

THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES AND THE FANTASTIC

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Medical Humanities and the Fantastic: Introduction to the Liverpool Symposium

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IN the *SFRA Review*'s 2016 winter issue Anna McFarlane reports on the launch of "Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities" research project at the University of Glasgow, led by Gavin Miller, and funded by the Wellcome Trust, the largest organisation for health-related research. She notes how "in recent years academic concerns with the intersections between medical ethics and technology have particularly arisen through the field of the medical humanities" (3) and goes on to define medical humanities as "an academic field discipline [that] aims to explore the ways in which humans (or, indeed, animals) come into contact with medicine and how such encounters must change both living beings and medicine itself." (4) This is of course evidenced by the Wellcome Seed Award itself, and also reflected in the *British Medical Journal*'s (BMJ) 2016 special issue *Science Fiction and Medical Humanities*, edited by Gavin Miller and Anna McFarlane, addressing the commonplace "headline": *Science Fiction Becomes Science Fact*.

In their editorial introduction they point out the vitality of interdisciplinary research: "Research in this area challenges the limitations of disciplines such as science studies and history and philosophy of science. Lacking the analytic training and vocabulary developed in English Literature, and Film and TV studies, the sociological and historical disciplines have great difficulty in apprehending the complex social and political engagement that may be found in science fiction." (213) They explore the theoretical framework which allows a wider interpretation of science fiction as well as allowing science fiction to function as analytical tool in the wider context of humanities, utilising Jauss and Benzinger's notion of "horizon of expectations" and Darko Suvin's "cognitive estrangement." The BMJ issue itself features relevant discussions of seminal science fiction writers, such as, Stina Attebery's piece on Mira Grant's *Parasitology* trilogy, John Carlo Pasco, Camille Anderson and Sayantani DasGupta's article exploring the "visionary medicine" of Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," Donna McCormack's work on "decolonialising transplantation" in Nalo

Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, as well as Fran Bignan's paper "Pregnancy as protest in interwar British women's writing: an antecedent alternative to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*." The Glasgow-based "Science Fiction and Medical Humanities" Wellcome research project with its website, workshops and conferences became a platform for further discussions, culminating in the publication of a short story collection *A Practical Guide for the Resurrected*, exploring how technology has and will affect the non/human body and psyche.

The Medical Humanities and Science Fiction research project and the aforementioned anthology were also featured at the First Inaugural Congress of Medical Humanities in 2017, organized by the North West Medical Humanities Research Network. The conference series, which have been running successfully for three years now, provides examples of further engagement and entanglement between medical humanities and science fiction. As I write in my introductory blog post for the column, "Medical Humanities 2.0" at *The Polyphony*, "the first panel in 2017 was dedicated to "Medical Posthumanities," where Amelia DeFalco (University of Leeds), drawing on examples from both literature and film, discussed how companion and caregiving robots embody and possibly subvert the gender and racial inequalities surrounding the economies of care work." Later at the same event, I suggested and led a small group discussion on monstrosity in medical humanities, reflecting on topics like pregnancy, madness and disability, across eras, disciplines, and media.

The second NNMHR congress was also relevant for showcasing links between medical humanities and fantastic scholarship. The first keynote speaker was Esther L. Jones (Clark University), author of *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2015), drawing attention to parallels between the biopolitics of Octavia E. Butler and the exploitation of Henrietta Lax, whose illness has led to a major scientific breakthrough. In her lecture she was talking about how speculative imagination is key to understanding biases and their consequences. The conference also had a transplantation panel featuring two distinguished scholars: Sarah Wasson (Lancaster University), leader of Translating Gothic Pain AHRC research project, whose new book, *Gothic Transplantation*, is forthcoming, and Margrit Shildrick, author of *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2001), in which she utilises the framework of monstrosity to discuss disability.

Following and engaging with these developments with increasing interest and fascination, I was wondering how can we theorise the fantastic within medical humanities and how can the fantastic facilitate research and engagement relevant to medical humanities? Consequently, organising a conference at the intersection of these fields was long in the making and a real passion project. The Medical Humanities and the Fantastic Symposium, funded by the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Programme (NWCDDTP), was

held at the University of Liverpool, on 19th July 2019. It provided an opportunity to explore these interdisciplinary challenges, and attracted so many fantastic (pun intended) scholars of different backgrounds. It was a long and exciting day with three keynote speakers, the aforementioned Amelia DeFalco, Anna McFarlane and Sara Wasson, and ten delegates across three panels (whose work with a few exceptions is published in this issue), and numerous guests.

The day began with Amelia DeFalco's keynote lecture "Robot Funerals and Clone Completions: Boundary Creature Disposal in Recent Speculative Fiction," exploring care and companionship from a critical posthumanist point of view, which introduced the "Fantastic Biases and Where to Find Them" panel. Out of the three talks three are featured in this issue: David Hartley's exploration of autism and the poetics of neurodivergence, Connor Jackson's talk on antagonistic representation of fatness in video games, and Lucia Lopez's reading of Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" drawing attention to oppressive gynaecological practices. Together these papers dissolve the boundaries between normal and abnormal minds and bodies, pointing out how those boundaries represent oppression. Staying with the idea of boundaries, Anna McFarlane's keynote lecture "Bleeding Genres: Pregnancy and Fantastika" bringing together Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* introduced the second panel, "Chimeras and Contamination," revolving around non-human embodiment and the entanglements of science fiction and horror with the medical. Two papers featured in the issue engage with these notions differently: Johnathan Thornton discussed fungi as a transformative agent in Tade Thompson's *Rosewater* and Aliya Whitely's *The Beauty*, followed by Lucy Nield's paper on xenotransplantation in Margaret Atwood's Maddadam trilogy. The last panel was taking us back to the Gothic origins of (modern) medicine and the fantastic as well as reminding us how incredibly relevant Gothic aesthetics (and ethics) are: Jenni Hunt explored freakshows from the perspective of museology, and Bronte Schiltz talked about queerness in Gothic narratives. Sara Wasson's keynote address, "Spectres, Strangeness and Stigmatisation: Chronic Pain and the Fantastic" pointing toward formulating answers to the symposium's main questions, closing the long day of presentations.

Finally, I am really grateful for all the speakers who took part in this initiative, and the *SFRA Review's* editorial team for supporting this project by publishing the proceedings of the symposium.

Works Cited

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