japanese cultural discourse.

Those who come into most active social contact with swords in the post-2015 context are women. Their motives, activities, and ways of talking about these objects run counter to assumed historical framings. Their ground-level approach to swords aligns, at times, with that of the institution: but is inclusive of elements that extend far beyond the simple display case. In their expansion of how a sword is recognised to inhabit social space, these actors are active in their own form of negotiation object value, and have the opportunity to push against the socialised categorisation of women's interests and abilities. This forms one major contribution I present with this investigation: an ethnographic approach to female fan communities, premised on their engagements and position as social producers rather than a consumer of media products.

Debates and designations as to women's interests in contemporary society are tied to assumptions and stereotypes as to what kind of cultural content is considered appropriate for differing kinds of audiences. The woman sword enthusiast acts contrary to these assumptions, not as a premeditated act of defiance, but simply through her own personal interest in swords and related sword cultures. In emphasising the agency of these actors, I ask for a consideration on the assumptive categorisations put on those like these women and others who call themselves

"Saniwa". From this, I also ask for a further questioning in regards to the taken-for-granted social authority held by majority actors in designating cultural value.

The sword culture of today could not exist without the support of women and Saniwa. At many sword exhibitions, or even places with the thinnest relationship to sword lives, women are a primary audience, and subject to the commentary of those who find their presence unexpected. It therefore serves to consider not only the female sword enthusiast's presence in sword activities, but how this presence is categorised: is she spoken of as a Touken Joshi, dismissed as a follower of fad or fashion; or is she recognised as a valid social and cultural negotiator? Is she relegated to the realm of fan activities and media consumption, or are her contributions to cultural heritage as investigator and promoter equally considered?

These questions underlie the writing of my dissertation, as I have sought to present the female sword enthusiast and her related Saniwa as active participants in contemporary sword culture, moving away from assumptions regarding her motivations and intent, and instead highlighting her actions and interests in her own words. This is particularly significant in research regarding fan realms centred on masculine-coded interests, with a tendency to assume the motives of female participants based on designations of appropriate, gendered realms of social existence.

One cannot properly grasp the scope of the re-emergence in interest towards Japan's swords without actively engaging with these women, and attempting to understand their own social communities and processes of communication. To do so would be to miss the reality of the phenomenon. These actors contributions can be found in the information they circulate regarding exhibitions and locally-positioned historical archives; it can be in their expression of social dynamics, through the lens of Touken Ranbu; or it can even be as simple as actively pushing against the label of Touken Joshi. In highlighting these activities, I contribute to discussions in fan and media studies centred on the 'otaku', an assumptive male actor, and expand upon the 'rekijo', or gendered, top-down categorisations of actors, by highlighting the actual activities of the fan herself. In doing so, what emerges is an active exploration of swords and their meaning, from the perspectives of actors outside of the typical structures of authority, and an assertion of women's position as social negotiators.

An Expanded View of Objects on Display

The independent element of contemporary sword culture has contributed to the ongoing placement of swords within their respective social settings. In drawing on the object's long-standing existence, their value derives from more than their tangible designation as 'artefact' or 'artwork', and instead comes to incorporate intangible qualities that express the sword's social value. This simple shift in perspective provides my second major contribution with this investigation, which

allows for a greater scope of analysis surrounding the meaning-making of Japan's swords. They are not simply passive objects that are manipulated by human owners, but are representatives of their own pasts and contexts. Engaging with this perspective brings forward the involvement of other actors—human and non-human—who exist outside the formalised hierarchies of cultural heritage.

This can be seen in the notion of meeting an object, or in recognising the sword as a central actor in its own past and life trajectory. In expanding our view of objects, met primarily in institutional displays, we can see how processes of human social construction—spirit, emotion, emplacement, and empathy—are equally applied to the non-human object. This challenges notions of value derived purely from aesthetic and material forms, and contributes to an expanded understanding of the intangible in cultural heritage, while bringing to light the complex ways in which social existence is made.

In my presentation of Japan's swords as personed actors, rather than objects to be admired in their displays, I seek to bring a further expanded view of human existences and their own, related, dynamics. Persons of the past and present, involved in discourses of gender, consumption, and cultural authority, are represented in the negotiations of a sword's life. It is here that we can see the additional impacts of considering objects through their social construction. Swords have not been exempt from existing theories of value based on social exchange. However, that exchange is framed largely in terms of the past, and the persons involved similarly socialised on understandings of male-dominated historical hierarchies. The view of swords as ongoing participants in social negotiations brings to light the new hierarchies of cultural authority present in our contemporary society, and those independent actors who operate alongside them. As such, the personed sword contributes to contemporary social debates as well as historical ones. The 'artefact's' value extends beyond its capabilities as a representative of past lives: it becomes entwined in a more direct manner to the lives of the present.

Thus, this expanded view of objects on display contributes to both the idea of intangibility in non-human, material things, as well as to the ongoing exploration of how inanimate 'things' are involved in human social processes. This provides further new avenues of inquiry for the social researcher, for example, in a reconsideration of existing frameworks of analysis that assume a lack of agency in objects and non-humans. While such efforts are ongoing in the fields of anthropology and material cultures, I hope that these contributions will further challenge anthropocentric assumptions in the designation of socially significant persons. Japan's swords post-2015 are regularly spoken of with personed terms, language, and forms of approach that recognise their status as swords, challenging the perception of a projection of 'humanness' onto the non-human. Thus, it is imperative that researchers dealing with objects and potential object non-humans do not

inadvertently fall on their own assumptions as to the social role of inanimate things, and maintain an awareness of the ontological depth present in any study of social existence.

Personed Objects as Cultural Negotiators

My push against anthropomorphic and anthropocentric assumptions for explaining socially-embedded objects leads to my third major contribution: the role potentially personed objects have as their own kinds of cultural negotiators. For Japan's swords, this is evident in their position as ambassadors for places of the periphery, where they reside in their own homes and support with their own life stories. It is here that we can see the significance of the sword as an individual entity, and that the analysis of their lives contributes to our understanding of what has the potential to become a cultural negotiator.

Swords as social persons are individual actors with their own diversity of lived experiences. When emplaced in their respective hometown contexts, the sword emerges not only as a 'valuable treasure' but a 'valuable resident', an entity embedded in its contemporary context that accumulates ties of existence in a similar manner to human actors. The distinction between an object as 'treasure' or 'person', or even in describing its past as 'provenance' in comparison to 'life trajectory', is significant. The sword is, in this phenomenon, not constructed as a 'thing', but as an entity with social presence and whose existence is explained in social terms. Thus the potentially personed sword contributes, by its very existence, to an expanded consideration of objects beyond their material value.

The personed sword emerges in a number of ways based on relational engagements with humans, from the terms of reference used by Saniwa and other sword enthusiasts to the sanctioning of sword hometowns and sword life histories. This is a form of reflexive social recognition, with a number of implications that range from the display of artefacts to their being rendered as the faces of regional promotional activities. For example, while a top-down view might frame a sword's regional display as a blockbuster exhibition for economic support of its locality, the personed one contributes additional layers of emotional attachments had by the object and drawn from notions of civic pride, acceptance of local cultural histories, and relationships with other social actors in their own arenas of value. The sword's abilities to act as ambassador, rather than a simple treasure, derives from its social attachments. The sword is welcomed to a community of human persons, and by extension, the processes of social life.

This is not only significant in the realm of regional promotion, but provides a new approach to historicised narratives. In highlighting both the institutional and independent approach to sword lives and their social attachments, I hope to contribute to ongoing debates regarding the development of historical narratives. While both institution and independent actor consider the

sword as an individual centred in its life story, the variability in the positioning of the sword's subsequent life narratives (aligned to broader social messaging, or more intimately concerned with the experiences of the singular sword) further highlights the necessity to examine objects in their own contexts. As one would not separate a historical human figure from their experiences, I argue that an examination of object histories, and the quintessential object biography, must also be viewed from the individual attachments of the sword.

The sword's individual attachments are what gives it its personed potential. These attachments are not restricted to the past, but accumulate in the present day as they meet with Saniwa and other contemporary sword enthusiasts who nurture and care for their ongoing existence. Thus, I present the personed object as a social negotiator that is present in discussions of its life, past and present, and is a potential ambassador for an expanded attention to object life histories. Imagine the typical artefact display: an object is framed by its tangible qualities, with perhaps contextual notes as to important former owners or the period of its make. A socially emplaced and recognised sword brings its experiences to the present. It can become its own storyteller, and thus encompass recent and newly occurring events as easily as those of the distant past.

As an actor with its own temporal existence, the existence of a potentially personed object cannot be adequately captured by typical descriptors of inanimacy. Thus, this dissertation is not only an examination of the surge in Japan's contemporary sword culture. It is one that asks for further consideration of the individual existences of 'things'.

The experiences I could engage with in this ethnographic investigation were limited by COVID-19, the effects of which are only now, in late 2022, declining. Nonetheless, I believe that this work reveals an overview of the diverse social and ontological positioning of swords as objects that have a status as more than 'things'—and the limitation of its scope only further emphasises the importance of ongoing re-consideration of how we approach the analysis of material things.

What has emerged from this investigation is not just a reconsideration of the social emplacement of object-beings. The situations I was not able to access due to time and COVID-19 provide the opportunity for continued investigation, and an expansion into other cultural and ontological contexts. In particular, the swords in this work are (with the exception of Nikkari Aoe, which resides in Shikoku's Kagawa Prefecture) based in Honshuu, and are involved in the dominant national narratives of contemporary Japan and the Yamato past. However, there are swords with ties to other groups in Japan that deserve similar attention. Swords related to the Ryukyu Kingdom are heavily involved in these same processes of emergent sword audiences and regional promotion. Thus, an examination of sword lives, experiences, and narratives for these swords that exist even further outside of normative historical narratives would be its own fruitful site of research, and unveil further ontological complexities to these socially-engaged objects.

WHAT MAKES A LIVING SOCIAL ENTITY

In this dissertation, I have sought to answer the following question: can objects such as swords be 'alive'? Across the institutions and communities I have engaged with in this ethnographic investigation, each with their own individual contexts and particularities, several common elements emerged. Primary amongst these was the notion of swords as gathering objects that hold memories and experiences, which in turn evoke empathetic reactions from human actors. From this emphasis on the sword's individual intangible qualities, the object becomes socially embedded in a variety of different debates and contexts. Whether or not one is willing to describe this as 'life', it is imperative that these objects be recognised as having a place within the social sphere.

The sword in this phenomenon emerges as an entity with experiences that are affirmed by human actors; that is, to understand whether a 'thing' can be 'alive', we must first engage in analytical approaches that are capable of grasping this affirmation and relational form of engagement. I do not believe the affirmation of an object's empathetic capacity is limited to the Japanese sword. As such, I once again emphasise the necessity in approaching material culture through the perspectives, actions, and emplaced engagements between human interlocutors and their respective material things. This requires more than a simple designation of whether a thing is biologically alive. It requires a consideration for ontological differences in the approach to things, and the elements that render something as socially relevant.

I did not start this investigation with the idea that swords are socially alive. I initially set out to examine what I assumed, wrongly, to be a bounded phenomenon of regional promotion and fan response, an approach influenced by production/consumption framings (inclusive of cultural consumption, and not just economic concerns) in the presentation of cultural artefacts. It was through an analysis of my interactions with my interlocutors, and in coming to understand their own approaches to objects, that I became aware of the sword as more than an inanimate, material 'thing'. The perspectives of my independent interlocutors both align with and differ to the empirical framings of cultural institutions. As such, it became evident to me that analysis and analytical approaches beholden to the institutional framings of value for objects risks taking for granted the "common-sense" approach to material things, when this "sense" may only represent one kind of actor involved with them.

It is here that analysis of institutional activities or popular media, largely concerned with the actions of top-level producers and management, inadvertently continues the established hierarchy as to who designates cultural value, rendering the 'fan' as a mere consumer. In uncritically adopting this hierarchy, the grassroots actor—in this case the women, independent sword enthusiasts, engaged members of periphery communities and, indeed, the sword itself—may have their own, alternate formations of value overridden and misunderstood. It is for this reason that I have focused

on bringing forward the ground-level actors of the phenomenon, their experiences, their interpretations, and their motives for engaging with swords. It paints a picture of a social dynamic involving swords that extends far beyond the case of display or the walls of the museum. At every field site I visited, and with every sword I engaged with, I uncovered a distinctly unique context tied to the emotive and embodied experiences of sword and human actors. The top-down activities in these contexts merely served as a single aspect of a much greater ontological whole.

While the individuality of each site and each sword is a strength of this investigation, it is also a limitation. It may even be that overlooking the individual depth of a socially emplaced object is a common limitation in the study of material culture, particularly as it involves categories of objects. In my goals of capturing the scope of this phenomenon, I have not been able to fully explore in depth and detail the life-trajectories and experiences of individual swords, and thus have potentially missed key events and experiences that render them active in the social realm. Nonetheless, this experience has opened my eyes and perspective to the depth of potential in a single object's life, setting the stage for future work in understanding the relational construction of things.

Our analysis of things does not need to be limited to Japanese swords or other kinds of historical artefacts—indeed, in this very work I have touched on the use of socially-engaged plush objects and replicas of haunted lanterns. The emergence of non-human entities, and the importance of non-human things in the making of our social world, has been a recurring theme in my research life. In my previous work towards my master's thesis, I considered how spaces that are framed in terms of 'heritage', 'architectural icon', or 'community' lead to differing phenomenological, and by extension socially valuable, experiences for the humans who inhabit them. These spaces, too, take on a living quality as their status shifts and is negotiated by human actors, each with a differing understanding of how to categorise the inanimate thing in relation to the human social world.

The more that I consider the ways in which we as humans exist in our social world, the more visible its non-human aspects become: from Ingold (2020's) notion of animate weather, to the swords Saniwa speak to on display, and even to the very structures that define the spaces we make socially alive. Potentially living non-humans are not just the biological animals and pets we share our social spaces with, but extend to the material things that do more than furnish these spaces. The sword, able to be carried and managed by human hands, has a social existence; but so too do entities as large as an entire building, and the range of objects in-between that engage in different, but nonetheless social, relationships with the human.

From here, the possibilities of examining the ontological depth of objects in social contexts are limited only by the ways humans engage with social space and the things that inhabit it. Searching for this ontological depth in more-than-human existences is, in my view, a vital element

of social research that deserves a greater consideration from established academic norms in humanities and the social sciences. In my early stages as an academic, I have started my investigations using human-centred ideas, invertedly framing non-human aspects of life—such as the architecture of my master's thesis, or the swords of this dissertation—as abstract elements *subject* to, rather than party to, social construction. However, through interacting with humans and how they engage with the non-human aspects of social life, it very quickly becomes apparent that the detached, abstract construction of things limits our ability to understand existence.

Thus, my work is not to demonstrate some notion that Japan's swords are a unique artefact with a uniquely social existence. Rather, I seek to highlight how historicised things, tied to a distinctly masculine realm, have a position beyond the assumptions of top-level actors and the "common sense" of objects inanimacy. In doing so, I ask both the reader and myself, in future endeavours, to seek out other socially engaged things whose existence is entwined with the make-up of our own. This is a recognition of objects as existing in a distinct category of socially-active non-humans, which can be applied to any number of cultural and ontological contexts, to any number of objects. The contemporary engagement with things extends beyond notions of ownership, possession, and consumption, making the thing passive and turning it into a representative, abstract concept.

Are swords 'alive'? As with most social categories, this is a question that can only be answered from understanding what constitutes a personed actor in its respective cultural context. If we have recognised, as social researchers, the diversity of cultural experiences in human realms, then I propose that this same consideration be given to the inorganic, non-human, man-made entity. Whether object entities are granted or denied social personhood, it cannot be denied that there is a diversity of thought and perspective towards them. This in itself challenges the notion that 'things' are automatically passive in social interactions.

Swords have, through contemporary actions, been drawn back into a realm of closeness to human actors. The distancing of their role and responsibilities from current modern life has been minimised, and subsequently, their social qualities have undergone their own resurgence in visibility. Here, and in the case of all objects and things that are in contact with the human realm, it is not enough to examine their tangible qualities. Consideration must be made for their intangible elements, and all of those beyond materials forms, that evoke connection, memory, empathy, and relationships: the qualities that bring forward an object's social life.

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