

MLA 2022 Annual Convention
Special Session Proposal
6 Jan. 2022 – 9 Jan. 2022, Washington, D.C.
Presidential Theme: Multilingual US
(CFP submitted and approved Spring 2021)
(Papers solicited/selected and overall session proposal
composed, submitted, and approved early summer 2021)

Note:

Due to concerns regarding COVID-19,
this panel was postponed and rescheduled to be included at the
MLA 2023 Annual Convention,
5 Jan. 2023 – 8 Jan. 2023, San Francisco, CA
Presidential Theme: Working Conditions

Panel Organizers: Rachel Warner, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill & Paul Blom, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Panel President: Paul Blom, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Panel Respondent: Rachel Warner, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Panel Title: Health, Medicine and Literature: Critical Intersections

Keywords: health humanities; disability studies; postcolonial studies; history of medicine; transgender studies

Subject: Genre, Theory, Method: Literature and Other Arts, Humanities, Law, Psychology, Science, and Sociology

Detailed Description:

This panel's central objective is to connect emerging scholars in the burgeoning field of health humanities. This interdisciplinary area of study differs from its foundations in medical humanities in that it more capaciously attends to a history of medicine, literature, and diverse cultural traditions. While foundational scholarship in medical humanities focused primarily on the clinical encounter (Charon 2006) and restoring patient autonomy (Frank 1996), the health humanities explore a broader archive of literary representations of embodiment, illness, disease, and medicine. Put succinctly, the health humanities use humanistic inquiry to investigate the cultural history and contemporary social context of medical practice.

Recent scholarship in health humanities tends to connect the history of medicine to ongoing structural inequalities. For example, Stephen Knadler's *Vitality Politics: Health, Debility, and the Limits of Black Emancipation* (2019) tracks the biopolitics of medicalization as it relates to Black "debility," or the targeted maiming of Black populations in the United States. Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017) similarly deploys the concept of debility to articulate the effects of violent social exclusion. Finally, Priscilla Wald's *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2007) considers the role of outbreak narratives in globalizing late capitalism and the racialization of novel pandemics.

Our panel builds upon this critical foundation but also extends the historical scope for such investigations of the relationships between power, narrative and medicine. Our three speakers consider how discourses of health and medicine interpret and impose meaning upon bodies. More specifically, our speakers explore the entanglement of medical structures with British imperialism, scientific anti-Blackness, and transgender medicine. Our guiding intellectual questions include: how has the Anglo-European production of medical knowledge buttressed imperial processes of racial formation? What are the tensions between medical gatekeeping and transgender access to gender-affirming care? And finally, how might we imagine new languages of care, resistance, and embodiment outside the medical model?

To begin the panel, **Suvendu Ghatak's** paper will adopt a transnational perspective in examining intersecting discourses of empire and epidemiology in British colonial India. More specifically, Ghatak connects the history of malaria's designation as a tropical disease to the political unrest surrounding the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. He uses his close readings of two primary texts, Fanny Parkes's travelogue *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (1850) and Octavius Henry Anson's mutiny journal, *With H.M. 9th Lancers during the Mutiny* (1857), to draw out the links between epidemiological and political calamity. Ultimately, Ghatak elaborates on Pablo Mukherjee's concept of "palliative imperialism" (2013) by demonstrating how such Victorian expatriates rationalized empire through the management of natural disasters.

Patrick Allen's work on medicalized anti-Blackness will continue this focus on the racial history of medico-scientific discourses and structures. Allen's paper brings us into the United States context and details how the Black female characters of Toni Morrison's novel *Home* (2012) heal one of the central characters after she escapes from the forcible experimentations of a white eugenicist. Allen's work helps contextualize the foundations of modern gynecology in J. Marion Sims's involuntary medical experiments on enslaved Black women and connects this history to ongoing forced sterilizations of incarcerated Black and Latinx women. Overall, Allen argues that the Black women of *Home* practice an ethics of care for one another and collectively resist anti-Black biopolitical systems of control.

Finally, **Iseult Gillespie** will continue to develop this panel's critiques of medicalization by situating her paper at the intersection of disability studies and transgender studies. As Gillespie highlights, the medical industrial complex has long been an object of ire among trans and disabled individuals. Gillespie thus reads her literary archive for how it both acknowledges yet moves beyond this tension, cultivating a "crippled, transfeminine response to medical treatment" instead. Ultimately, Gillespie's work illuminates how medical practice continues to function at the nexus of gender, sexuality, and studies of the body.

The inspiration for this session draws mainly from the collaborative work of the presider and respondent in the graduate student reading group, the Literature, Medicine, and Culture Colloquium ([LMCC](#)). Established in 2012 with support from the UNC Health Humanities Lab, the LMCC has convened monthly to discuss selected readings in the field of health humanities. As co-directors of this group, we are eager to expand these intellectual conversations to a broader network of emerging scholars. We have thus organized our panel to include three papers, each strictly limited to 17-18 minutes, in order to leave time for the respondent to make closing remarks and frame the final discussion period.

Participant Information:

Suvendu Ghatak is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Florida. In his dissertation research, he explores the conjunctures of medical and cultural narratives in obscuring the impact of colonial developmentalist policies on malarial epidemics, and in marking the disease as a malady of primitivity and degeneracy. He traces the continuities of this colonial semantics of malaria in postcolonial state policies and medical practices in South Asia. His archival research for the dissertation has been funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, UF. Currently, he is the Kumkum Chatterjee Memorial Fellow in Indian History, affiliated with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata. More broadly, he is interested in how prolonged crises, beyond the suddenness of “outbreak” or the closure of cure, shape disease imaginaries and medical practices in the Global South. Connect with Suvendu by email, ghataksuvendu@ufl.edu, or on Twitter, [@ghatak_suvendu](https://twitter.com/ghatak_suvendu).

Patrick Allen is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Elizabethtown College. He specializes in African American literatures, critical race studies, and medical and health humanities. His research attends to questions of race, gender, health, and medicine, especially in Black print culture. He looks particularly to the place of the Black medical professional in the United States and in US literature and the modes by which both doctors and lay writers portray health and medicine in the post-bellum, pre-Harlem era. Allen currently serves as Vice President of Organizational Matters for the Society for the Study of American Women Writers. He has published on the “practice of print” performed by early Black US “doctresses” in *Arizona Quarterly*, and his paper today was recently published in *MELUS*. It addresses forced sterilizations and eugenics in the US in the context of Toni Morrison’s 2012 novel, *Home*, which is set in the 1950s.

Iseult Gillespie is a PhD Candidate in Literary Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her dissertation asks how the internal, biological aspects of embodiment are translated into contemporary cultural forms. She analyzes these forms at the nexus of crip theory and feminist science studies to define an emergent arena of cultural production: the biological imaginary. As a disability advocate, she works with on- and off-campus groups to ensure accessibility and inclusion. As a TED-Ed educator, she foregrounds marginalized voices in her transmedia storytelling, creating lessons that span art, literature and culture for a global audience.

Paul Blom is a PhD candidate and Teaching Fellow at UNC-Chapel Hill in the Department of English. His research focuses on twentieth-century American literature and its intersections with health humanities and literary trauma studies, primarily the ethical and political implications of representations of psychological trauma in literature and other media. He is a Yale University Summer Session Teaching Fellow for a study-abroad course on visual epidemiology and global health communication and serves as the co-director for UNC’s Literature, Medicine, and Culture Colloquium. His research has involved extensive work with underserved populations regarding trauma, illness, embodiment, and representation.

Rachel Warner is a PhD candidate and teaching fellow in the Department of English. Her research interests include twentieth-century American literature, women’s and gender studies, queer of color critique, and animal studies. She has completed two peer-reviewed publications: one explores Black feminist theories of embodiment in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, forthcoming from *Society & Animals*; and the other offers an archival analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s brief tenure at UNC and NCCU, published by *North Carolina Literary Review* in May 2020. Rachel also co-directs the graduate working group Literature, Medicine and Culture Colloquium which explores topics in health humanities.