SENSATION LECTURE SERIES

Sensitivity Training

Erica Fretwell

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11:00-12:40 EST, Webinar Registration Link

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