

CENTRE FOR SENSORY STUDIES

SENSATION LECTURE SERIES

Sensitivity Training

Erica Fretwell

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11:00-12:40 EST, [Webinar Registration Link](#)

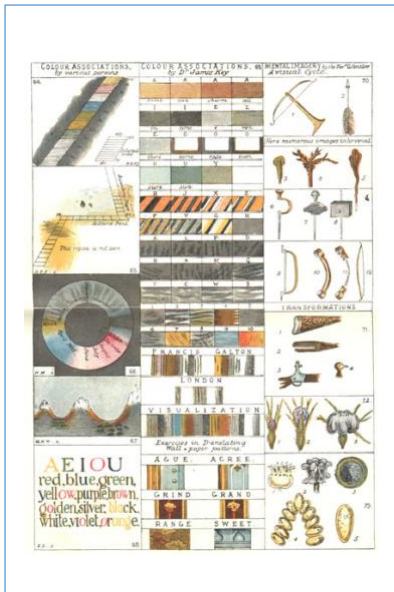


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This talk takes the primary classroom as a point of entry into the history of the haptic. There, a Progressive-era program called “sensitivity training” first flourished. Originating in nineteenth-century psychophysics, sensitivity training – the refining of the perceptual faculty – was popularized as a pedagogical method by Maria Montessori, who located touch at the core of her program for early childhood education: children trace letters on textured sandpaper, acquiring a “feel” for the sound and shape before all else. By revisiting Montessori’s cultural aims, as well as situating her program along a scientific history of touch originating in philosophical and philanthropic discussions of blindness, this talk suggests that the judgments typically taught in the college classroom inhabit a continuum of “sensitivity training” that begins in the general primary classroom, where touch discrimination and language are entangled in and as – to borrow from Henry James – a “grasping imagination.”

Erica Fretwell is associate professor of English at the University at Albany, SUNY. Her research and teaching interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. literature, the history of science and medicine, disability studies, and affect theory. She is the author of *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Duke 2020), and she is co-editing a special issue of *American Literature* with Hsuan Hsu on “Senses with/out Subjects.” Her essays have appeared in the journals *J19* and *American Literary History*, and in the volumes *Timelines of American Literature*, *The New Walt Whitman Studies*, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, and *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body*

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