

International Conference–

Making Sense of America – Conversations on Matters & Methods

Co-organized by **Mahshid Mayar & Philipp Leonhardt**

Venue: **Department of American Studies - University of Innsbruck - Austria**

Date: **2-3 July 2026**

Keynote Speaker:

Professor Erica Fretwell (State University of New York at Albany)

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.

The conference participants share their expertise on the United States from a “sense studies” perspective – a collective endeavor that entails 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?

A headspace to both think about how senses circulate through the texts, archives, and cultural forms that we study and to explore new avenues of research that facilitate the study of the *Treffpunkte* between the abstract *and* the tangible, the far-off *and* the everyday, the self *and* the other, the archival

and the experiential, and the perceived *and* the affective, possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Senses of place, sensory environments, sense-scapes, e.g. soundscapes, smellscapes, tastescapes and/or sensory experience in specific regions or geographies, e.g., mountains, waterways, deserts, the atmosphere
- Senses of time, temporal reconfigurations of linear and progress-driven conceptions of time, e.g., deep time, queer temporalities
- Sensory histories and new models of conceptualizing sensory experience, e.g., against the “Great-Divide-Theory” and teleological narratives of modernity
- Individual and/or community-centered practices, rituals, routines, and performances of sense-making and sensations
- Forms of resistance against regulatory practices, power structures, and sense proscription, e.g., deodorization, sonic warfare, epidemic restrictions imposed on the body in the open
- Technologically-mediated sensations
- Single sense vs. inter-sensory and multi-sensory alignments and divergences against a “hierarchy of the senses” and, e.g., synesthesia
- The marketing, shopping, and selling of sensory goods, modes of production and consumption – e.g. the politics of food in cookbooks or intersectional (de-)coding of scents in perfume ads
- An invitation to consider the development of non-print-based and non-textualist methodologies and approaches to presenting sensory histories and experiences, e.g., creation of sonic archives

Submission Deadline

Please submit abstracts of no more than 300 words and short biographies of no more than 100 words to the conference co-organizers, Mahshid Mayar (mahshid.mayar@uibk.ac.at) and Philipp Leonhardt (philipp.leonhardt@uibk.ac.at) by 15 September 2025.

The conference will take place at The University of Innsbruck on 2-3 July 2026.

The conference proceedings will be published as an essay collection with a leading academic press.