

# **Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ethnologie und Medizin AGEM e.V.**

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## **Call for Papers:**

### **“Aesthetics of Healing: Working with the Senses in Therapeutic Contexts”**

**32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ethnologie und Medizin e.V. (AGEM)**

**in Cooperation with the Institute of Ethnology of the University of Münster**

**May 24-26, 2019 in Münster (Westfalen) / Germany**

The concept of aesthetics covers very distinct aspects and meanings. In public discourse, it relates to ways of human expression including the arts, theater, music, and dance and its appraisal through categories such as "beautiful" or "graceful." Taking into consideration the original meaning of the ancient Greek word "aísthēsis," the concept relates to sensory perception as delimited from rational-cognitive processes. To discuss "aesthetics of healing" thus means to focus sensory aspects of therapy and to integrate them into a theory of the meaning and effectiveness of healing practices. During the "performative turn" of the social and cultural sciences in the 1980s, this idea mainly related to symbolic practices to ritually resolve psychosocial conflicts. Since the 2000s, it also depicts an integration of medical and sensory anthropology: the capacity of the human sensorium to perceive and to react to stimuli from the environment or the proper organism is central to perception and interaction in the therapeutic context. Healing practices can address, intensify, or diminish different sensory functions, and meaning and assessment of the particular senses differ in distinct cultural and social frameworks. Research on the interrelation of culture and the sensorium has produced the insight that humans consist of more than the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch) reproduced in public discourse. Bodily sensations like interoception, pain, empathy or mediumship thus constitute another vital source for the comprehension of health, illness, and healing. The intersection of religious/spiritual and therapeutic practices is of particular interest here. Religious-spiritual healing practices require the acquisition and cultivation of specific perceptual processes, including the shift of sensory attention and bodily expression. Consequently, coping strategies and explanatory models of illness often do not refer to cognitive/rational but to bodily/sensory perceptual forms. Further, contemporary popular healing and health practices like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness training focus on multiple bodily sensations and are increasingly integrated into the psychotherapeutic context. This tendency also unfolds perspectives on mechanisms of the institutionalization and commodification of these practices and related political and economic dynamics.

With a few exceptions, the current interdisciplinary discourse reduces to the insight that culture, embodiment, and emotion are interrelated without really opening the "black box" of bodily and sensory processes and dynamics. We thus have little knowledge on how sensuality and sensory manipulation influence health-seeking behavior, therapeutic decision-making, and the establishment of healing cooperation in the context of increasing medical diversity. In a conference in Berlin in September 2018, the CRC "Affective Societies" introduced the theoretical approach of "affective arrangements" in therapeutic environments, initiating an interdisciplinary discussion of sensory-emotional factors of (mental) health, well-being, and therapeutic potentials and deficits in the context of current cultural, social, (health-)political, and economic developments. In cooperation with the CRC "Media of Cooperation" at the University in Siegen/Germany, AGEM carries out two conferences on "Preparing for Patients" (June 2018) and "Preparing for Physicians" (June 2019). Further developing related approaches, our aim is to now explore the mentioned aspects, questions and problems with the focus on "aesthetics of healing." We thus invite you to participate in our discussion on "working with the senses" in the context of health, illness, and healing. We want to investigate how sensory modalities influence therapy as a transformation of self, perception, and experience and how they are embedded in social and hierarchical relations and political and economic dynamics. Our broad spectrum will integrate diverse approaches to sensory experience in the context of health, illness, and healing. The conference will be inter- and transdisciplinary: cultural and social scientists, medical professionals, psychotherapists, physiotherapists, nurses, music and art therapists, practitioners of complementary and alternative medicines, as well as patients and relatives are welcome to contribute with their experience, expertise, and evaluation.

**Questions of interest for your submission include, but are not limited to:**

What is the importance of sensory perception in different healing practices?

To what extent are sensuality and aesthetics relevant factors for illness experience, health behavior, and therapy decision?

How do different therapeutic practices address the particular senses?

Which patterns of (self) perception are generated and cultivated?

What is the importance of place, equipment, and substances?

Is there a difference between treatment at home and out- or inpatient treatment?

How do sensory aspects of therapy contribute to the diversity of the health sector?

Which social, political, and economic dynamics are involved?

What is the importance of "aesthetics of healing" for the integration, complementarity, or competition of different health and healing practices?

**Language: English or German**

The conference will be a cooperation of the “Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ethnologie und Medizin” (AGEM) and the Institute of Ethnology at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität of Münster and is organized by Cora Bender (University of Siegen), Helmar Kurz (WWU Münster), and Ehler Voss (University of Siegen).

Participation is free of charge. Costs of travel and accommodation cannot be funded.

We are planning a publication of selected contributions in *Curare – Journal of Medical Anthropology*.

Please send abstracts in English or German with up to 300 words and a brief biographic note by January 31, 2019 to:

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