

Dissertation Abstract

My dissertation project, “The Sensory Environments of Civil War Prisons,” examines captivity during the American Civil War through the lens of environmental and, especially, sensory history. The premise of sensory history is that while human sensory “hardware” changes slowly over time, perception is deeply cultural and contextual. This means that when people in the past wrote about experience through the senses, they conveyed more than a biological process and instead expressed the ways the senses helped give meaning to existence.

Drawing from more than two hundred unpublished manuscripts from twenty-five libraries and archives, newspapers, government records, and postwar narratives, I maintain that Union and Confederate prisoners of war mediated and understood environments of captivity through touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. In doing so, this project follows previous historians who emphasize the continued importance of the nonvisual senses in the ostensibly visual era of nineteenth-century newspapers and photography. This sensory approach foregrounds and contextualizes what has previously been implicit or taken for granted in debates on the conditions, treatment, and memory of Civil War prisons. By radically historicizing the nonvisual senses in nineteenth-century America, however, my dissertation aspires to challenge not only how historians think about the Civil War, but also how scholars think about the role of the senses in understanding the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of daily life in the past.