



# Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg

Medical Humanities & Diversity Studies

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## **Interdisciplinary Conference of the BaGraLCM “Medical Humanities & Diversity Studies – Intersections of Medical and Diversity Critique Discourses and Multidimensional Perspectives on Body, Mind, Illness, and Health in Literature and Media from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” at Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg**

**September 30 - October 2, 2025**

Abstract Submission Deadline: **April 15, 2025**

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The already interdisciplinary fields of Medical Humanities and Diversity Studies have become more intertwined in recent years, with an increasing focus on the cultural and social dimensions of illness and health (both physical and psychological/psychosomatic). This is particularly exemplified by the emergence of the relatively new discipline of gender medicine, which emphasizes the importance of considering gender differences in medical diagnoses and treatments.

This development can be extended to other categories of social difference and inequality. Studies show how profoundly race, class, disability, and religion—as well as other cultural, social, and economic factors—affect medical care and the understanding of illness. A central concept here is the widespread racial bias in medicine, which manifests itself in diagnoses and treatment methods. Closely linked to the issue at hand (and problematic in its own right) is the category of class: Socially disadvantaged groups often face worse access to medical care, frequently accompanied by financial barriers, a lack of health education, as well as regional factors which also raise questions of center versus periphery (cf. Kroll et al. 2017).

Literature and art often address these complex issues in compelling ways, underscoring their central significance for the human experience. Portrayals of (experiencing) illness and its associated themes can be explored across a range of texts and genres and lend themselves to meticulous analysis of considering various categories of diversity. Especially from a historical perspective, these representations gain increasing complexity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, diseases such as hysteria and alcoholism were frequently depicted in literary works to reflect social norms, often through the lens of determinism. Texts like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871/1872), Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877), and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) depict individual experiences of illness as results of broader societal processes with a larger a socio-critical dimension.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924) profoundly influenced the discourse surrounding illness by presenting the protagonist's tuberculosis as a metaphor for social and intellectual developments. Equally noteworthy is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which powerfully depicts the psychological impact of slavery the body and mind of the protagonist. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) focuses on mental health and femininity, while works of the French *littérature du sida*—such as those by Collard or Guibert—addresses illness and sexual stigma.

Contemporary works have exhibited a remarkable capacity to illuminate the complexities and interconnections inherent to the themes of diversity and medicine. This phenomenon can be attributed, at least in part, to the growing awareness in contemporary societies of intersectional entanglements and multidimensional discrimination across all areas of life. Prominent examples of 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature include Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* (2014), or Annie Ernaux's *L'événement* (2000). Moreover, the recent context of the pandemic has produced a vast diversity of narratives of plague and the pandemic, not only drawing from existing traditions but also developing entirely new, multi-perspective narratives—such as Isabel Allende's *Violeta* (2022) and Agustina Bazterrica's *Cadáver exquisito* (2017).

Consequently, literary and media study hold considerable potential to show how narratives of illness and health are deeply intertwined with various social categories such as gender, class, race, age, disability, religion, and others. Narratives of illness, thus, often represent more than mere depictions of physical symptoms, as they offer insights into social inequalities and systemic power relations.

We invite scholars from the fields of literature, culture, media studies, art and medical history, cultural anthropology, sociology, and related disciplines to submit their contributions for discussion on the connections between narratives of illness and social categories. The following questions will guide the discussion: What roles do gender, social class, race and origin, religion, or disability (and other dimensions of diversity) play in narratives of illness? How do they shape the understanding of illness and health, and how are these themes addressed in literature and media? The focus will be on the literatures, societies, and media of the Romance-speaking world, the Anglosphere, and the German-speaking areas from the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—but submissions related to works from other regions will also be considered.

We particularly invite intersectional projects dealing with the relations between multiple discrimination and illness/health/medicine. Therefore, the suggested thematic areas for submissions include, but are not limited to the following:

- **Gender, Sexuality, and Illness:** Gender- and sexuality-specific differences in the depiction of illness and health, gendered perspectives on individual medical phenomena.
- **Literary/Media Engagement with Race and the Experience of Illness:** Postcolonial and intersectional perspectives on medical phenomena, e.g. in contrast to European (or other) perspectives, racial bias, post- and decolonial health narratives, connections between migration/refugee status and health, etc.
- **Illness and Social Class:** Literary and media depictions of health in economically and educationally disadvantaged contexts, obstetric violence, etc.
- **Ecological Narratives:** Environment and health in relation to literature and social inequalities, relationships between the individual and collective, perspectives from New Materialism and Human-Animal Studies, etc.
- **Disability Studies and Literature/Media:** Connections between disability, illness, and health in literature and media, constructions of disability as illness, reclaiming

disability, social models, perspectives on ‘narrative prosthesis,’ ‘normate subject position,’ or ‘aesthetic nervousness,’ etc.

- **Religion, Spirituality, and Illness:** Intercultural and religious perspectives on the interplay of faith and health, religious views on medical practices, etc.
- **Illness as Metaphor:** Literary representations of illness as a symptom of societal crises, connections between the imagery of war/fight and illness, animal world and illness, etc.
- **Body, Aging, and Illness:** Processes of aging, physical and mental changes, and their literary and media depiction in connection with other social categories.
- **Medical Technologies and Their Literary Reflection:** Organ transplants, genetic diagnoses, artificial intelligence in medicine, etc.
- **Mental Illness and Literary/Media Depictions:** Negotiations of the boundaries and interconnections between physical and mental health, psychosomatic phenomena, representations of mental illnesses such as PTSD, depression, intergenerational trauma, etc.
- **Health Policy, Biopolitics, and the Pandemic:** Media and literary responses to health crises, pandemics, and epidemics in past and present, political and social shaping of and expectations for bodies and health, perspectives on healthcare systems (e.g. various forms of bias and systemic discrimination, including racial bias, medical weight bias, etc.).

The main languages of the conference will be German and English, though contributions in other languages, such as Romance languages, are possible upon consultation with the organizers. Scholars of all levels of qualification are warmly invited to submit proposals for 20-minute presentations. Please send an abstract (**approx. 350 words plus references**) and a brief bio note by **April 15, 2025**, to [medicalhumanities.bagralcm@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:medicalhumanities.bagralcm@uni-bamberg.de). Travel and accommodation expenses will be partially covered, pending confirmation of funding; a subsequent publication of the contributions is planned.