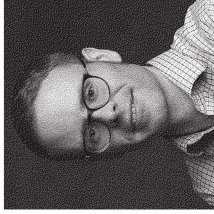


POLITICAL KEYNOTE THE “IN-BETWEEN” AND THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF AN URBAN PHENOMENOLOGY

In many ways, the theme of the “in-between” represents a concise way of describing sociology, my personal home discipline. Classic sociological theorists like Georg Simmel and Norbert Elias define sociology as the study of the social relations between humans, a social “in-between” par excellence. In this short essay, I approach the “in-between” in a slightly different way as a spatial feature of urban environments that shape our sensory experience — our sense of hearing, sight, smell, and touch. In the city, spatial proximity to other humans — what we may refer to as “density” — produces sensory experiences that influence our experience, behavior, and relationships in many consequential ways.

Sensory experience is shaped by the physical and social structure of the city. Who and what do I see when I look out of my window or as I walk home from the train station at night? What sounds do I hear in my home or as I sit on a park bench? Which smells do I sense as I ride the bus or enter my building’s vestibule? These sensory experiences reflect traces that other people — from neighbors to architects and city councilors — produce and that shape how we feel, what we think about, and what we do as we go about our days. To some, these insights may feel trite. And yet, few serious readers of urban studies would say that the sensory “in-between” that links us to other urban residents has received satisfactory scientific attention.



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Jan Deering is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. He received his PhD in Sociology from the University of Chicago. His work is situated in two, sometimes overlapping areas: 1) urban neighborhoods as sites of social conflict, and 2) individual experiences of ethnic or racial discrimination. Published by Oxford University Press in 2020, Dr. Deering’s book *Life, Means, and Place: Race, and Generative Conflict on Chicago’s Northside* features in the work of Troyon Martin and Michael Brown. Most recently, his journal articles have appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Science*, and *Urban Affairs Review*.

In prior research, I have examined how urban experience produces or activates cleavages that unite and divide urban residents. In doing this research, I have focused especially on race and ethnicity and, like most scholars, privileged vision — the things that we see other people do and that may make us happy or sad, tolerant or angry, trusting or fearful. Other sensory experiences, such as what we hear or smell, have occasionally found their way into my work but only as marginal phenomena. Accordingly, in new research, I hope to deliberately center a broader set of sensory experiences. For instance, I am pursuing research on how individuals transform some of the sounds they hear in the city into noise through a complex calculus of urban norms and moralities.

In the process of thinking about sensory experience in the city, interdisciplinarity must be a key aspect of developing a more serious study of the urban “in-between.” Participating in the 2023 International Graduate Student Symposium at the Illinois Institute of Technology’s College of Architecture has reminded me of the unique ways in which different disciplines approach experience. Anthropology, architecture, cultural studies, geography, political science, psychology, sociology, and urban planning all have their own insights into sensory experience. A more complete phenomenology of urban sensory experience will require drawing on scholarship from all these approaches.



Dr. Deering (second from left) engages in conversation with members of the audience during the Round Table session at the Symposium in S.R. Crown Hall. Photo courtesy of Şişek Karateç.