Beyond the Written Record: Exploring Past Sounds, Tastes, Smells, Vistas, and Touches

An EIHS Multi-sensory Presentation Series and Roundtable Discussion
December 2, 2022 | Noon to 2 pm | Location TBD:

An inconspicuous hole in a permanent exhibition panel of the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr (MHMBw) in Dresden, Germany, elicits particularly strong reactions from its visitors. If museum goers put their noses next to the hole they can catch a whiff of the typical smell of a World War I battlefield trench, a mix of decaying flesh, dirt, sweat, disinfectant, and gunpowder. Originally dedicated to documenting the history of the Armed Forces of Germany, the museum is an unusual military history institution which instead focuses on individual and collective experiences of war, going against conventional tropes, imagery, and narratives of military history. The MHMBw and exhibits such as the scents of a battlefield trench exemplify that the past consists not just of written words which are stowed away in archives, but also of sensory experiences such as sounds, tastes, smells, vistas, and touches. In our EIHS Multi-sensorial Presentation Series and Roundtable Discussion, we want to explore the potentialities of and challenges to multi-sensorial histories.

We invite proposals for 5-to-8-minute lightning talks/performances/demonstrations which may consider, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- In what ways does including visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and/or olfactory elements of particular human experiences complicate, broaden, or enrich our engagements with narratives of the past, the present, and the future?
- What archival practices do scholars need to cultivate to retrieve and present past sounds, tastes, smells, vistas, and touches? What are possible challenges to producing multi-sensory histories?
- To what degree have sensory experiences varied according to gender, social class, race or other perceptions of difference in the past and how does this shape our histories thereof?
- To what degree are our understandings of the senses themselves historically constructed and what impact does this might have on working with multi-sensorial sources?
To what extent or not do alternative presentation formats such as speculative fiction, multimedia montages, or reproduced recipes allow scholars to make past sensorial experience accessible in the present?

The initial round of lightning talks/performances/demonstrations is followed by a roundtable discussion and audience Q&A which are led by a faculty moderator. Participation is open to Michigan graduate students working in all disciplines, time periods, and geographic areas.

As part of the EIHS graduate student workshop series, we strive to create an inclusive, collegial, and affirmative forum of exchange where participants can test and experiment with ideas which they might not yet feel comfortable enough to present in more formalized settings. Participants are welcome to present work in progress and/or address methodological challenges faced in their research. We especially encourage first- and second-year graduate students to express their interest.

If you are interested in participating in our EIHS Multi-Sensorial Presentation Series and Roundtable Discussion, please email a short précis (a paragraph or two; one double-spaced page max) to EIHS Graduate Student Liaison, Robert Diaz (rjdiaz@umich.edu). Briefly outline your work and how your proposed lightning presentation relates to the themes outlined above. In accordance with this year’s EIHS theme, “Against History,” we are particularly looking forward to experimental, creative, and unconventional formats that engage with the senses in creative ways. Thus, we welcome presentations that incorporate tactile demonstrations or soundscape/scentscape components (though this is optional!). The header of your précis should include your name and departmental affiliation. The deadline for proposals is Friday, July 15, 2022.

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact us beforehand.

We are looking forward to hearing from you!