Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 31: Challenging Dominant Medico-political Models through Sensory Ecologies of Health
Organizers: Josephine Biglin, Kristina Baines, Elisabeth Hsu

Abstract: The study of 'sensory ecologies' implicates the body and its immediate environment in a way that allows us to account for health and wellbeing beyond biomedical measures and representations of health and the neoliberal commodification of wellbeing as an individualised state that can be acquired or achieved. Through a focus on practices that bring to the fore often non-verbalised sensory experiences and ['new] materialities', where therapeutic space is created through intercorporeal practices, it becomes possible to think about forms of resistance – for one, to dominant ways of knowing and understanding how health might be defined, and two, to ways of disrupting socio-political positioning. For example, Biglin's work sheds light on the way in which asylum seekers and refugees wellbeing practices resist enforced marginality and the affective technologies of power that the state employs. Baines' work with indigenous Belizean communities identifies relationships between everyday traditional heritage practices and health that maintain wellbeing through times of change (spatial, temporal, political climate), and Hsu's research on the temporalities that fermentation of local food in remote areas requires, highlight carving out spaces where wellbeing is engendered through sensory and embodied experience, place and materiality. Wellbeing, in this context is understood as an affective state in constant flux, rather than a life state. Framing the analysis of wellbeing in terms of sensory ecologies, allows the speakers to go beyond representationalism in ways that include negotiations of space, place, affect and texture that resist the dominant medico-political models of constructing and thinking about health.

SESSION SCHEDULE

18.09.2025 | Slot 2 | 4-0-3

Dhruv Gautam: The Materiality of Psychic Lives: Spatial and Material Healing in an In-Patient Psychiatric Ward and a Healing Shrine in North India

Lukáš Senft, Tereza Stöckelová, Varvara Borisova: The Sensorium of Metabolic Evasion: Mitigating Toxic Cocktails in Phytotherapeutic Practice

Kaja Skoftedalen: Exploring Therapeutic Spaces of Dhikr, a Devotional Sufi Practice, in Southeastern Tanzania

SESSION PAPERS

The Materiality of Psychic Lives: Spatial and Material Healing in an In-Patient Psychiatric Ward and a Healing Shrine in North India

Dhruv Gautam

This paper traces the therapeutic journeys of two women, Mewati and Reena, both diagnosed with "dissociative disorders," as they move between a psychiatric ward in Delhi and the Mehandipur Balaji Temple in Rajasthan, a well-known site of ritual healing. Drawing on narrative interviews and ethnographic attention to bodily expression and movement across the hospital, temple, and home, the paper explores how psychic distress can be understood not only through biomedical or occult epistemologies but also through spatial and material forms of care.

While the hospital provides structured treatment, it often limits how distress can be expressed. In contrast, the temple offers a space where affect is released through bodily practices like shouting, crying, and dancing. For both women, the temple provides material anchoring for disembodied experiences, such as feeling alienated from their bodies or hearing voices attributed to divine sources. These experiences are materialized through objects like amulets, red threads, and the temple's iron grille, which they hold onto during moments of possession.

Though their experiences differ—Mewati finds refuge in the temple from her patriarchal hometown, while Reena's experiences are shaped by her relationship with a local pundit—both reveal how therapeutic space is co-produced through movement, touch, and the senses. This paper argues that bridging alternative epistemologies of healing through a spatial and material lens offers a broader understanding of therapeutic practices, beyond the social environment and the religion/secular divide.

The Sensorium of Metabolic Evasion: Mitigating Toxic Cocktails in Phytotherapeutic Practice

Lukáš Senft, Tereza Stöckelová, Varvara Borisova

In the aftermath of industrialization, the Earth's "critical zones" (Latour, 2020) as well as the tissues of human and nonhuman organisms are infiltrated by residues of pesticides, flame-retardant compounds, and nano- or microplastics. While singular substances are tested and regulated, the often unpredictable combinations they form—so-called "toxic cocktails"—pose new and largely overlooked risks (CHEM Trust, 2022). Much like the "slow violence" associated with many forms of environmental pollution (Nixon, 2021), these toxic cocktails act as agents of "delayed destruction." Drawing on ethnographic

research in the Czech Republic, this paper explores phytotherapeutic practices aimed at evading the human body's absorption of toxic cocktails embodied in the healing plants. The paper examines how the boundaries of what is permitted to enter the body are negotiated (Roberts, 2017) in the use of healing herbs. To minimize the risk of metabolizing toxic mixtures, people establish localities and more-than-human relationships that are perceived as mitigating dangerous exposure. Informed by the framework of "sensory ecologies" (Shepard, 2004; Baines, 2024) and Hannah Landecker's (2024) work on metabolism, the paper discusses three modes of sensing and navigating the flow of healing and harmful substances within human–plant metabolic relations: (1) foraging in search of toxin-free environments; (2) gardening as a form of place-making beyond the reach of industrial pollution; and (3) spiritual techniques aimed at purifying plants. By examining the sensory ecologies of phytotherapy, the paper frames everyday tactics for minimizing the slow violence of toxic cocktails as crucial to conceptualizing intercorporeal wellbeing and environmental justice.

Exploring Therapeutic Spaces of Dhikr, a Devotional Sufi Practice, in Southeastern Tanzania

Kaja Skoftedalen

This paper examines the ritual practice of deep breathing dhikr, sometimes referred to as the 'worship of coughing', among Qadiriyya Muslims in Southeastern Tanzania. Dhikr, a form of devotion in Sufi ceremonies, involves the repetitive recitation of Allah's name accompanied by specific body movements. It is practised not only in religious rituals but also in healing contexts that connect practitioners with more-than-human beings, such as jinn and ancestors.

Drawing on nonverbalised sensory experiences from my ethnographic fieldwork in coastal southern Tanzania during 2023 and 2024, I explore how dhikr, as an incorporeal and collective practice, creates therapeutic spaces. My interlocutors described dhikr as a pathway to joy and well-being; however, it also provided a space for the release and liberation of emotions through vigorous body movements and occasionally through spirit possession.

I discuss the implications of Dhikr in the context of societal changes described locally as increasing individualism, economic hardship, and a shift away from collectivist mentalities. While often not explicitly linked to health and well-being, practitioners of Dhikr clearly associated it with social connectivity and emotional wellness.

As a collective and sensory experience, dhikr can be understood not only as a religious practice but also as a form of resistance to individualisation and marginalisation. By examining how dhikr fosters social connection and well-being, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of health, challenging dominant medical models and offering new ways to understand health in complex social contexts.