In my application for the MURA fellowship, I focused on the “immaterial” quality of spaces in Japanese shrines. While I did provide some specific examples in which this concept may be played out spatially, this focus was rooted more in my general interest in a “Japanese” sensibility evident in Japanese architecture of not only the past, but also of the present.

The first thing I discovered as I began my travels through some 40+ shrines around Japan was the difficulty in translating my specific experiences to relate to such a broad phrase. At first, it felt as if the richness of my specific experiences were being flattened out as I forcefully tried to conceive of them within the framework of the “immaterial”. I wasn’t yet sure of what exactly I was looking for - a direct physical manifestation of the concept or a more abstract notion picked up through a deeper analysis of details. What really helped me conceptualize my experiences was once I had hit around 15 shrines and I had started to think of them as a network, or a group rather than an assembly of individual structures.

It was quite obvious that the spaces I experienced in these shrines were physically “light” and had used significantly less material than other religious structures such as the christian church or the muslim mosque. There was, however, quite an amazing sense of depth that could be felt in these spaces despite its lack of monumentality. This depth seemed to lie in the connection of these shrines to the grander network of shrines throughout Japan. The shrines are best explained as the fingertips of the body that is Shintoism. Each shrine has a specificity to it in which it blends into the daily life surrounding it. Some are even surrounded completely by apartments in which the shrine is extremely localized in its function and appearance. They, however, relate back to the greater network by certain formalisms such as the repetition of “gates”. Every shrine also serves as home to different gods (one may be home to the god of business whereas another may be home to the god of medicine). The shrines, in a way, have areas of expertise in which the individual shrines depend on others to cover other areas of expertise. The existence of this network was one of the strongest ways in which I saw the concept of “immaterial” play out in my travel experiences. Simply looking at the photos I took confirms this, as one may sense a continuity among these photographs even when these were taken at different shrines.

The conceptualization of this network was in large part due to the catalogue-like manner in which I decided to conduct this research. Rather than focusing on a few exemplified shrines and conducting a close reading of each one, I decided to take this opportunity to cover as much ground as I can and to grasp a broader essence of what shrines were to the Japanese. This analysis that resulted as a consequence, however, was not one I had necessarily expected out of my travel. Outside of gaining insight into the specifics of shrines, I was also presented with the wonders and potentials of travel and how real experiences can be so different from what one might imagine sitting at a desk back home. That, to me, is the greatest take-away from this trip and what this fellowship has allowed me to do.
I'm Chris Johnson, a Senior at Rice, who spent my previous year in Japan studying abroad. In June of this year, I was fortunate enough to be a recipient of the Mitsubishi Undergraduate Research Award (MURA), providing me with funding to conduct a research project in Japan.

As a linguistics major, the focus of my project was conducting interviews in Japanese, obtaining linguistic data regarding "quotative markers". Quotative markers are ways that people quote prior speech (e.g. in English there are “s/he said…”, “s/he was like”, among others.). Seeing how demographic factors like gender, age, and location motivate variation with quotative markers was the focus of my research. 30 of my interviews were conducted near Tokyo, and the remaining 10 were located in Osaka, which is in Southern Japan. All together, I was able to collect over 2 hours of interviews from participants spanning from 18 to over 60 years old, with a variety of different backgrounds.

I'll be using the data I've collected as the focus of my year-long Linguistics Honors Project for my Senior year here at Rice. After transcribing the interviews, I'll be conducting an analysis of the transcripts and investigate what motivating factors appear from the results.

I'm incredibly thankful for the funding from the Mitsubishi Corporation for my scholarship. I would never have been able to travel, provide stipends, or do hardly any of my research without the assistance I was fortunate enough to receive from the MURA scholarship. Without a doubt, ending my year in Japan with traveling, meeting new people, and overall having a blast was the perfect wrap-up to my adventure overseas.
Pictures:

Me with my host family:

At the 5th Level of Mt. Fuji: