

Making **Sense** of America

Conversations on
Matters & Methods

02 & 03 July 2026 —

New Orleans Saal — Main Building — Innrain 52
University of Innsbruck —

organized by

Mahshid Mayar
Philipp Leonhardt

keynote lecture

Erica Fretwell

State University of New York, Albany

Erasing [REDACTED]s — Splintering Archives

Student-Led Critical Art Exhibition

02 & 03 July 2026 —

New Orleans Saal — Main Building — Innrain 52
University of Innsbruck —

organized by

Violet Stathopoulou

Mahshid Mayar

Philipp Leonhardt

MAKING SENSE OF AMERICA

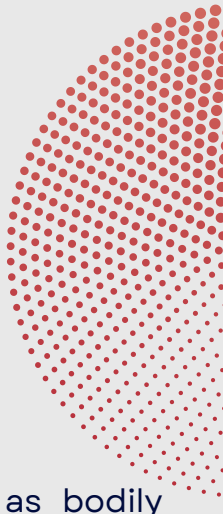
Conversations on Matters and Methods

Co-organized by Mahshid Mayar & Philipp Leonhardt

While the sensorium and sense perceptions have long been considered as bodily dispositions that are determined by physiological and neurological factors, a cultural studies approach to the study of the senses complements this perspective by centering attention on how sense-making takes place in a relational, embodied, performative, and co-constructed manner and appears in interaction between individuals as the collection of lived experiences, being shaped as they are by mutually perceived perceptions and performed practices. As Erica Fretwell asserts, therefore, the task in exploring the various dimensions of sensory perception and sense-making, e.g., in the study of the US, is to “[reconsider] the senses not simply as objects of study but as methodologies: as a means of navigating and investigating the cultural materials, affective forces, and epistemological paradigms through which humans and nonhumans continue to both emerge and engage each other” (“Introduction. Common Senses and Critical Sensibilities” 2018, 3). The two-day, international conference “Making Sense of America” brings together Americanists in a collective attempt at understanding the United States in this very frame: multisensory, embodied, co-created, and affective.

Making Sense of America: Conversations on Matters and Methods" embodies both an invitation and a redirection: an invitation to explore the sensory dimensions of American life and culture as both matter and method and a redirection of the kinds of questions that sense studies scholars have been asking for some time to the fore of debates in American Studies. Understanding sense-making as a process of reciprocal investigations between various objects and methodologies – with a focus on the United States transnationally understood – the conference panels engage with the following questions:

- How do we convey not just what America means, but also how its many sites, sights, and sides feel, look, smell, and sound?
- How do sensory experiences and sensory histories materialize in the various objects of study that we rely on and employ for sense-making in our own work?
- What are potential remedies to the methodological perils that underpin “re-enactments” and “re-creations” of historically distant archival sources of sense data, sensing practices and sensory experiences that appear to be lost?
- Whose sense histories and sense orientations do scholars present in their research and what are the politics of revisiting these sensorial repositories?
- How can the presentation of the ephemeral, fleeting, and contingent produce meaning and significance again by revealing how the past felt, sounded, looked, or smelled to individuals and communities?



CONFERENCE VENUE



University of New Orleans Saal / Room 1119
1st floor - University Main Building/ Hauptgebäude
Innrain 52, 6020 Innsbruck

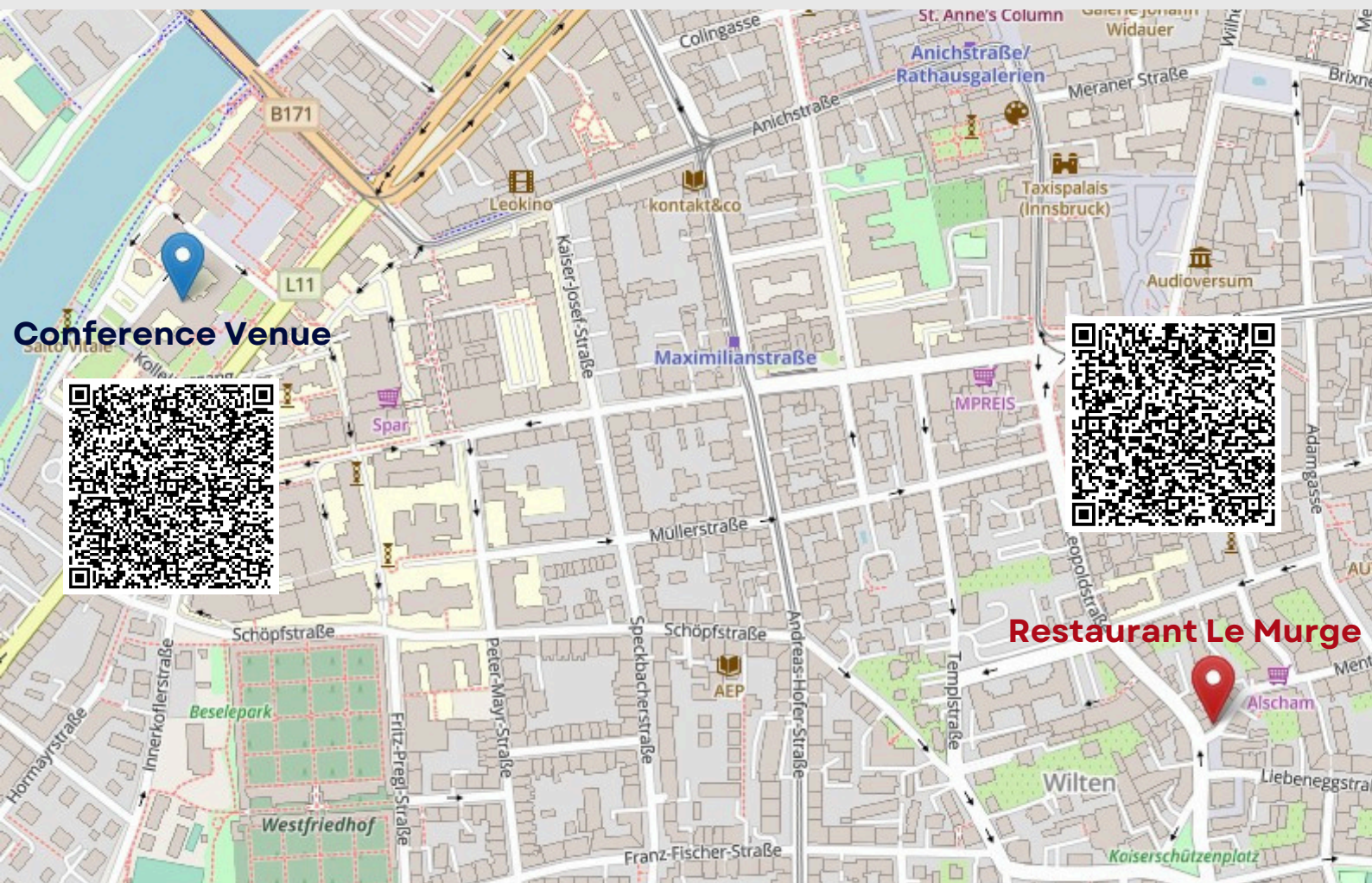


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PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Thursday, July 2

10:15-10:30	Arrival
10:30-10:45	Opening Remarks
10:45-12:00	Keynote Lecture - Erica Fretwell
12:00-13:15	Lunch Break
13:15-13:30	“Erasing Erasures = Splintering Archives Art Installation Opening
13:30-15:00	Panel I: Buccal - Archival -Authentic
15:00-15:30	Coffee and Tea
15:30-17:00	Panel II: (Eco)Feminism - Body - Collage
17:00-17:30	Coffee and Tea
17:30-18:30	Panel III: Smell as Method
18:30-20:00	(Conference-) Free Time
20:00	Conference Dinner @Le Murge - Wiltener Platzl Leopoldstraße 27, 6020 Innsbruck

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Friday, July 3

9:00-9:30	Coffee and Tea
9:30-11:00	Panel IV: Sensing the Screen
11:00-11:30	Coffee and Tea
11:30-13:00	Panel V: War(s) of Senses
13:00-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:30	Panel VI: Fossilized - Versional - Haptic
15:30-16:00	Group Photo + Departure



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JULY 2: KEYNOTE & PANELS



KEYNOTE – ERICA FRETWELL

University of Albany, SUNY



Erica Fretwell is associate professor of English at the University at Albany, SUNY, where she teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. literature, as well as affect theory, the history of science and medicine, and feminist and disability studies. She is the author of *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Duke, 2020), and her essays have appeared in the journals *PMLA*, *American Literary History*, and *American Literature*. She is currently writing a book on the literature of unlived experience, titled "The Art of Slight Living."

Sense and Insensibility, ca 1900 and 2000

This talk considers the sense-making that might derive, counterintuitively, from senselessness. The invention of general anesthetics in the mid-nineteenth century, which yielded the chemical control of unconsciousness, catalyzed a paradigm shift human ontology that, in the following decades and centuries we are still tarrying with: What is human life when consciousness (and with it, selfhood) is dead? This talk tracks that question across the literature of "unlived experience" that clusters around the turns of twentieth and the twenty-first century. Drawing on feminist and disability phenomenology, the history of science, and sense studies, I read Edith Wharton's fiction alongside Claudia Rankine and Ottessa Moshfegh to consider how the "oversleeper" -- unable to awaken but refusing to dream -- refigures insentience as a reprieve from the racialized and gendered demands of interiority. The counter-history of (Freudian) unconsciousness that general anesthetics offers, then, suggests that the flatlining of consciousness can function as a lifeline, a means for subjects to survive the normative fantasies that may not kill but form which recovery is not possible. At stake, then, in tracking the aesthetic life of senselessness is the pivotal role that insensibility plays in the intimate and embodied relations, performances, and practices that we otherwise call "sense-making."

JULY 2: PANEL I

BUCCAL - ARCHIVAL - AUTHENTIC

Chair: Julia Faisst

13:30-15:00



Andrin Albrecht (Jena) & Hannah Schoch (independent scholar)

The Privacy of the Mouth

Unlike the communal experience of sight, sound, smell, and arguably even touch, the experience of taste is categorically individualized, even though it connects us most directly to the world: In order for the mouth to sense, an object has to be placed inside a person's body, with virtually no way for two individuals to simultaneously experience the same object—or, at least, the same morsel of it. Consequently, while culinary stories have been a staple of literatures across cultures and centuries, what is often described is the preparation, anticipation, the smell, visuals, and motoric intake of food. The actual experience of taste remains undernarrated. In our talk, we work from these observations and explore how the human mouth and its sensory experiences connect to paradigms of privacy and suspicion, specifically so in mid-century short stories set in New York City about people posited as 'ordinary Americans' (White and distinctly middle class). We show how these stories—exemplarily Stanley Ellin's "The Specialty of the House" (1948), Shirley Jackson's "Like Mother Used to Make" (1949), and Roald Dahl's "Pig" (1960)—all narrate attempts to foster social connections, yet these connections inevitably fail and cannibalize themselves. The moment of tasting emerges as a multisensory experience that connects us intimately with the here and now and, if acknowledged, would dispel all illusions of the human as in any way existing self-containedly. However, under US-American postwar capitalism, these attempts at relating to the world come at a risk: In these stories, the private space of the mouth turns into the place where trust in relations is perilous. Cannibalism in both a literal and figurative sense thereby dramatizes the anxieties of a rapidly changing urban society in which boundaries between private and public, intimate and plainly visible, between producer, product, and production line become increasingly opaque.

This paper considers the relational dynamics that underpin first-person accounts of archival research in contemporary queer narratives, specifically Jenn Shapland's *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* and Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE*. In both texts, the researcher's search for queer records becomes as central to the construction of queer history as is the story those records might contain. As such, each text features extended scenes of archival discovery in which researchers experience moments of identificatory, affective, embodied recognition that pull them closer to the subject of their research. I demonstrate that these moments of recognition authorize the researcher-narrators to use specific narrative forms – speculative and subjunctive modes, rhetorical questions, and narrative refusals – to fabulate the histories that might have, could have, should have, or would have been found in the gaps, silences, and elisions of the archival record.^[1] I discuss the radical potential contained within these narrative forms, which offer ways to blur lines between fact and invention, to liberate queer stories from the burden of proof that plagues them, and to (re)imagine the past through the possibilities of the present. I then point out the drawbacks of this relational model which, in placing such emphasis on the first-person perspective of the researcher, risks a dangerous commitment to liberal individualism as well as a renewed investment in the very “truth” that speculation and subjunctive narration would seem to work against. I close with a turn to Ramzi Fawaz's recent work on psychedelic imaginaries and the relational networks that become available when we allow the self to dissolve.^[2] I suggest that it is only by turning away from the auto/biographical and more fully toward the fabulated and fictional that we can begin to use narratives from the past to connect across the entrenched national divisions of the present.

Tamara Dima Imboden (Basel)

“Avoiding My Mother's Kitchen”: Cultural Authenticity in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*

When Alabama-born Gifty, protagonist of Yaa Gyasi's critically acclaimed *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020), is made to wear traditional Ghanaian dress at her brother's funeral, she is discomfited: “I felt about as Ghanaian as apple pie, but how could I tell that to my mother?” (185). Her mother, distraught at the death of her son, “throw[s] a big, Ghanaian-style funeral,” forcing Gifty to face her feelings of inauthenticity due to her detachment from Ghana (185). This anecdote shows the inherent contradiction within the concept of ‘cultural authenticity’: On the one hand, it provides an important “meaning system” for diasporic subjects to find orientation and belonging in a new culture (Naber 66); on the other hand, it serves a normative, restrictive function that can alienate individuals from their sense of self.

Gyasi's novel highlights that what Nadine Naber calls the “politics of cultural authenticity” (63) is strongly linked to embodied, sensory experience. This paper explores two elements of this: the performative, embodied nature of authenticity and its affective, familial component. By analysing the novel's mother-daughter relationship through the lens of “performative authenticity” (Nunius 203), the paper shows how the protagonist Gifty's sense of authenticity is mediated by and performed for her mother, her only remaining Ghanaian-born relative. The study shows that, in *Transcendent Kingdom*, ‘authentic’ cultural practices are simultaneously alienating and functionally necessary to maintain relations of kinship. In this way, the paper expands on our understanding of cultural authenticity by showing that individuals' sense of authenticity is dependent on a range of relations and interrelated constructs, such as one's sense of self, affective relations, memory and nostalgia, and experiences with concrete realities of a place. These findings make up part of a wider dissertation project that considers the discursive construction of cultural authenticity in migration novels since 2020.

JULY 2: PANEL II

(ECO)FEMINISM - BODY - COLLAGE

Chair: Cornelia Klecker

15:30-17:00



Johanna Pitetti-Heil (Cologne)

“Becoming-Body” as “Worlding” in Forcetimespace

In 1983, Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen wrote that “[d]ance is surely among the most vital of the contemporary arts, especially in America” (viii), but dance has been hugely absent from European American studies. My paper explores the potential that perspectives from critical dance studies offer the endeavor of “making sense of America” from a theoretical and from an analytical perspective. For new materialist dance scholars, dance is not only an aesthetic practice of the performing arts, it is also an “embodied and enacted process” of “worlding”: “an active, ontological process” which is “informed by our turning of attention to a certain experience, place or encounter and our active engagement with the materiality and context in which events and interactions occur” (Palmer and Hunter). Therefore, dance practices are aesthetic as much as they are political because they draw attention to the particular ways in which we perceive ourselves within our bodies and within the communities that we inhabit and traverse. In order to fathom the “indivisible wholeness” that is created and experienced as one moves through time and space with a specific kinetic force, the dance phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has proposed the term “forcetimespace” (10), which implies that physical movements always exhibit a directedness, intention, and effect. My own notion of “becoming-body” makes use of the notions of “worlding” in “forcetimespace” for American cultural studies by considering the moving and aestheticized body as a form of art, as a cultural “artifact,” and as a technology and cultural practice of inquiring into the self. Such an exploration requires a self that senses itself as a vibrant body as much as it demands a heightened sense of its presence and force in time and space. I will use examples from amateur and professional dance practices from the high modernism and from current culture in order to exemplify the ways in which “worlding” requires attention from all senses. Such a focus on sens(e)ing and sense-making requires to think American studies not as German “Geisteswissenschaft” but as “multisensory, embodied, co-created, and affective,” as the call for papers postulates.

A naked body draped in translucent white muslin—evoking the image of an embryo enclosed in an amniotic sac—is carried toward the shore, heralding the emergence of new life rising from the water. This is the opening scene of *Returning Home*, a dance documentary, produced by Andrew Abrahams Wilson and released by Open Eye Pictures in 2003, featuring the then eighty-year-old Jewish American performer Anna Halprin. Comprising a series of pieces conceived by artistic performer Eeo Stubblefield, the film offers a ritualized exploration of the interconnection between the human body and the natural world in the tradition of “environmental performance art” (Ross 340). The production exemplifies the multisensorial approach to the environment that has characterized Halprin's work. Having left New York in the late 1940s together with her husband, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, she committed herself to engaging the Western landscapes of the Bay Area as a source of inspiration and a resource for recovery in her dance practice. *Returning Home* departs from Halprin's community-based dance events by featuring only two dancing bodies: the body of the Performer and the body of the Earth, enacting what I conceive as an eco-humanist pas de deux between Halprin and Nature in which touch functions as the central catalyst for movement – physically, affectively, and conceptually. Situated within an ecocritical framework, my paper brings the fields of performance, body, and sense studies into conversation to examine the dialogical qualities of Halprin's dance with nature and their implications for notions of embodiment, temporality, spatiality, and being. I will argue that touch – understood with Erin Manning as “one way of thinking this body-in-movement” (xiii) – is essential in shaping Halprin's notion of the “transactional body” (Sullivan): a body that asserts interrelationality, accommodates adaptation and transformation, and participates in a co-constitutive process of becoming. This reading expands existing Halprin scholarship by foregrounding touch as a mode of negotiating being as both located and relational (as ‘being in the world’ in Heidegger's terms and ‘being singular plural’ in Merleau-Ponty's). By centering touch, *Returning Home* advances conceptualizations of being as a sensory, corporeally grounded experience and gestures toward a biocentric conception of continuity between woman and nature. Despite the purported universalism that underpins this eco-humanist projection of being, the performativity of touch, movement, corporeality, and nature situates *Returning Home* firmly within a specifically U.S.-American discourse. In this sense, Halprin's work reinforces mythic figurations of the American West in the pastoral tradition and draws on culturally coded notions of touch and repertoires of movement to reimagine the land through a distinctly American ecofeminist sensibility.

Sandra Tausel (Innsbruck)

‘Obeying him was easy, not a drudge’: Lisa Huffaker's Collage Erasures

Lisa Huffaker's erasure project of Helen Andelin's 1963 best-selling *Fascinating Womanhood* offers a critical re-reading of mid-twentieth-century prescriptive womanhood by transforming its didactic rhetoric into a site of rupture, resistance, and reconstruction. Through selective removal and reconfiguration of the original text, Huffaker exposes the ideological scaffolding that once naturalized women's subservience, emotional containment, and heteronormative fulfillment. Erasure here functions not merely as subtraction but as an interpretive and generative practice, making visible the silences, exclusions, and violences embedded within the original “self-improvement” manual while opening space for alternative articulations and reformulations, helping to make sense of past and present construction of womanhood in the United States. By intervening in the “straitjacket of this text” (“Visual Poetry”) and its authoritative voice, Huffaker contests its claims to universality and coherence, revealing womanhood as historically contingent as well as rhetorically and politically constructed. The resulting text and artwork oscillate between ghostly residue and emergent possibility, inviting readers to confront the persistence of the image of an “ideal” woman's behavior while advocating for its undoing. In this sense, I argue that erasure becomes an intervening technique that mediates between what women were once instructed to be and what they have and might yet become. Crucially, Huffaker's project reframes erasure as a feminist methodology of repair and re-vision: Rather than preserving the original text as an artifact or rejecting it outright, the work inhabits and reworks it to demonstrate how oppressive narratives can be re-authored and re-imagined from within. Huffaker's collage and erasure art thus models a practice of critical engagement with texts in the patriarchal archive, transforming a prescriptive past into a reimagining with emancipatory potential.

JULY 2: PANEL III

SMELL AS METHOD

Chair: Michael Fuchs

17:30-18:30

Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová (Charles)

Olfactory Penetration and Gender in Desert Blood

The first novel written on the US turf to tackle Juárez maquiladoras murders, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* (2005) is rooted in explicitly affective, feminist positions so as to implicate both the US and the Mexican state in perpetrators' impunity and in upholding structural hierarchies that have turned the US-Mexico borderlands into a neocolonialist "femicide machine." In the novel, the border is a site of hyper-sophisticated surveillance technologies and law enforcement that, nevertheless, see violence selectively. To contrast and counter this structural failure, parts of the plot are set in an olfactory necrozone saturated with decay and putridity, a narrative device through which the novel materializes the otherwise diffuse and systemic nature of femicide. Contrary to its desired impassability, the border emerges as a porous sensory field where smells circulate freely, mirroring the asymmetrical flows of capital, labor, and disposable (brown, female) bodies. Besides witnesses' visual and tactile inspection of victims' cadavers, Gaspar de Alba mobilizes odors—ranging from stale alcohol, sweat and gunpowder to flesh rot. These smells permeate both domestic and public spaces, but also connote hierarchies of (gendered) power, such as (masculine) presence of life and agency and the (feminine) lack thereof. These sensory cues operate as affective signals, alerting characters and readers alike to infrastructures of targeted danger before they are fully articulated within the plot. At the same time, the saturation of the novel's geography with noxious smells reflects the normalization and routinization of gendered violence at the Juárez/El Paso divide. Drawing on affect theory, border studies, and theories of embodiment, this paper close reads selected scenes of femicidal violence along the US-Mexico border to demonstrate how olfaction collapses the distance between reader, character, and victim, while simultaneously undermining the novel's ambition to effectively protest gendered suffering and advance grievability (Butler 2010).

Hsun L. Hsu (UC Davis)

Olfactory Ecologies in the Past Conditional

Zoom

Meeting ID: 927 3511 8628, Passcode: 191038



Researchers have documented powerful connections between scent, memory, and affect, but they generally focus on individual memory associations and on scents abstracted from webs of relation. Meanwhile, sensory historians raise difficult questions about the viability of recovering or even reconstructing past scents and smellscapes. How can we understand odorous substances as a kind of material archive bearing traces of historical patterns of extraction, sensory labor, circulation, consumption, and interpretation—but also conveying a sense of other possibilities—of ecologies that exceed the worldmaking of racial and colonial capitalism? How do historical scents interact with other senses, like taste, touch, vision, and heat? Do historically suppressed sensations and sensory media bear traces of an unsettled "past conditional temporality" where, as Lisa Lowe suggests, "there may be other possibilities that remain, still unvanquished, which we might bring forth and manifest"? This talk will consider narratives and multimodal artworks by Toni Morrison and Candice Lin that enact olfactory ecologies in the past conditional mode and, in doing so, offer frameworks for thinking and encountering suppressed ecologies inherent in the material legacies of colonial capitalism.

JULY 3: PANELS



JULY 3: PANEL IV

SENSING THE SCREEN**Chair: Carmen Dextl****9:30-11:00**

Julia Faisst (Dortmund)

Sense-Scapes of Migrant Childhood in Contemporary US Media

Whether a migrant child is lost at the Mexican-U.S. border in Michel Stone's novel *Border Child* (2017), finds himself on an odyssey to reunite with his parents on the other side of the border in Javier Zamora's memoir *Solito* (2022), is penned in a cage in John Moore's photographs of ICE facilities in Texas, or peeks across the border wall as a gigantically blown up image in an installation piece by French artist JR: what all these mediated versions of childhood cut short due to family separation have in common is posing the question of what it looks—and feels—like to be separated from your family at the U.S.-Mexico border. Through selected examples of sense-scapes of lost or absent children, I investigate material landscapes (such as cages and the Mojave Desert) as well as immaterial, if embodied sites of feeling (including memories and dreams as part of personal archives) of migratory childhood and family separation. In order to probe into the lived experiences of a political issue that, given its cruel nature, might rather defy the imagination yet significantly determines an³-migrant sentiments currently pervading large swaths of the U.S., I ask: how do these textual and visual works of art (co-)create affective spaces of closeness, care, and intimacy notwithstanding? How do they try to make sense of what from a human rights perspective makes no sense for its readers and viewers? Furthermore, I explore the limits to empathetic (non)fiction and photography while they negotiate a sense of potentially reciprocal communality through heightened attention and immersion as methods of close reading and viewing in tackling the ephemeral spectre of migratory childhood via its sensory sites and sights.

Sensation and Validation:

The Pop-Cultural Integration of Toxic Masculinity in Film and Television

This paper examines the intricate relationship between pickup artist (PUA) culture and the American entertainment and celebrity industry, surveying figurations of the pickup artist in film and television from the late 1960s to the present. Originally framed as a niche form of personal development—promising romantic success through the strategic application of “social dynamics”—PUA culture has over the past five decades evolved into a multi-million-dollar industry and a primary pillar of the contemporary “manosphere.” While the manosphere is frequently analyzed as a digital counter-public disseminating “alternative” truths in opposition to mainstream narratives, this article looks beyond the digital age to examine the long-standing filmic integration of toxic masculinity into popular mainstream culture. The origins of PUA culture are traced as a reactionary response to the “new morality” that emerged from the sexual revolution and the concurrent rise of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism. Central to this inquiry is the ambiguous and ambivalent role of the entertainment industry: While it serves as a model of social validation and economic success for pickup artists, it also functions as a social sensorium and forum where representations and evaluations of pickup artists are mediated under the technological and economic conditions of the market. Revisiting historical representations of pickup artists in films and series such as *How to Pick Up Girls!* (1970), *The Pickup Artist* (1987), *Magnolia* (1999), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), and *The Mentalist* (2008–2015), the paper focuses on how pop-cultural aesthetics are variously invoked as tools of social revelation, symptoms of societal decay, means of auteurist remasculination, or as blueprints to decode the simulacrum that has replaced reality. To what extent is the post-truth society, advocated by the manosphere, a contingent response to the postmodern philosophy and the ironic turn of the late twentieth century? By analyzing the pop-cultural hermeneutics of the alt-right, the paper interrogates the limits of irony and how subversive strategies of ambiguity are put to work in the ideological appropriation of films such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1999).

Sieglinde Lemke (Freiburg)

The Academic Video Essay as Method:

Exploring Trickle-Down Ideology and Cultural Affect

How to make sense of one of the most pressing and consequential features of contemporary American society: the dramatic rise of economic inequality? This talk examines both the ideological foundations of wealth concentration and its material and affective consequences, including precarity and the erosion of social trust. While economists and political scientists have documented the scale and causes of inequality, this contribution adopts a cultural studies perspective, analyzing cinematic representations of social stratification and trickle-down economy. By investigating cinematic narratives of this toxic wealth culture, this contribution asks how extreme inequality has become normalized. At the same time, it explores alternative visions of prosperity that move toward concepts of social wealth. My talk advances its argument not only through critical analysis but also through the aesthetic and affective power of images themselves.

During the talk, a self-produced ten-minute video essay, which itself appeals to our senses to find answers to the above-mentioned questions, is screened. The goal is to deconstruct the ideological basis of trickle-down economics as well as to project a social wealth culture that aims for economic sufficiency and human flourishing. The proposed contribution would reflect on the mode of production behind this piece, the potential sensibilities it may evoke in viewers, and the methodological challenges of such an approach to knowledge production - one that moves beyond the “Great-Divide Theory.”

JULY 3: PANEL V

WAR(S) OF SENSES

Chair: Matthias Mösch

11:30-13:00



Giulia Kobza (Zurich)

“The Worst Part Was the Smell”:**Memory and the Senses in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried***

“He liked the smell of the New Testament under his cheek, the leather and ink and paper and glue, whatever the chemicals were. He liked hearing the sounds of night. Even his fatigue, it felt fine, the stiff muscles and the prickly awareness of his own body, a floating feeling. He enjoyed not being dead” (O’Brien 18). Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* is saturated with descriptions of sensory experiences. As this paper aims to explore, the text positions sensory experiences as absolutely crucial for the ability to not only remember, but also process – that is, make sense of – the traumatic experience of war. Indeed, in O’Brien’s stories, sensory experiences perform a double function. On the level of the diegesis, descriptions of sensory experiences act as anchors in the disjointed spatial and temporal experience of war. Smells, in particular, elicit highly intense memories not only during the war, where the smell of the New Testament may evoke memories of home and safety, but also after the war, where the actual events of the war may become impossible to retell, but details like the “smell, in particular, but also the numerous varieties of texture and taste [of shit]” (O’Brien 144) become impossible to forget. Simultaneously, however, on the level of the text, the ubiquitous description of sensory experiences highlights the insurmountable remove between readers and war veterans. As sensory perception, fleeting and ephemeral in nature, resists straightforward (linguistic) representation, readers are confronted with their own inability to fully make sense of war trauma experienced by others. By exploring this tension between the importance and the simultaneous unrepresentability of the sensory experience of the Vietnam War in a highly metafictional, non-linear form, *The Things They Carried* proposes specifically fiction as a realm in which this seemingly irresolvable tension, nevertheless, can be made sense of.

Giulio Segato (Urbino Carlo Bo)

“When Trains Make the Dogs Howl”:

Yusef Komunyakaa and the Poetics of Soundscape

My paper intends to explore how Pulitzer Prize Yusef Komunyakaa's poetry constructs immersive soundscapes that merge music, memory, and history. Instead of conceptualizing sound as mere metaphor, Komunyakaa stages poems as acoustic environments, incorporating elements such as the auditory chaos of Vietnam, the syncopated cadences of jazz, and the sensory textures of Southern landscapes. An examination of the interplay among rhythm, noise, and silence reveals that Komunyakaa transforms the act of listening into a poetic practice of survival and resistance. The paper utilizes theories from sound studies and African American cultural criticism to demonstrate how the poet's verse positions readers not merely as interpreters of text but as auditors of an unfolding sound-world. In this sense, Komunyakaa extends the lyric beyond the page, embodying the persistence of music and sound as vehicles for memory and identity.

From a methodological point of view, my paper will combine close readings of selected poems (from *Dien Cai Dau*, *Magic City* and *Neon Vernacular*) with theoretical frameworks from soundscape studies (R. Murray Schafer's concept of “soundscape,” Fred Moten's work on Black performance, and Christina Sharpe's reflections on listening and Black life). Interviews and recorded readings could supplement the analysis.

Masayoshi Yamada (UC Santa Cruz)

***The Cry of Jazz* (1959) and the Soundscape of Race and Neighborhood Change in Postwar Chicago**

This paper situates the 1959 film *The Cry of Jazz* within the soundscape of Hyde Park, a South Side neighborhood, in post-WWII Chicago. The neighborhood transitioned from an all-white enclave to an interracial community in the early post World War II years, before the onset of urban renewal in the late 1950s. Drawing on the living experiences of its African American producers in Hyde Park, the film stages a fictional jazz society in which interracial members debate the meaning of jazz, Black life, and American democracy. I argue that *The Cry of Jazz* emerges from, and simultaneously critiques, the fleeting possibility of interracial musicking in Hyde Park. A product of the neighborhood's short-lived interracial social interactions in one of the most segregated cities of the era, the film captures the tensions between freedom and constraint. Its central claim—that jazz had reached the limits of its formal development even as it continued to embody the realities of Black existence in the United States—registers both a diagnosis of structural racism and a pointed critique of liberal interracialism.

Reading the film as a semi-autobiographical project allows us to understand *The Cry of Jazz* as more than an aesthetic manifesto; it becomes a record of community formation and dissolution. The film reveals how residents of both races used jazz listening and debate to grapple with broader questions of race, space, and belonging at a moment when interracial association was gaining foothold in the age of the Civil Rights Movement. By tracing this entanglement of sound and neighborhood change, the paper repositions *The Cry of Jazz* as an essential soundscape archive that illuminates the fragile politics of interracialism in postwar urban America.

JULY 3: PANEL VIFOSSILIZED - VERSIONAL - HAPTIC

Chair: Michael Fuchs

14:00-15:30



Michael Fuchs (Innsbruck)

Making Deep Time American:**Fossils and the Transnational Sensory Politics of America'**

This paper will examine fossils as privileged objects that allow deep time to become sensuously and affectively present in U.S. culture—without ever becoming directly accessible. Taking as its point of departure a North American megalodon tooth, an object that predates the United States by millions of years yet circulates today through U.S. (and global) markets, media, and museum logics, the paper will ask how deep time is made sense-ible and naturalized within transnational regimes of sense-making. While deep time is often invoked as a nonhuman horizon that destabilizes anthropocentric and national narratives, this paper will argue that sensuous and affective encounters with fossils are organized through historically specific dispositifs of mediation. Provenance claims, certification practices, documentary framings, and museum display do not merely frame fossils as scientific evidence but produce wonder, awe, and humility to make deep time meaningful as cultural common sense. Importantly, these affective responses are not private sensations but patterned and socially available orientations that circulate across institutional and popular forms.

By close-reading dinosaur displays at the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien and analyzing the commercial circulation and popular-cultural representation of fossil objects, the paper will trace how deep time is reterritorialized as “American” even when the geological past precedes continental and national formations. Although deep time, staged across different temporal dimensions (Mesozoic dinosaurian prehistory and the Cenozoic marine prehistory of megalodon), unsettles the spatial boundaries that underpin modern political geographies, institutional and market practices nevertheless reinscribe deep time within narratives of American discovery, expertise, and spectacle.

Situating this argument at the intersection of sense studies and transnational American studies, the paper will suggest a transnational sensory politics that describes how deep time is condensed into portable objects, staged in exhibition spaces, and circulated through media and markets—making “America” materially and affectively present through fossils that precede the United States and exceed its borders.

The Materiality of the Book, Haptics, and Versionality

The term *tête-bêche*, in a literary context, describes books that are readable from both ends. While this practice goes back to the nineteenth-century, my paper considers a specific use of the *tête-bêche* form in two twenty-first-century novels: Mark Z. Danielewski's highly experimental *Only Revolutions* (2006) and Kiese Laymon's BLM-novel *Long Division* (2021). With these texts, I argue, the *tête-bêche* form serves to link the books' haptics with the versionality of their narratives. In other words, Danielewski and Laymon deploy the affordances of the book as a material object that can be flipped and physically handled in various ways, to enhance via the sense of touch an aesthetics and politics of versionality. This strategy helps them articulate what I call a speculative solidarity. While *Only Revolutions*, often read as a radically democratic text (Piatkowski; Pöhlmann), requires readers to turn the book in various ways to create versionality through polyphony, telling an American road-trip narrative in side-by-side stories through two autodiegetic narrators, Laymon's novel presents two versions of its main character in different timeframes that "meet" in the book's physical center when reading from both ends, thus exposing racialized vulnerabilities in the United States while celebrating the hope that comes with a human ability to re-write stories. My analyses are inspired by Jacques Rancière's thought, aiming to analyze sensibilities as central to reading and world (re-)making processes, and considering aesthetics, as "the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to experience," as fundamentally linked with politics (Rancière 13). Combined with a focus on versionality this framework and a look at *tête-bêche* form in contemporary fiction not only spotlights speculative solidarity as a self-reflexive practice that embraces ambivalence and uncertainty. It also contributes to exploring the fundamental, mutually shaping relations between versionality, U.S. reading practices and materialities, and sensual experience.

Kristin Allukian (South Florida) - via Zoom

Touched by Labor: How it Feels to be a Lowell Factory Girl

Zoom



Meeting ID: 927 3511 8628, Passcode: 191038

This paper follows the cotton as it circles through Lucy Larcom's 1868 poem "Weaving" and emphasizes the lived experience of the poem's speaker, a white, working-class factory weaver who labored under the antebellum cotton market. It explores the embodied process of cotton weaving, the tactile experience of cotton itself, and the racialized and gendered significance of cotton as it makes contact with the skin. Because the speaker's observations of how cotton shows up in her world are filtered through her body as she weaves, her embodied experience positions her to make sense of her body, the cotton, and the reciprocity of touch between the two. It is through the act of weaving—her physical experience of being in a gendered and racialized body whose skin makes contact with the cotton—that the weaver comes to think about enslaved women in the South who may have touched that very same cotton before her and to imagine a world of women beyond the one she can see. Through the lens of feminist phenomenology, I explore how one woman perceives a world created by cotton in and through her body. I read, in the weaver's focus on the body, the apperceptive moments that reveal an awareness of her embodied role in the cotton market in order to read Larcom's poem with a focus on how whiteness feels, as read through apperceptive moments that locate the body of the wage-earning, white woman both in opposition to slavery and within the cotton market of slavery's capitalism.

15:30-16:00

Group Photo and Departure

ERASING ERASURES = SPLINTERING ARCHIVES

Co-curated by **Violet Stathopoulou, Mahshid Mayar, & Philipp Leonhardt**

“Erasing Erasures = Splintering Archives” “Erasing Erasures = Splintering Archives” is the first of the two components of our conference’s critical/creative installation, which emerges from a critical erasure workshop–inspired by Tracy K. Smith’s erasure poem “Declaration,” led by Mahshid Mayar, and hosted by Violet Stathopoulou as part of her Creative Writing course+club in the English and American Studies program. The workshop invited students to engage erasure as a practice of sense-making through redaction, fragmentation, and cross-generic transduction as a re-reading of the US Declaration of Independence and of the Declaration of Sentiments in 2025/6.

The resulting installation reckons, through erasure, with the 250th anniversary of the Declaration’s adoption in 1776, commemorated this July. Each piece reworks either of these historical documents through erasure, interrogating the authority and finality of founding documents. The reflection essays that accompany the works record each artist’s individual aesthetic and political choices within broader debates over the nature of founding documents and our readerly-writerly relationship to them. Together, the works approach (re-)reading as a twofold practice of critical proximity and rupture, one that traces the fractures internal to the very coherence of “pre-texts.”

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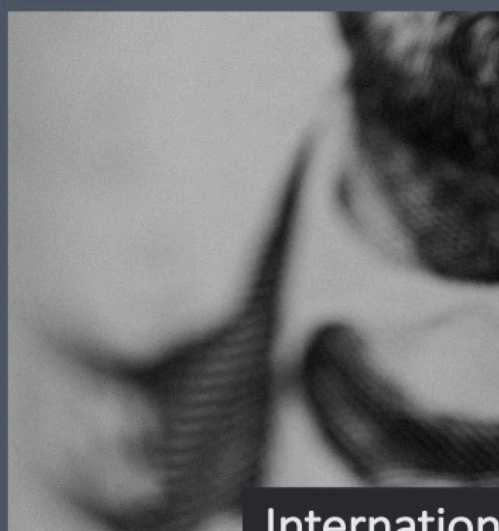
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