The 20th Conference of the Commission *Gender Studies and Queer Anthropology* of the German Society for Empirical Cultural Studies (DGEKW)

Witnessing as a Feminist Practice of Transformation

JGU Mainz, 7–9 October 2027

We are witnessing the times of profound and often unsettling changes. Wars, genocides, forced displacement, re-patriarchalisation, rampant racism and violence, the rise of authoritarian politics, deepening inequalities and exploitation, the climate crisis and other challenges are reshaping societies and generating uncertainties in everyday life. The rapid expansion of digital media and artificial intelligence is transforming how realities are represented, mediated and contested, giving rise to new struggles over legitimacy, authenticity, visibility, responsibility and power. These developments expose longstanding hierarchies while generating new forms of vulnerability and resistance, as well as surprising instances of solidarity and new forms of world-making. It is within this context that we turn to witnessing as a feminist practice of transformation, asking what it means to bear witness to the uncertainties of the present and to make particular tomorrows more likely.

As Koensler and Näser-Lather (2023) remind us, the concept of the witness should not be confined to that of the 'truthful observer'; witnessing is always partial and embodied. Rather than understanding witnessing as a singular act of observing, documenting or giving testimony, this conference approaches it as a relational, situated and generative practice (Chua 2021; Oliver 2001). Witnessing plays an ambivalent and complex role across legal and media settings. Legal institutions police the boundaries of who is authorized to speak, often along highly gendered, racialized and classed lines, yet they can also be transformed through witnessing, advocacy and coalition building (Greenberg 2025). Scholars have drawn attention to ethical-political (Redfield 2006), affective and embodied (Razsa 2014) and distributed (Arnold-de Simine and Ch'ng 2023) dimensions of witnessing, as well as to how it is shaped by media technologies (Grinberg 2021; Ibrahim 2021), data practices (Gray 2019) and institutional frameworks (Douglas Jones 2021). In times of crisis, new forms of media witnessing appear to be flourishing.

Following Binder and Hess's (2026) invitation to reframe the vocabulary of 'crisis' as a spacetime of possibility, we are interested in 'witnessing as moral optimism' (McGranahan 2020) as well as in its ambivalences and limits. Witnessing carries a particular moral, epistemological and institutional weight that can be distributed in particular ways (Fay 2023). Approaching witnessing as a feminist practice of transformation means asking how this weight has been distributed so far – and how it might be distributed differently. Witnessing can be a fugitive feminist practice that seeks to carve out new spaces for FLINTA* grounded in anthropology and feminism, while simultaneously challenging their premises (Hodžić 2019). It can expand ordinary understandings of the self (Fassin 2008), transform institutional divisions and create new publics (Chua 2018) while also potentially deepening the species divide (Dave 2014) or reinforcing angry politics (Maskovsky and Bjork James 2020).

Building on ethnological and anthropological debates on witnessing as a feminist practice, the conference invites contributions that engage a broad range of themes, including but not limited to:

- Feminist witnessing in contested realities: How can feminist witnessing offer situated ways of engaging with contested realities? What forms of knowledge, responsibility, solidarity and ethical tension emerge? How might witnessing build, complicate or disrupt alliances across feminist, queer, anti-racist, decolonial, communist, Jewish–Palestinian, migrant solidarity and other justice movements?
- The politics and regulation of witnessing: Who is authorized to bear witness, where, and under what conditions? How do socio-legal, institutional and technological frameworks shape whose testimonies are recognized as credible and whose are marginalized or rendered invisible? How might witnessing reproduce unequal relations or place extractive demands on marginalized groups to narrate their suffering?
- Temporalities of witnessing: How does witnessing connect contested pasts, uncertain presents and possible futures? How can it generate new interpretations of pasts – for example, critical readings of socialist pasts beyond the lens of the 'end of history' – and open up different futures?
- Embodied witnessing: How might care, mothering, friendship and other intimate practices serve as forms of witnessing social relations, interdependence and alternatives? How can bodies become sites of witnessing and how are embodied traces, affects, gestures and vulnerabilities recognized – or refused – as testimony?
- Far-right forms of witnessing: How do far-right actors mobilise personal testimony, ordinary experience and claims to authenticity as evidence of crisis, decline or threat, producing victimhood and exclusionary publics (Bodén 2020)? How might such forms of witnessing be challenged?
- More-than-human witnessing: How can objects, landscapes, infrastructures and non-human beings function as feminist witnesses? What might more-than-human witnessing contribute to feminist ethics and practices?
- Transformations in ethnographic witnessing: How are anthropological practices of witnessing changing in response to current conditions? What distinguishes ethnographic witnessing from other forms of knowledge production and what forms of ethics arise from the anthropologist's position as witness? How do multimodal, sensory, digital and participatory methods transform ethnographic witnessing?
- Media witnessing: How do different media shape what can be witnessed and how witnessing is produced, circulated and received? What new forms of witnessing emerge through social media, digital platforms, and AI? How does AI transform the production, circulation, verification and contestation of testimony?

Submission Guidelines

We welcome proposals for individual papers, panels and multimodal contributions.

Individual papers will be grouped into panels by the conference organizers. Submit:

- A title and abstract (maximum 300 words)
- A brief biographical note (maximum 100 words)

Panels may include up to four papers, along with a chair and a discussant; these roles may be combined or held by different individuals. Submit:

- A panel title and description (maximum 250 words)
- An abstract for each paper (maximum 300 words per abstract)
- A brief biographical note for each panel participant (maximum 100 words per person)

Multimodal contributions may take a wide range of forms, including music, dance, visual art, photography, film, video, live performance, slam poetry, storytelling, soundscapes, interactive digital works, rituals, gestures, sensory-based practices and collaborative or participatory engagements. Submit:

- A title and description of the proposed contribution, including how it engages with the conference theme of witnessing (maximum 1,000 words)
- A description of the technical and spatial requirements, including any audiovisual equipment, materials, installation conditions and the approximate dimensions of the contribution. Please indicate which equipment and materials contributors will provide themselves. This information does not count towards the 1,000-word limit.
- A brief biographical note for each contributor (maximum 100 words per person)

Proposals will be assessed based on their quality and engagement with the conference theme.

Please submit your proposal by **26 December 2026** via the **Converia submission portal**.

Applicants will be notified of the outcome by the end of February 2027.

Contact: feministwitnessing@uni-mainz.de

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