

Seminar in American Studies  
**Material Sensations**  
**Sense and Contention in Material Religious Practice**  
Tuesday 1:30-3:20 p.m.  
Fall 2011

Professor Sally M.  
Promey

Office: BK 025; or  
ISM N210

Office Hours:  
by appointment  
Office Phone: 203-432-6264

E-mail:  
sally.promey@yale.edu

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**I. Course Description**

This interdisciplinary graduate seminar will explore the *sensory and material* histories of religious images, objects, buildings, and performances as well as the potential for the senses to spark contention in material religious practice. With a focus on American things and religions, the course will also consider broader geographical and categorical parameters so as to invite intellectual engagement with the most challenging and decisive developments in relevant fields. The goal is to study not only the visual cultures of religions but also to investigate possibilities for scholarly examination of a more robust human sensorium of sound, taste, touch, scent, and sight---and even “sixth senses”---the points where the senses meet material things (and vice versa) in religious life and practice. Topics for consideration include the cultural construction of the senses and sensory hierarchies; investigation of the sensory capacities of (religious) things; and specific episodes of sensory contention in and among various religious traditions. In addition, the course invites thinking beyond the “Western” five senses to other locations and historical possibilities for identifying the dynamics of sensing human bodies in (trans)national religious practices, experience, and ideas. Yale will host a related conference, "Sensational Religion," in early November; an exhibition on these subjects, titled "Making Sense of Religion," will on view in the Memorabilia Room of Sterling Memorial Library beginning 4 October. [Course is by permission of instructor.]

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**II. Course Requirements**

**A. Readings:** This class is designed to explore interdisciplinary research and thought on sensory and material cultures of religion and to encourage innovative, compelling scholarship on these subjects. A key requirement for this course is the student’s critical engagement of assigned readings----and of the kinds of objects explored in them (and those the class identifies as neglected by them). Every student in the class is responsible for completing each week’s reading assignment before the class meeting. Individual students will lead discussion of texts; all class participants will contribute to analysis and discussion each week. Books may be purchased at Labyrinth (or elsewhere) or found on reserve in Bass Library. Shorter readings, articles and chapters in books, have been uploaded to the Classes V2 course pages. Readings are selected for their facility in illuminating the field(s) of study and to aid class participants in refining their own

approaches to research and writing on material subjects.

**B. Discussion Leadership and Reader Responses:** Students assigned to leadership roles for each week's readings will come to class prepared to facilitate discussion. It may be useful to think of this task as, in part, a brief critical review of the reading in question. Even more important than summarizing and critiquing key aspects of the author's argument, discussion leaders will be expected to engage the class in conversation on these and closely related subjects. *In preparation for leadership, please note that the goal is to elicit active classroom conversation about the reading and the ideas it proposes;* leaders are not being asked, in other words, to provide a comprehensive "report" on the reading. Students in leadership roles will arrange to make available in class, and when relevant, *reproductions of major images or objects under discussion.* For any given class session, each student not assigned a discussion leadership role for that session is expected to post reading responses (including questions) on the classes server and to come to class having read the week's set of responses by other class participants. These responses should be posted by 5:00 p.m. that Monday (before each Tuesday class session), in order to facilitate access to the entire class.

**C. Semester Presentation and Paper:** Each student will conduct research on a topic directly related to the seminar's constellation of subjects. This research may focus on a particular object or constellation of objects or on a particular instance of sensory contention, controversy, or censorship. On 4 October the class session will be devoted to initial conversation about each student's projected subject. By 18 October, students will have posted their proposal summaries to the class site on Classes V2. In the second half of the semester students will present this research in class and, at semester's end, turn in a final research paper of 15-18 pages in length. Reflection on and critique of semester projects, and ways to pursue and refine them, will form one substantial subject of in-class conversation.

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### III. Course Grades

Grades will be earned for performance in three areas:

Discussion leadership, reader responses, and overall class participation, including conference attendance; see description below (30%)

Presentation of research in class (30%)

Final paper, 15-18 pages (40%)

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### IV. Course Calendar and Readings

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Tu 6 Sept Introduction to the Course---Rethinking Things: Sensation, Religion, and the "Modern" Academy

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Tu 13 Sept Why (and How) Sensory Cultures?  
Readings: ●David Howes, *Sensual Relations*  
●E. Edwards, C. Gosden, and R. Phillips (eds.), "Introduction" to *Sensible Objects*; and Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts," also in *Sensible Objects*

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Tu 20 Sept Sensation and Materiality  
Readings: ●W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, Part Two, "Objects"  
●Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, contributions by Miller

●Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things"

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Tu 27 Sept Sense, Sensuality, and Controversy  
Guest lecturer: Professor Jonathan Katz  
Censoring Sensualities: The Case of Hide/Seek and the National  
Portrait Gallery

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Tu 4 Oct Refining Research Proposals---an in-class conversation  
Readings: ●Sally Promey and Shira Brisman, "Sensory Cultures: Material and  
Visual Religion Reconsidered" (recommended)  
**Visit exhibition at Sterling Memorabilia Room: "Making  
Sense of Religion."**

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Tu 11 Oct Sensory Histories I  
Readings: ●Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts in Early Modern England*  
●Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (selections)  
●David Howes, ed, *Sixth Sense Reader*, selections by Howes, Wade, Schmidt, and  
Riskin  
●Neil Harris, *Humbug* (selections)

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Tu 18 Oct Sensory Histories II : Senses and/in Modernity  
Readings: ●David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses*, introductory materials to the book as  
well as essays by Stewart, Classen, Howes  
●Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American  
Enlightenment*, introduction  
●Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*

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Tu 25 Oct Presentations I

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**Tu 1 Nov to Th 3 Nov Conference, Sterling Memorial Lecture Hall  
"Sensational Religion: Sense and Contention in Material  
Practice"**

Attendance required at a minimum of three conference panels

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Tu 8 Nov Presentations II

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Tu 15 Nov Presentations III

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Tu 22 Nov Fall Recess---no class meeting

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Tu 29 Nov Presentations IV