Call for Responses

5th Crosscurrents Conference—Women and Health in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic World

4 - 6 December 2025

Venue: University of Madeira – Rectory Building (Madeira Island, Portugal)

Organised by
Intercontinental Cross-Currents Network
and
University of Madeira, Faculty of Arts and Humanities - Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures
and
Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg

We welcome response proposals addressing the main themes of the accepted individual papers, which can be found here on the following pages.

Each response proposal should engage directly and substantively with only ONE of the accepted individual papers.
We encourage response proposals that focus on:

- Constructively critiquing arguments, methods, or conclusions.
- Suggesting extensions (research, applications, theory).
- Discussing broader implications and contexts.
- Raising key questions or identifying tensions for future study.

Also, your response **should enhance the transatlantic and transnational scope of the original paper**.
Your response proposal should include:

- A 150-word abstract of the proposed response (rough collection of potential ideas suffices).
- A brief biography (150 words), including the author's name, institutional affiliation, and contact information.

Responses should last 8 to 10 minutes, depending on the number of contributors.
Please submit your response proposal to crosscurrents@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de by **July 25, 2025**, with the subject line: "Response – Women's Health Conference."

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Federico Bellini

Overwork, Health, and Gender in the Late Nineteenth Century

At the end of the nineteenth century, the intersection of discourses on health and labor became a central cultural and social concern on both sides of the Atlantic. Increasingly, excessive work—particularly among the middle classes—was perceived as a significant threat to both physical and mental well-being. This growing anxiety was reflected in the literature of the period, where recurring topoi of overwork emerged as key narrative devices, shaped by deeply gendered assumptions about health, productivity, and social roles.

For middle-class male professionals, especially doctors and intellectuals, overwork was often depicted as a temporary affliction that could be "cured" through travel or the stabilizing influence of marriage. By contrast, portrayals of overworked middle-class women followed a markedly different trajectory. Female exhaustion was frequently cured by means of prescriptive treatments that reinforced women's passivity and domestic confinement. The most notorious of these was Silas Weir Mitchell's "rest cure," famously critiqued in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. A rejection of enforced domestic rest as therapy also surfaced in women's organizations such as the Women's Rest Tour Association, which promoted travel as an emancipatory remedy for "nervous" women.

This essay examines the emergence and development of these gendered literary topoi surrounding overwork and health, analyzing their distinct narrative functions and broader cultural implications. I argue that these representations reflect contemporary anxieties about labor and health and contribute to revealing how gender shaped the diagnosis and treatment of overwork in the late nineteenth century.

Federico Bellini is a researcher in comparative literature at the Catholic University of Milan. He is the author of *La saggezza dei pigri* (Mimesis, 2017), a study on the literary representation of the refusal of work in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and *Un'identità minore* (Vita e Pensiero, 2022), which explores the theme of habit in turn-of-the-century philosophy and literature. He is currently involved in the research project *Beyond Workism and the Work-Centered Society. A Gender-Oriented Theoretical and Historical Inquiry into the Vocabulary of Socio-Political Inclusion*, led by Tiziana Faitini (University of Trento). Within this framework, he is investigating literary and artistic representations of working women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Alice Bailey Cheylan

Representations of Physical and Mental Illness in the Works of Katherine Anne Mansfield, Katherine Anne Porter, Edith Wharton, and Virginia Woolf at the End of the Long Nineteenth Century.

Although there were so many scientific and technological advances in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, at the turn of the twentieth century cures for tuberculosis, pneumonia, pandemic viruses, depression, and mental illness were yet to be seen. The objective of this short study is to demonstrate that four women writers on both sides of the Atlantic were not spared from this blight and its traces can be found in their works. New Zealand's Katherine Anne Mansfield contracted both syphilis and tuberculosis during her first years in England and suffered from debilitating bouts of pain. She tried several cures in southern France and then Switzerland before entering a sanatorium in Fontainebleu to follow the latest controversial cure for tuberculosis at Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonius Development of Man. The American journalist and short story writer Katherine Anne Porter contracted the Spanish flu in the 1918 pandemic. She suffered a near-death experience which had a profound effect on her later life and writing. Porter's compatriot Edith Wharton also suffered from delicate health. As a child she fell victim to typhoid fever and as a young adult began to experience periods of depression which recurred throughout her life. Her doctors suggested writing as therapy. The well-known British novelist, poetess, and playwright Virginia Woolf suffered most of her life from severe depression and was hospitalized numerous times in and near London before losing her lifelong battle against mental illness. The sadness, incomprehension, and struggle which eventually led to her suicide can be found in her writing. An analysis of some of the representations of physical and mental illness in the works of these four women writers will reveal the extent to which their own painful experiences affected their writing.

Alice Bailey Cheylan is retired from teaching English translation and American literature at the University of Toulon in southern France. Her fields of interest include bilingualism, expatriate authors, feminism, and surrealism. She has published studies on Ezra Pound, Lawrence Durrell, Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, Richard Aldington, Ford Madox Ford, Amy Lowell, Julien Green and Katherine Anne Porter. She has co-edited a bilingual collection of essays on Aldous Huxley intitled *Huxley, ce méconnu,* to be published in the spring of 2025. She is currently President of the Katherine Anne Porter Society.

Shromona Das

Mr. Lady Doctor: Ridicule, Gender and Health in Colonial Bengal

On 28th of August, 1886, the Bengali periodical *Bharatbasi* condemned "…the action of the Syndicate of the Calcutta University in passing, by an extension of grace, Mrs. Ganguly, the first female medical student of Bengal […]. As far as the writer is aware, she has been passed only because she is a female. It is not proper to show grace to a particular sex in public examination." (Chattopadhyay, 2020:36) Kadambini Ganguly was the first Indian woman doctor, whose education, marriage, and career had become a sensational scoop for the contemporary periodicals. She was met with serious hostility from the conservative Hindu publications in colonial Bengali public sphere. The debate around her merit or the lack thereof had also become a site to contest opinions on women's education and careers in general. My paper uses the very public debate around Kadambini Ganguly's education, first at the medical institute in Calcutta and then in Edinburgh, as its point of departure. I present interdisciplinary readings of newspaper reports on women in medical professions and of essays on women's health and midwifery, and describe recognized stereotypes and caricatures of women doctors.

As a researcher in the field of literature, humour studies and visual culture, I argue that the stereotype of the lady doctor in colonial Bengali public sphere is a well established one. She features as a prime subject of ridicule in both visual and literary satire. The discourses around hygiene, childbirth and women's health were fraught with new Western ideas of medicine, traditional midwifery, and religious dogma. I read the stereotype and the iconography of the lady doctor within this specific context. In my presentation, I use examples from satirical fiction, such as Meye-parliament, and visual satires, such as caricatures, to discuss Hindu patriarchal hostility. I read essays and reports of and by women in the medical profession at the time in opposition to these satires, not just as historical documents but also as a feminist subversion.

References:

Chattopadhyoy, Subir Kumar, *Ananya Kadambini*, Banglar Mukh, 2020.

Guha, Ambalika *Colonial Modernities: Midwifery in Bengal, c.1860–1947,* Routledge, 2018.

Shromona Das is a researcher at the Department of English Philology, Freie University, Berlin. Her PhD project is a feminist reading of gendered humour and caricatures from Colonial Calcutta. She is a recipient of Elsa Neumann Scholarship for her PhD. Her reasearch interests are gender and feminist studies, popular culture, visual studies, and postcoloniality. Shromona has completed her MPhil dissertation in Visual Studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her Mphil project focused on the visual depiction of female deviancy in feminist graphic autobiographies. Shromona is a practising artist, and works on gender and comics. She was a resident artist for the 2018 Master Practice Studio with Orijit Sen for the Kochi Biennale. She received the 2019 Sabin Award for her work on rape, idealised victimhood and trauma in Indian comics.

Emma Day

'If We Could Only Cure Her, She Would Have a Child': Cure as Conception in Nineteenth Century Gynaecological Surgery.

By the end of the nineteenth century, gynaecological surgeons had gained significant authority to manage a range of reproductive complaints in women, including menstrual irregularity and disabling pain. Southern gynaecologist Janes Marion Sins framed his novel surgeries for gynaecological disorders successful not if they eased a woman's pain or cured incontinence, but if after the operation the woman conceived. Sins – like other aspirational doctors who saw themselves as part of a civilising mission to transform medical practice at home and abroad – made his name and fortune by exploiting the childbearing capacity of enslaved women while encouraging childbearing in white, able-bodied, upper-class women for the preservation of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant race. Physicians in the antebellum South defined as cures remedies which they believed promoted the childbearing capacity of enslaved women upon whom the future of slavery relied. Physicians in the post-emancipation period continued to define as cures measures which they believed enhanced the fertility of white native-born women. This paper examines the prioritisation of procreation within the emerging field of gynaecology in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Analysing the medical writings of male surgeons alongside women-authored medical journals and alternative health texts, the paper explores the ways and extent to which women and lay healers conceptualised women's health differently to male physicians: namely, in defining health beyond fertility. As name physicians displaced women healers as the authorities on matters relating to women's bodies, such an investigation reveals how the emergence of modern gynaecological medicine entrenched the association between women's health and procreation in ways that shaped future reproductive research and treatment. The analysis also opens avenues to explore how women navigated, resisted, and subverted these trends.

Dr Emma Day is a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at the Institute of the Americas, University College London. Her research focuses on the intersections between histories of sexuality and gender and medicine and disease in the United States.

Her postdoctoral research project examines the formation and maintenance of the concept of reproductive health and its role in shaping the politics of the gendered body in the United States. This work builds on her doctoral research – completed at the University of Oxford – which explored the interplay between women's health, activism and political action in shaping the AIDS epidemic in the US. She is the author of *In Her Hands: Women's Fight Against AIDS in the United States* (University of California Press, 2023).

Dorota Dias-Lewandowska

From Dangerous Pleasures to Bad Habits. Navigating the Boundaries of Women's Drinking in Post-partition XIX-Century Poland.

In the 19th century, we can observe the dynamic development of medical knowledge about the properties of alcohol and the conceptualisation of drunkenness as a disease. Not only did alcohol gradually cease to be seen as food or medicine, but temperance became one of the elements of social surveillance, especially of women. They were seen as responsible for the sobriety of the family, as the female drinking was considered particularly immoral.

Contrary to appearances, we are not dealing here with one clear voice, but rather a polyphonicity of discourses.

The Polish discourse on alcohol was influenced both by the works of the American doctor Benjamin Rush, who inspired Jakub Szymkiewicz to write his "Work on Drunkenness", and by the German-Russian socio-medical discourse on the conceptualisation of alcoholism.

The change in the perception of alcohol was remarkable when it came to its medicinal properties: on the one hand, the general idea of its negative effects on health was strongly emphasised, but at the same time alcohol was used as a basis for medicines and was prescribed to patients.

By identifying the constructed and reconstructed boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable consumption of alcoholic beverages, this paper examines the impact of the new medical discourse on alcohol and drunkenness on the social position and health of women in post-partition Poland in the 19th century.

Dorota Dias-Lewandowska, anthropologist and historian, holds a PhD from the Nicolaus Copernicus University (Poland) and University Bordeaux Montaigne (France), where she examined the cultural history of French wine in early modern Poland. Co-editor of the series “Studia z historii wina w Polsce” (Studies in the History of Wine in Poland) and co-lead of the Drinking Studies Network „Women and Alcohol” research cluster. Currently she is Principal investigator on the „Between the drunken ‘mother of destruction’ and the sober ‘angel of the house’. Hidden representations of women’s drinking in Polish and British public discourses in the second half of the 19th century” and “Alcohol, Sobriety and Drunkenness: Discourses on the Boundaries of Drinking in the 19th century Post-Partition Poland” projects where she leads an interdisciplinary research team.

Stéphanie Durrans

"The scene of torture": The Language of Health in Kate Chopin's The Awakening

What was it that caused such a shock in American readers when *The Awakening* was published? Was it Edna Pontellier's extramarital love affair? Her intense desire for freedom? Her neglect of her marital and motherly duties? Or could it possibly be her vivid impressions after witnessing the childbirth scene at the Ratignolles'? Many critics consider that the novel borrows the imagery of birth to retrace Edna's own progress towards a new sense of self, but paradoxically enough, this has led them to overlook the way in which Chopin deals with the crude reality of childbirth – albeit indirectly since "the scene of torture," as the narrator calls it, is only evoked through the confused memories of Edna. As a result, Adèle Ratignolle's *accouchement* appears to be the blind spot of the novel, both for the main character who is left in a state of stupor after witnessing what is presented as a horror scene and for the successive generations of critics who have deflected attention away from the plain facts of childbirth to the benefit of a metaphorical, figurative reading of the scene. As a matter of fact, *The Awakening* may actually be the first American novel in which a writer – male or female – dared evoke the pangs of childbirth in such a straightforward, unabashed manner. But other writers had already done so in France, and once more Chopin was possibly following in the steps of the writer she most admired: Guy de Maupassant. In this paper, I will compare Chopin's depiction of childbirth with that of French writers she was likely to be familiar with (Maupassant, Flaubert, Zola, and Sand) before examining how the language of health permeates *The Awakening*, offering a commentary on how any expression of malaise, unease, dissent, or rebellion on women's part was likely to be forcefully medicalized by a society where male doctors reigned supreme. In so doing, I would like to suggest possible parallels between the critic's and the doctor's respective approaches to the body – both the textual body and women's bodies.

Stéphanie Durrans is Professor of American Literature at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France. She is the author of *The Influence of French Culture on Willa Cather: Intertextual References and Resonances* (2007) and of *Willa Cather's My Ántonia: A Winter's Journey* (2016). She has also edited a special issue on "American Women Writers Abroad: 1849−1976" for the online journal *Transatlantica*, and another special issue on Harriet Prescott Spofford for the *European Journal of American Studies*. She has published widely on nineteenth− and twentieth−century women writers, with a special focus on questions of intertextuality, multilingualism, interlanguage, and transatlantic literary relationships.

Kim Embrey

Exoticism and Medicine: Gendered Imagery in Coca Advertising

Coca, a plant native to South America, had long been valued by the Inca for its stimulant and medicinal properties. By the nineteenth century it gained popularity in Europe, particularly in Britain, France, and Germany where it was incorporated into tonics and wines. As a novel narcotic, coca's introduction to European consumers was shaped by advertising that framed it within familiar cultural narratives.

In the nineteenth-century transatlantic world, coca-based products were marketed as both medical remedies and exotic stimulants, with advertising playing a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. British and French advertisements often applied gendered and racialised imagery, contrasting indigenous Andean figures with Western women to foster ideas about health, femininity, and the benefits of coca consumption. This paper explores how these visual representations constructed a transatlantic narrative that linked the 'primitive' origins of coca in South America to its refined, medicinal use in Europe.

A striking juxtaposition emerges in these advertisements: on the one hand, indigenous Andean women – often resembling Mama Coca, the coca goddess – were used as symbols of coca's religious practices and tradition, which also reinforced colonialist ideas of South America as a land of natural abundance. On the other hand, European women, often portrayed as elegant yet fragile, appeared as ideal consumers who required coca's invigorating properties to manage the demands of modern life. This contrast helped establish coca's place in European medicine but also illustrated racial hierarchies by treating indigenous knowledge as useful but secondary to Western medicine.

By analysing British and French coca advertisements, this paper argues that they did more than merely promoting a product. They reinforced cultural ideas that linked gender, health, and empire, thus shaping perceptions of both coca and the women associated with it. In doing so, they justified the commodification of coca while reinforcing racialised hierarchies that placed Western medicine and consumers above their indigenous counterparts.

Kim Embrey is a PhD candidate in History at Goethe University Frankfurt and expected to complete her degree by summer 2025. Her research focuses on the history of narcotics in nineteenth-century Britain, particularly that of coca and opium, which she has already presented at the German Historical Institute in London and the International Nineteenth-Century Studies Association's Conference in Durham. Her upcoming conference contributions include an academic poster titled *"To what extent did coca's reception in Victorian Britain reflect tensions between traditional herbal practices and the desire to modernise or 'improve' them?"* for the Herbal History Research Network, and a paper,

"Liverpool and the Transatlantic Coca Trade: A Hub of Opportunity," for the Britain and the World Conference in Liverpool in June 2025. She currently serves as secretary for the German Association for British Studies.

Alexandra Hartmann

Noisy Environments – Loud Women: On Noise, Silence, and Medicalized Moral Discourses of Women's Health

For a number of years, sound and sonic phenomena have received increasing attention within literary and cultural studies. This focus lends itself to the study of (long) nineteenth- century discourses around women and health because noise and silence became dominant measures of disciplining and evaluating the mental and physical state of women. Especially at the turn of the century, the wider public was concerned with the impact of modernity on US society and its soundscapes and what it would do to the social fabric. Women – white (immigrant) women – were deemed particularly susceptible to new spectacles and thus in need of 'protection.'

These interconnections become clear when taking a closer look at contemporaneous discourses around leisurely spaces such as movie theaters and amusement parks. In 1909, none other than Jane Addams criticized that "the whole apparatus for supplying pleasure is wretchedly inadequate and full of danger to whomsoever may approach it" (*The Spirit of Youth* 15). Sensory overload – including aural stimulation – was framed as a risk not only to health but also to morality and purity. After all, both the movie theater and the amusement park came to be feared as sites of sexual transgression and unwarranted cross-class encounters (cf. Ward, *Static in the System*; Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland*). This was intricately connected to moral panics around white slavery and women's sexuality.

In this paper, I study efforts to link noise to women's health and safety (or rather lack thereof) by tracing discourses around early film and amusement parks in reform circles (*Charity and the Commons*) and the trade press (*Moving Picture World*). I explore how the sonic etiquette of silence was reinforced and advocated and how silent film increasingly and inadvertently contributed to that gendered moral and health discourse.

Alexandra Hartmann holds a PhD in American Studies from Paderborn University where she teaches classes on US-American literature and culture. Her dissertation explored the contributions to anti-racism in the Black humanist intellectual tradition; the book *The Black Humanist Tradition in Anti-Racist Literature: A Fragile Hope* came out in 2023 with Palgrave. In her second-book project, Alexandra studies the Progressive Era and the cultural, social, and political work that sound did. It analyzes both sound's oppressive and subversive potentials. Alexandra's research interests include African American studies, intellectual history of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, sound studies, and affect theory. Research stays have led her to Washington University in St. Louis, Harvard University, and most recently The New School, where she conducted work on her Habilitation project on a Fulbright.

Janet Laidla

Feminising the Field of Women Dentists and Pharmacists in the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire

The first dentist to receive a certificate at the imperial University of Tartu (Dorpat) did so in 1814. Josepha (or Josephine) Serre had received her education from her husband and the University of Kraków. She was followed by her daughter Marie Louise (certificate in 1829) and these two remained as exceptions until the 1870s when slowly more and more women became certified at the university as dentists but also as assistant pharmacists and pharmacists.

A relative wealth of personal information gathered by the university and kept at the Estonian National Archives allows us to analyse these women's background, although 19th century personnel files contain slightly less information than in the 20th century. Where were they from? As one of the prominent imperial universities, Tartu attracted students from several provinces of the empire (not only the local Estland, Livland and Kurland). What was their social and educational background and what does that suggest about the opportunities for women's education at the time? The diplomas and certificates shed light on this.

Although the sample gathered in the course of the project *Women at the University of Tartu until 1919* contains only six assistant pharmacists, two pharmacists, and 127 dentists before 1901, the results will still be relevant to characterise how these two fields developed in regards to gender. The profession of dentist was largely feminised in the independent Estonia in the beginning of the 1920s and the feminisation of pharmacy was discussed in the 1930s. The presentation will provide a comparative analysis from the beginning of this process.

Janet Laidla is Lecturer of Estonian History at the Institute of History and Archaeology and Research Fellow at the Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu. Her research focuses on educated and professional women in 19th and the first part of 20th century mainly in Estonia.

Sarah Lias Ceide

Men-made Advice as Female Empowerment? Manuals on Pregnancy and Childbirth and Their Ambivalent Role in Women's Health (1890s-1920s)

This paper focuses on obstetric manuals written by mostly male physicians between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Because they focused exclusively on the female health and body during the three crucial phases of pregnancy, childbirth and puerperium from a medical point of view, these texts represented a significant innovation within the already established field of popular- scientific medical manuals at the time. Still, they have so far received little attention from researchers. This is all the more surprising as it can be legitimately assumed that such texts significantly influenced both external and self-perceptions of the female body and health, as it was through them that pregnant women, new mothers, and their relatives were for the first time directly addressed by medical professionals within the privacy of their homes.

By focusing on a variety of texts both written and translated into German at the turn of the century, this paper will contextualize obstetric manuals within the broader phenomenon of the medicalization of modern societies. The aim is to explore the highly complex intertwining of issues within the field of women's health, such as correlations between the female body and male medical advice, between female privacy and/or intimacy and the public sphere. What were the objectives of the authors of these manuals and to what extent did they contribute to female self-assertion and patient autonomy within the context of both modern medicine and family life? And, furthermore, what can these texts tell us about gender-based professional conflicts, such as the one between female midwives and male doctors?

Sarah Lias Ceide was born in Munich, Germany, in 1993. After majoring in Historical Sciences at the University of Naples, Italy, in 2018, she received her PhD *cum laude* from the same University in February of 2022 with a doctoral thesis on the reconstruction of the secret service of West Germany (BND) and its networks in Italy at the beginning of the Cold War. From 2022 to 2024 she worked at the German Historical Institute in Rome (DHI) on a project on technocracy and technocratic governments. Since May 2024 she is a post-doc researcher at the University of Münster, where her research focuses on European and African interconnections and exchanges of knowledge within the field of obstetrics during the 20th century. She is currently on maternity leave.

Etta Madden

Agency Amid Systemic Constraints: A Diplomat's Wife's Story Speaks Today

Caroline Crane Marsh (1816-1901) lived with undiagnosed and misdiagnosed illness for most of her adult years in the United States and Europe. Her experiences foreground the ways in which numerous nineteenth-century women negotiated their treatments by male physicians and yet adapted to physical limitations. Caroline achieved agency through literary work and her acknowledged dependency on others. Standing and walking only briefly, she depended upon a sister, husband, nieces, and hired help to assist her with physical needs. Despite these challenges, she followed her husband George as he accepted diplomatic appointments first to the Ottoman Empire (1850-54) and then to the Kingdom of Italy (1861-82). George pushed Caroline through the Louvre in King Louis Philippe's *chaise roulante.* She was carried up Mount Vesuvius in the wake of its 1850 eruption, ascended Mount Horeb on a camel, journeyed up the Nile, and descended into Egypt's pyramidal tombs. Conversations with Elizabeth Barrett Browning triggered Marsh to throw herself into literary work. She published two books as well as poems in *Harper's* and elsewhere. She recorded in her diaries political changes she witnessed in Italy. This literary work complemented Caroline's sedentary life. Yet she dreamed of relief from physical troubles and seemed pleased that family friend and physician Elizabeth Blackwell referred her to the now-infamous J. Marion Sims in Paris in 1866. While Caroline saw Sims as a possible savior, she also endured pain through his treatment. By the early 1870s Caroline realized that her "wonder-working doctor" had not been successful. Nonetheless, she devoted herself to activism with female education and upheld her duties as a diplomat's wife. I read Caroline's ill health in light of her contemporaries, Harriet Martineau, Barrett Browning, and Sophia Hawthorne, employing scholarship on pain and healing by Jennifer Lunden (*American Breakdown*) and contemporary essays on disability and travel.

Etta Madden is Professor of English, Emerita, at Missouri State University. Her publications include *Engaging Italy: American Women's Utopian Visions and Transnational Networks* (SUNY Press 2022), *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias* (U Nebraska 2006), and numerous articles on women writers and on utopian communities. She has been a visiting professor at the University of Pisa, a visiting scholar at the American Academy in Rome, and a Fulbright Senior Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Catania (Italy). Her current project is a biography of Caroline Crane Marsh (1816-1901), tentatively titled "The Diplomat's Wife: A Story of Chronic Illness, Marriage, and Life Abroad."

Anitta Maksymowicz

"Do Not Cut Up the Cadavers! Do Not Lose Your Lady's Dignity!". Anna Tomaszewicz-Dobrska (1854- 1918) - The First Polish Woman With a Medical Degree

The paper aims to present Anna Tomaszewicz-Dobrska and her achievements in medical work and social activity for women's rights.

Anna was born in Mława (in the part of Poland under Russian partition at the time). In 1871 she became a student at the medical faculty of the Zurich University – then the only medical faculty in Europe to admit women.

In 1877, as the first Polish woman receiving a medical degree, she returned to Warsaw. Despite her high qualifications, she was denied the right to practise her profession. She went to St. Petersburg. This decision proved to be a turning point in her career: she was the only one candidate who met all conditions to become a doctor in the harem of the Oman's sultan staying then with his wives in St. Petersburg. Tomaszewicz-Dobrska was finally allowed to practise her profession. Thereafter, she devoted the next 30 years in Warsaw to caring for pregnant women, childbirth and the puerperium.

Tomaszewicz-Dobrska made many outstanding achievements: In 1896 she performed the first caesarean section in Poland. She trained ca. 340 midwives and 23 obstetricians. At the time she headed the hospital, the mortality rate decreased from 30% to 1%!

As an advocate for equal rights for women, together with famous Polish writers Maria Konopnicka and Eliza Orzeszkowa, she organized the First Congress of Polish Women in 1907. She died in 1918, three months before women gained the voting rights in already independent Poland.

The paper should show a (hardly known in Poland) figure of Anna Tomaszewicz-Dobrska — diligent social and women's rights activist, philanthropist, and above all — a doctor by vocation in the world full of barriers and prejudices.

Anitta Maksymowicz, PhD, a curator at the Muzeum Ziemi Lubuskiej (The Museum of the Lubusz Region) in Zielona Góra, Poland. Her research interests and projects comprise 19th and 20th century Polish and German overseas emigration, activities of American women of Polish origin for Polish WWI veterans in the USA, migrations and resettlement in the Polish "Western Territories" after 1945, and biographies. She is author i.a. "*Agnieszka Wisła and the Blue Army: The Efforts of Polish Women in America on Behalf of Volunteers and Veterans of World War I*"; "*On the Road to Independence. Canadian stop - Camp Kosciuszko in Niagara-on-the-Lake, 1917-1919*", „*Emigracja z pogranicza Brandenburgii, Śląska i Wielkopolski do Australii Południowej w latach 1838-1914*" [Emigration from the borderlands of Brandenburg, Silesia and Greater Poland to South Australia between 1838 and 1914].

Dr. Katharina Motyl

"Oh Doctor, Shoot Me Quick!" Women Addicts and Medical Practice in Victorian America

"During the nineteenth century, the typical opiate addict [in the United States] was a middle-aged white woman of the middle or upper class: […] female, outwardly respectable; long-suffering – and thoroughly addicted to morphine," writes historian of medicine David T. Courtwright (1). This "predominance of women among the addicted population," asserts medical historian Stephen Kandall, was "largely the result of Victorian medical practice" (23). Physicians continued excessively treating women patients with hypodermic morphine, but also other opiates such as laudanum, for such conditions as hysteria, neurasthenia, dysmenorrhea (painful period), amenorrhea (no period) or womb complaint (cf. Kandall) long after publications in the medical journals of the day had started sounding the alarm on hypodermic morphine's and other opiates' addictive potential.

In this paper, first, I will flesh out this medical practice and introduce contemporaneous medical discourses on morphine, opiates and gender. Second, I will briefly summarize hegemonic cultural discourses on female drug addiction of the day. Little surprisingly, women addicts were represented in terms of abjection; they were considered dependent on the wrong entity (drugs rather than men), thought to renege on their responsibility of exerting a civilizing influence on their husbands and children, and, finally, women injecting themselves with a syringe was framed as self-pleasuring and, thus, monstrous.

Last, I will discuss two fictional treatments of Victorian medical practice and women's drug addiction – *Kitty's Choice* (1874), a 'forgotten' novel by Rebecca Harding Davis and the novel *A Voice in the Wilderness* (1895) by 'forgotten' woman writer Maria Weed. Davis causally links the opium addiction of character Louise to the fact that her husband, Dr. McCall, is a physician, and unfavorably contrasts Dr. McCall's allopathic medical practice with the homeopathic approach embraced by Dr. Maria Muller, a woman physician who allegorically represents the New Woman. In Weed's novel, Helen, a widow, develops an addiction after being treated with hypodermic morphine for an injury sustained in an accident; Helen and her physician, Dr. Stanley, quickly develop sexual desire for one another. Fascinatingly, *A Voice in the Wilderness* not only treats the administration of hypodermic morphine in the language of sex and masturbation; in its rendering of the (male) doctor – (female) patient relationship it ruminates on deceit and cruelty in Victorian gender relations at large.

At the very least, nineteenth-century (male) physicians' predilection for treating a wide range of 'female ailments' with morphine / opiates indexes the hegemonic view in the medical community at the time that women were frail and more susceptible to stress than men. However, one may also wonder whether the male-dominated medical establishment's excessive treatment of women patients with morphine/opiates cannot also be read as the attempt to *sedate* women (in every sense of the word), that is, to keep them from complaining about the role separate spheres ideology prescribed for them and from organizing for women's rights.

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Katharina Motyl is an assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Mannheim, Germany. From 2020 until 2024, she was principal investigator of the research network "The Failure of Knowledge – Knowledges of Failure" funded by the German Research Foundation. Her second- book project investigates cultural, medical, and legal discourses surrounding drugs and social minorities in the U.S. from the Early Republic to the "War on Drugs." Her monograph With the Enemy – Arab American Literature since 9/11 was published with Campus / University of Chicago Press in 2024. Further publications include a co-edited special issue of *Studies in American Naturalism* on "Intimate Knowledge in American Naturalism and Realism" (2021) and the co-edited volumes *Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt? Facing Problems of Race, Racism and Ethnic Diversity in the Humanities in Germany* (transcript, 2019) as well as T*he Failed Individual – Amid Exclusion, Resistance, and the Pleasure of Non-Conformity* (Campus, 2017); articles have appeared in Interconnections: Journal of Posthumanism and European Journal of English Studies, among other venues.

Dariusz Pniewski

The Power of the "Witch"/"Baba": Nineteenth-century Transfer of Medical Knowledge, Pseudo-medical Superstition and the Socio-political Function of the Witch Doctor in 19th-century Eastern Europe

This paper examines the relationship between medical knowledge and pseudo-medical practices of "witch doctors" in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. The study focuses on critical nineteenth-century Polish analyses of such practices in the territories of present-day Eastern Poland, Western Belarus and Western Ukraine. The corpus includes texts on medicine, approached from sociological and ethnographic perspectives, such as *O przesądach lekarskich ludu naszego* by Michał Zieleniewski (1845), *Medycyna wiejska: obrazek z obyczajów ludu wiejskiego* by Walery Wielogłowski (1859) and *Zarys lecznictwa ludowego na Rusi południowej* by Julian Talko-Hryncewicz (1893). These texts represent a wide variety of genres, from scientific monographs to drama-like "genre scenes." I am interested in folk medicine women and shamans, commonly referred to as babas, who are portrayed in such texts as "social actresses" – figures possessing real, though only regional, power based on their "magical abilities" and folk medical knowledge, which conflicted with the state of academic knowledge at the time. The attitudes to the different social roles of these folk healers are reflected in the name used in the analyzed texts: for academics, baba carries a pejorative connotation, whereas for the treated folk, it is a figure of both taboo and reverence.

The first research problem addressed in the paper is the analysis of the recurring narrative model describing pseudo-medical practices as characteristic of the region of Europe. Their negative features are emphasized, including inconsistency, ineffectiveness, harmfulness and the reliance on fragmented medical knowledge, distorted due to the subordination of this selection to ritual tradition and superstition. For the latter reason, there has been scientific interest in these practices, especially in medical-sociological and medical-ethnological texts.

This research material will be used to analyze two areas of power: (a) as determined by the characteristic rhetorical narrative of nineteenth-century texts and (b) the non-medical roles played by "witch doctors." In both cases, I am interested in/ I focus on intention, effectiveness and consequences. As a methodological inspiration, I have chosen a type of biopower defined by Thomas Lemke as the polycist, stating that "man is [...] the product of biocultural developmental processes" (with three concepts ascribed to this type of biopower: organicist, racist and biologist). In the narratives, I analyze the clash of binding and parallel oppositions: (medical) knowledge vs. pseudo-knowledge with elements of scientific knowledge; healing as a male activity vs. healing as a female activity; and scientific analyses of folk medicine as sources of information relevant to the new fields such as sociology and ethnology vs. folk medicine as limited knowledge/authority – "secret knowledge," regional, familial and female knowledge. In addition, I examine the flow of knowledge from German, French, British academic centers/texts (and to a lesser extent American sources, due to their limited presence in Polish texts), as well as the selection and transmission of information based on its intended effect, political impact, imperial, colonial and "superiority" narrative (from the perspective of racial, social and gender hierarchies), or social and national resistance –

“alternative knowledge.” The goal is not to positively assess the activities of folk healers, but to identify the non-medical elements responsible for the long persistence of these practices and superstitions, as well as their role in social change and their significance for identity (female, folk, national and ethnic).

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Antonia Purk

Sickly and Monstrous. The Infectious Spread of the Female Fantastic in Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Miss Grief"

The eponymous protagonist of Constance Fenimore Woolson's short story "Miss Grief" (1880) is a sickly and dejected woman who pursues the male narrator of the text for collegial feedback on her own literary work. Seen through the eyes of the narrator, who is a young and healthy man and a successful author of realist sketches, pitiful Miss Grief is presented as his contrary who yet pesters him for support of her own literary endeavors. Although her new friend promises Miss Grief access to publication venues, her work remains unpublished as he ultimately keeps her papers locked away after her eventual death from starvation and desolation. In this paper, I argue that the illness of the female author signifies writerly trouble in two interrelated ways. 1. It comments on women's limited opportunities to publish literary texts in the second half of the nineteenth century or the expression and an anxiety of female authors to be accepted into male literary circles (indeed, Woolson's work is often read in relation to her friend Henry James, see e.g. Coulson 2007 or Boyd 2004). 2. I argue that the narrator's aversion to the ailing female body points to the rejection of romantic modes of writing in favor of a supposedly male realist model that is represented by the young healthy author. He repeatedly expresses his disgust with the "blemishes" that permeate Miss Grief's otherwise genius literary work. I read the parts that the male narrator damns as "monstrous" as gothic elements that do not confirm with editors' and publishers' ideals toward the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, I will demonstrate how the gothic nonetheless spreads through the young author's own narrative of his encounter with Miss Grief. While he works to subdue the unruly female elements (both the woman writer and her texts) that uninvitedly seek entry to his world, the persistence of the gothic presents his failure to detain Miss Grief.

Antonia Purk is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Mannheim. She is currently working on a project titled "Cooking up Significations. Foodways and Racialization in 19th-Century American Literature." She received a doctoral degree in American Literature from the University of Erfurt in 2021. Her book on *Jamaica Kincaid's Writings of History. A Poetics of Impermanence* was published with De Gruyter in 2023. Her research interests are the intersections of literature with history and poetics, literature and truth, literary food studies, and 19th-century regional literatures. Her most recent publication is the article "Between the Joys of Nonsense and the Excess of the Other: Foodways in Laura E. Richards's Children's Poems" in a special issue of *European Journal of American Studies* (19.4, 2024).

Eva Rösler

Creeping Into the Dark – An Ultimately Futile Struggle Against the Age of Reason?

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a frequently anthologised nineteenth-century short story that continues to generate scholarly interest (see Golden, Brown, Delchamps). My proposed paper will revisit Gilman's short story and place it in the broader conflict between the Age of Reason and Romanticism. Much has been said about the story in relation to reason and madness, but critics, as far as I can tell, have neglected to view it through a larger lens that encompasses Michel Foucault's influential work *Madness in Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, which enables to examine the nexus of oppositions that guide the story, in the struggle of light and darkness, reason and unreason, and male and female. I argue that the cultural struggle between Enlightenment and Romanticism is played out within the protagonist's mind.

On the one hand, femininity in the short story is presented to be both rational, thus reasonable and healthy, through the female narrator's storytelling and on the other as irrational and hysterical, signified in the protagonist creeping between darkness and light, Enlightenment and the Gothic (Ger. "Schauerromantik"), (literary) freedom and confinement, and reason and insanity. Writing her story, the nameless narrator struggles to control her descent into madness as strongly influenced by male characters representative of the Enlightenment, who determine her a scientific object and thus enforce her loss of control over both body and mind. Transcending the narrative level, however, change seems possible in a Pyrrhic victory for the female narrator, the (contemporary female) reader, and Gilman herself.

The proposed paper attempts to analyse how far Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" participates in a struggle between reason and madness signified through aspects of patriarchal dominance in the medical discourse, female madness, hysteria, and Gothic elements that serve as indicators of the larger struggle between Enlightenment and Romanticism.

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Kena Stüwe

Worker's Wife, Doctor's Patient – The Scripting of the Proletarian Woman in German Birth Regulation Pamphlets

During the late 19th and early 20th century, a small number of books and pamphlets were available in the German Empire that provided a proletarian readership with information on contraceptive methods. These publications evaluated contraceptives in terms of their effectiveness, their health effects, their applicability and the associated interference with the "natural" processes of sexuality. Their authors were (mostly male) medical professionals who encountered the social and health related problems caused by unregulated pregnancies as part of their clinical work. Interestingly, in their publications, they combined practical and medical information with political analyses. To legitimise their advocacy for sexual education and contraception they cited and established a new concept of morality, contrasted with that promoted by the church and with quantity-oriented and nationalist population policies. They also construed contraception as both the basis and effect of social progress, which was characterized by the scientific penetration of bodily processes and rationally considered decisions and practices.

In my contribution, I ask how the framing of birth regulation as an issue of class struggle and societal progression led to the (re-)production of new behavioural norms for women. In answering this question, I will map out the authors' implicit norms regarding maleness and femaleness, sexuality and rationality. Women, as imagined and described in the pamphlets, were at once the wife of a worker, the mother of future socialists and the implementers of birth regulation. Their status and behaviour were constructed in demarcation from the "irrational" and "irresponsible", represented by non-white "barbarians", pleasure-seeking bourgeois women, religious women, sex workers, midwives etc. Proletarian women, as I will show in an analysis that is informed by contemporary theory on familism and reproductive justice, were constructed as people, whose intellectual and emotional capacity was at constant risk of being consumed by their reproductive bodily functions and who could only be lifted into the status of political subjects through the intellectual and physical intervention of doctors and social reformers.

This image of the proletarian woman became an omnipresent trope in the discourses of socialist feminists in Germany during the early 20th century. Focussing on its framing by social reformers and socialist doctors, allows to connect the questions of female agency and familial norms to the discourses of rationality, male medical expertise and class struggle.

Kena Stüwe is a PhD candidate at Institute for Historical Science the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. She is particularly interested in the negotiation of women's and family politics within social movements. In her Master's thesis, she researched women in the anarchist movement in the German Empire and the Weimar Republic. Her current research project focusses on the integration of birth control activism and socialist policies by syndicalist and communist actors in Germany, in the early 20th century. Stüwe is a member of the Arbeitskreis Historische Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung e.V. and an associate member of the doctoral program for

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Vid Žepič

The Regulation of Prostitution in the 19th Century: The Intersection of Sexual and Medical Criminal Law

The legal treatment of prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases in 19th-century Central Europe reflects broader anxieties regarding morality, public health, and gender roles. This paper examines the criminal regulation of prostitution in German-speaking legal codes, focusing primarily on the *Allgemeines Landrecht* (ALR) and the Austrian Criminal Codes of 1803 and 1852, particularly their provisions concerning the punishment of prostitutes diagnosed with venereal diseases.

The ALR mandated that infected prostitutes notify brothel authorities and law enforcement to prevent the spread of disease. Failure to comply resulted in severe penalties, including imprisonment for six months to one year, corporal punishment, and public shaming. These punitive measures disproportionately targeted women rather than their male clients, reinforcing gendered power imbalances within the legal system. While early legal scholars such as Benedikt Carpzov condemned prostitution as a capital offense, the deliberate transmission of venereal disease was not explicitly criminalized until later legal reforms. This asymmetry illustrates how criminal law functioned as an instrument of social control over women's bodies, particularly those perceived as transgressing moral and sexual norms.

The regulation of prostitution was closely linked to urban planning and police oversight. The ALR restricted sex work to designated, secluded areas within major cities, where prostitutes were subjected to strict state surveillance. Similar policies existed in the Habsburg Monarchy, where Maria Theresa's 1752 *Keuschheitskommission* sought to uphold sexual morality by expelling prostitutes to penal colonies. Later, the 1803 criminal code allowed police authorities to punish only those prostitutes who caused public scandal or knowingly spread venereal diseases, a policy that remained in place until the late 19th century.

The underlying legal rationale was one of tolerance—prostitution was not outright prohibited but was heavily regulated to ensure public health and social order. Only in cases involving the spread of infectious diseases did prostitution become legally relevant as a criminal offense. This regulatory approach highlights the absence of absolute prohibition while underscoring the state's efforts to control the visibility and health risks associated with sex work.

Assist. Dr. **Vid Žepič** holds a PhD in law and serves as an assistant and researcher at the Department of Legal History at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana. He contributes to academic life by teaching Roman law and German legal terminology. His research focuses on the history of criminal law, particularly regarding sexual offenses, the history of canon law, and the reception of Roman law. In February 2024, Dr. Žepič presented Legal Perspectives on Sexual Transgressions in Early Byzantine Legal Sources at the 26th OUBS International Graduate Conference at the University of Oxford, providing valuable insights into sexual transgressions in Early Byzantine legal contexts. Earlier, he explored pandemic- related criminal law in Continental Europe, focusing on responses to infectious diseases. His 2022 article, "Pandemic Criminal Law in Continental European Legal History", published in the

Journal on European History of Law, analyzed legal frameworks addressing pandemics and sexually transmitted infections, offering insights relevant to contemporary public health challenges. Dr. Žepič led a multidisciplinary project in 2024, Sexual Criminal Law in the Age of Information Technology and Artificial Intelligence: Legal-Historical, Comparative, Doctrinal, and Practical Aspects, under the RSF program Integrating Local, Regional, and Global Sustainable Development Challenges, Interdisciplinarity, and STEAM Approaches into the Study Process. The project, involving students from various fields, examined how technological advancements affect sexual criminal law, integrating historical analysis, comparative law, and practical applications. Recognized for his scientific achievements, Dr. Žepič received an award from the Senate of the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana, in 2023. His recent contribution includes chapters in the 2024 scientific monograph *Sexual Criminal Law: From Antiquity to Modern Regulation,* which explores the evolution of sexual criminal law from antiquity to World War II, focusing on the complex periodization between premodern and modern legal frameworks.