Contemporary Womxn’s Writing and the Medical Humanities
International Online Conference (29-31 July 2021)
Organised by Rebecca Rosenberg (KCL) and Benjamin Dalton (Paris Nanterre)

THURSDAY 29 JULY
9:30am-11am – Parallel sessions 1A, 1B, 1C

Panel 1A: Feminism, Femininity, and Illness
Chair: Lucía López Serrano

Giorgia Garilli - ‘It’s a numbing aid’: Pills, Politics, and Pop Culture in Ottessa Moshfegh’s My Year of Rest and Relaxation


Jasmine Mortazavi - Rewriting Experiences with Anorexia: Contemporary French Women’s Autobiographical Narratives

Katie Goss - ‘Don’t try to think too much’: the ‘emotional brain’ and feminine aesthetics of ‘cerebrality’

Giorgia Garilli

Paper title: ‘It’s a numbing aid’: Pills, Politics, and Pop Culture in Ottessa Moshfegh’s My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Abstract: In this paper, I will argue that Ottessa Moshfegh’s My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018) deploys the aesthetics and vernacular of contemporary ‘self-care’ to unravel its myriad meanings: as medical practice, feminist praxis, and exploitative neoliberal rallying cry. Moshfegh simultaneously embraces and refutes the frivolity which haunts discourses of self-care, presenting us with a novel which is both parodic and earnest, flippant and grave – propelled at once by the sounds of a whirring VCR and the rattling of a pill bottle. As the novel’s grieving protagonist pieces together a routine of prescription medication and pop-cultural salves in her quest to ‘hibernate’ for a year, the text interweaves her narration of her trauma with a cutting satire of the American medical establishment at the turn of the millennium. By placing Moshfegh’s novel in dialogue with scholarship on the politics of self-help and twenty-first century affect, including the work of Nikolas Rose and Lauren Berlant, I
will explore the text as a crystallisation of the ethical and political complexities of contemporary self-care.

In *The Self Help Compulsion* (2020), Beth Blum urges for a reconceptualisation of the relationship between self-help and literary fiction, arguing for the two to be understood as mutually constitutive. This paper builds on Blum’s necessary intervention, honing in on the aesthetic specificities of twenty-first century ‘self-care’ practices as both the foundations and punchlines of Moshfegh’s novel. With an emphasis on the moments in which parody and practice intertwine, this paper will make the case for the contemporary novel as a uniquely sophisticated medium through which the ethics, politics, and conflicting feminisms of self-care can be held in tension.

**Bio:** Giorgia Garilli is a doctoral candidate in English Literature the University of York. Her thesis is on the aesthetics self-care in twenty-first century women’s novels, including Maggie Nelson, Ottessa Moshfegh, and Joanna Walsh. She has previously completed an MA in Culture and Thought After 1945 at the University of York, writing her dissertation on illness and narrative resistance in the fiction and life-writing of Carrie Fisher. Her wider research interests include affect theory, autofiction, and the medical humanities.

**Stephanie Barnes**

**Paper title:** Poor Rich Girls: The Medicalisation of Femininity under Capitalism.

**Abstract:** Mark Fisher deemed that under Neoliberal Capitalism work and life must be inseparable; making the precariousness of work central to the precariousness of self. For Fisher this precariousness manifests in mental illness, depressive hedonia and reflexive impotence. This paper considers contemporary ways of conceptualising the feminine experiences of mental illness with social and financial precarity. This is an interdisciplinary critique of the medicalisation of female performance in life and work.

Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019) and Lucie Britsch’s *Sad Janet* (2020) deal with transgressive female agency and present nuanced responses to capitalist patriarchy. All ask what happens when work; consumption and participation don’t fill the void of modern life?

The challenging and problematic representation of the privileged, heteronormative, white woman with unparalleled access to health care posits many questions- Which women are allowed to refuse? Why is female refusal met with pathologisation? Is there a cure for 'bad' femininity?

This paper considers how and why mental illness is readily assigned to women refusing or failing to meet the standards of femininity under patriarchal capitalism. Whilst, this alone is not new, the contemporary desire for wellness and selfcare infiltrates such positions. When economic productivity is threatened by the power of female refusal, what does this mean for big pharma?
Bio: Stephanie Barnes has recently completed her MA in Literature and Culture at The University of Salford. Her main research interests are representations of abject femininity in twenty-first century women’s writing. Stephanie currently works in Adult Social Care for a Local Authority which is in itself a constant source of socio-political inspiration. Stephanie can neither confirm nor deny is she herself is an abject woman.

Jasmine Mortazavi

Paper title: Rewriting Experiences with Anorexia: Contemporary French Women’s Autobiographical Narratives

Abstract: In 1978, Valérie Valère published a testimony recounting her experience in a psychiatric hospital where she was treated for anorexia. Her work is the first autobiographical text to relate anorexia from the anorexic person’s point of view in France, paving the way for other such accounts and turning her into a familiar figure in discussions about anorexia. This study will look closely at three of the first of such texts written by French female authors—Valérie Valère’s *Le Pavillon des enfants fous* (1978), Geneviève Brisac’s *Petite* (1994), and Delphine de Vigan’s *Jours sans faim* (2001) --to examine how these women have narrativized and fictionalized their anorexia, how these texts are constructed overall, and how they function in a larger network of texts that precede and succeed them. It will be argued that storytelling plays a large role in the discussions surrounding these texts and in the texts’ plots. Discourses on anorexia across various disciplines partake in storytelling, in the sense that they suggest a multitude of sometimes contradictory explanations for the illness. Within the texts, the protagonists’ anorexia is closely tied to story consumption and production. Publishing these texts is another form of storytelling because it allows their authors to share an experience with anorexia. These texts’ publishers and editors, through paratext, engage in their own form of storytelling that is often at odds with the stories themselves. This seems to play into their need to market their product and sometimes, unwittingly or not, results in the marketing of anorexia. While they may seem like isolated narratives, these texts, which are all retrospective in nature, form the basis of a genre of autobiographical narratives discussing anorexia that reached a peak at the start of the twenty-first century. Once published, the very solitary experience of anorexia becomes a collective one.

Bio: I am currently completing a master’s in Arts, littératures et langages at Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales where my research takes both a literary and anthropological approach. Last year, I completed a master’s degree in History and Literature at Columbia University in Paris. Previously, I received bachelor’s degrees in Media, Culture, and Communication and French from NYU. My research centers around contemporary women’s autobiographical narratives in which anorexia is a theme and inner speech and self-fragmentation as they relate to the experience of anorexia.

Katie Goss
Paper title: ‘Don’t try to think too much’: the ‘emotional brain’ and feminine aesthetics of ‘cerebrality’

Abstract: This paper takes Catherine Malabou’s concept of ‘cerebrality’ as a means of approaching new aesthetic trends in contemporary womxn’s writing, exploring how the ‘reciprocal link’ between cognitive architecture and subjective experience is articulated through narrative forms of disaffection and experimental (de)formations of language.

In *The New Wounded* Malabou argues that psychoanalytic schemas of sexuality and neurological accounts of the brain’s plasticity have ‘wage[d] fratricidal war for etiological dominance’. Yet the delocalized constitution of affects presented by the ‘emotional brain’ and its traumas reveal the extent to which psychic life and neuronal organization do not only coincide but possess peculiar and unanticipated forms of inter-relation, disrupting dominant binaries between reason and emotion, mind and body, creation and destruction.

Primarily focused on Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, I will suggest that the specifically neuronal component of feminine subjectivity is coming into focus through contemporary depictions of trauma. The flat and disaffected tone of Moshfegh’s protagonist, who intensively self-medicates in an attempt to suppress her own consciousness, “stop thinking” and become ‘a whole new person’, speaks to emergent regimes affecting psychic life within what Paul Preciado calls the ‘pharmacopornographic era’. Significantly, the failure of Moshfegh’s protagonist to achieve her desire for total inertia suggests that the em-brained body actually contains forms of resistance to neoliberal matrices of social regulation, materially disrupting demands for infinite flexibility and the suppression of individual and collective trauma.

I argue that Moshfegh’s narrative, as well as the innovative experimentation with language in Eimear McBride’s *Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* and Eley Williams’ *Attrib. and Other Stories*, pose the deformation of cognitive architecture as a creative mode. My close reading of Malabou’s privileging of the ‘emotional brain’ and the formative role of sleeping pills, brain tumours and neuro-divergency in these literary texts will thus emphasise how cerebral life is a new frontier for feminist interrogations of socio-political violence and the forms of subjectivity which suffer it.

Bio: Katie Goss is a funded doctoral candidate in the School of English and Drama, Queen Mary University of London. Their dissertation focuses on the concept of “plasticity” as articulated in the work of philosopher Catherine Malabou, and how its potential alliance with feminism provides a means to understand emergent trends in women’s artistic production. Their research interests lie in material embodiment and its capacity for transformation, particularly in convergences between the arts, humanities and neuro-, epigenetic and ecological sciences. Their work has been published in Porn Studies Journal and they have recently co-organized a conference (Queer-feminist Ecocriticism in Live Art and Visual Cultures) and co-edited a collection of essays, *Queer Feminist Decolonial Ecologies Dossier* (2020).
**Panel 1B: 1B – Clinical Spaces and Hospitals**  
*Chair: María Díaz*

**Mona Baie** – Heterotopias and Psychiatric Hospitals

**Daria Kozhanova** - Daughters, Monsters, and Machines: Valeria Parrella’s Posthuman Maternity

**Marie Allitt** - Topography of the Sick Bed

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**Mona Baie**

**Paper title:** Heterotopias and Psychiatric Hospitals

**Abstract:** Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘heterotopia’ (1967) has been studied mostly within architecture and regarding the design and characteristics of different (social) spaces. Its applicability to hospitals and especially psychiatric hospitals has been recognized as well, but not as widely examined. In my MA dissertation, I take the heterotopia as a starting point to analyse three novels whose protagonists are young adults in psychiatric hospitals: *Impulse* (2007) by Ellen Hopkins, *It’s kind of a funny story* (2006) by Ned Vizzini, and *Suicide Notes* (2008) by Michael Thomas Ford. As a first step, I examine how the different characteristics of heterotopia, such as deviation, the interplay of isolation and permeability, and a different experience of temporality are present in the texts. As a second step, I analyse if and how the heterotopia becomes “a kind of effectively enacted utopia” (Foucault). Drawing on philosophical and literary theories of the utopian as well as affect theory, I seek to answer the question of whether a kind of utopia is present in the texts and if so, what it consists of, whilst also applying the given examples of literary heterotopian and utopian worlds to ‘real world psychiatry’. Considering the highly problematic and in many ways truly dystopian realities of psychiatric institutions and the care delivered in them, I try to discern what we can learn from these novels for psychiatric hospitals as they exist in the UK and elsewhere today.

**Bio:** Mona Baie is a medical doctor from Germany, having graduated from medical school at the beginning of last year. She is currently enrolled in the Health Humanities MA at University College London. Her doctoral dissertation was on ‘Illness Metaphors of Cancer and Aids in Autobiographical Literature 1973-2013’. An article about her findings was published in the German journal *Medicine and The Life Sciences in History* in December 2020.

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**Daria Kozhanova**

**Paper title:** Daughters, Monsters, and Machines: Valeria Parrella’s Posthuman Maternity
Abstract: There are different representations of posthuman motherhood in contemporary Italian women’s writing. Some authors depict realistic, science-fictional, or dystopian scenarios concerning assisted reproductive technologies, others reflect on posthuman aspects of motherhood, which emerge in the interactions between body, medical space, and technologies. In this paper, I will focus on the latter by analyzing Valeria Parrella’s novel Lo Spazio Bianco (2008) that explores the traumatic maternal experience of Maria, a forty-two-year-old schoolteacher from Naples. Her daughter, Irene, was born prematurely and has to spend forty days in the incubator of the neonatal intensive care unit.

The hospital is a space of top-down power where women have a passive role, as well as technological equipment controlled by the medical personnel alienates mothers’ and children’s bodies. Since Irene’s body is intertwined with medical technological devices, Maria sees her as a hybrid creature, but she is not able to overcome an essentialist binarism and embrace a posthuman dimension. To analyze Maria’s anxiety about the “human” and the “nonhuman”, I will draw on Braidotti’s reflections on mothers, monsters, and machines, applying them to the daughter: for Maria Irene is either a terrible cyborg or a monster. Posthuman motherhood is perceived by the protagonist as something abnormal because it differs from the common discourse on maternity. As a result, Maria experiences a double conflict of motherhood (she struggles to consider Irene her daughter and does not feel like a mother), which can be analyzed through the lens of Foucault’s concept of biopower.

Finally, I will show how by the end of the novel, when Irene is released from the NICU, the protagonist manages to acquire maternal subjectivity by welcoming her unconventional motherhood and daughter’s posthuman identity, which reflects the notion of hybrid “bodies of Naples”.

Bio: Daria Kozhanova holds a BA in Journalism from the Lomonosov Moscow State University (2016) and a MA in Strategies of Communication from the University of Padua (2019). She is currently attending courses on contemporary Italian literature at the University of Bologna (MA in Modern, Postcolonial and Comparative Literatures). Her main interests are Contemporary Italian Literature, Women and Gender Studies, and Motherhood Studies. In particular, she investigates the representations of motherhood in contemporary Italian women’s writing from posthuman and ecofeminist perspectives.

Marie Allitt

Paper title: Topography of the Sick Bed

Abstract: This paper focuses on the experience of sick beds, both in hospital and in domestic spaces. Confined to the bed for long periods of time, the space shrinks and expands, grows to become a whole world, dilating into a microcosm of life. It can be a prison; a mountain peak; another country.

Engaging with recent illness narratives, such as Hilary Mantel’s Ink in the Blood (2010) and Sinead Gleeson’s Constellations (2019), and their overlap with Woolf’s On Being Ill (1930) and Julia Stephens’ Notes from Sick Rooms (1883), I navigate the prone position in the domestic and hospital bed. This paper illuminates the intriguing, sometimes painful, re-
focus on the relationship between the interior and immediate exterior of the body. The phenomenology of the body has expanded, maybe now connected to tubes and machines; it oozes and bleeds, forcing the patient to see their body in different ways. Their body is no longer intact, but directly entangled with the bed and the bedside.

This particular focus on restriction enables us to explore the affective and imaginative terrain of the patient’s experience, and recognise the hospital or bedroom for its multiple incarnations and meanings to the patient stuck in bed. Restriction distorts and rearranges what is important and interesting: as Mantel points out: ‘Hospital dramas are small, desperate, self-centred’. The small becomes substantial, for better and for worse: crumbs in the bed become boulders.

Extended confinement to the bed marks an intimate reacquaintance with one’s own body, sometimes including startling discoveries, and the bleeding of spatial boundaries. Drawing on personal accounts, I explore the literal and figurative landscape of the sick bed, noting that when the world seems to shrink, the focus shifts: flights into fantasy, creativity, and escapism are always brought back to the body in the bed.

**Bio:** Marie Allitt is Humanities and Healthcare Fellow at the University of Oxford, on the project ‘Advancing Medical Professionalism: Integrating Humanities Teaching in the University of Oxford’s Medical School’. She is also the Postdoctoral Research Assistant for the Northern Network for Medical Humanities Research, at the University of Leeds.

Her research focuses on 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century medical life writing; practitioner health; senses; and medical spaces, architectures, and environments.

Her first monograph, *Medical Caregiving Narratives of the First World War: Geographies of Care*, will be published with Edinburgh University Press in 2022.

**Panel 1C – Unexplained Illnesses**

**Chair:** Claire Jeantils

**Katherine Cheston** - Contemporary womxn’s life writing in the shadowlands of unexplained illness.

**Sakshi Srivastava** - Debating Inexplicability of Pain in Selected Women’s Poetry

**Alex Henry** - In a ‘Time of Undiagnosis’: ‘Unexplained’ Symptoms and Chronicity in Ali Smith’s *Hotel World* (2001)

**Katherine Cheston**

**Paper title:** Contemporary womxn’s life writing in the shadowlands of unexplained illness.

**Abstract:** ‘Everyone who is born’, writes Susan Sontag, ‘holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick’ (1990, 3). Several recently-published examples of
contemporary womxn’s life writing, however, are more concerned with the shadowlands that lie in-between these two metaphorical kingdoms. These liminal spaces are populated by those with ‘medically unexplained’ illness: those who are exiled from the kingdom of the well by their physical symptoms but, with diagnostic tests producing no clear answers, are denied the documentation required to enter the kingdom of the sick. In this paper I will interrogate these illness metaphors in three autobiographical texts – Julie Rehmeyer’s Through the Shadowlands (2017), Anna Lyndsey’s Girl in the Dark (2015) and Dorothy Wall’s Encounters with the Invisible (2005) – in order to elucidate the somatic and social suffering endured by womxn with ‘medically unexplained’ illness.

I will first attend to the geographical metaphors that abound in these memoirs, mapping out the unexplored topographies of unexplained illness that communicate the isolation and loneliness of the experience. I will then turn to the tropes of (in)visibility threaded through these texts, which reveal unexplained illness to be an excruciating source of shame for womxn. Attending to these distinctly literary metaphors will speak not only to the realities of living with unexplained illness, but also to the instrumental role of contemporary womxn’s writing in illuminating experiences of illness that are too often hidden from view. Moreover, by focusing on three writers (Rehmeyer, Lyndsey, and Wall) who write not only from the shadowlands of healthcare but also from the shadowlands of the contemporary literary canon, this paper will shine a light on the productive and revelatory diversity of both contemporary womxn’s writing and the medical humanities.

Bio: Katharine Cheston (she/her)
I am a PhD student based between the Institute for Medical Humanities and the Department of English Studies at Durham University. My doctoral research aims to offer a critical exploration of the concept of so-called “Medically Unexplained Symptoms” (MUS). Inherently interdisciplinary, my project combines literary and qualitative methods, comparing contemporary womxn’s life writing with interview testimony from experts-by-experience in order to think more broadly about issues of diagnosis, shame, and stigmatisation. My PhD is generously funded by the Wellcome Trust.

Sakshi Srivastava

Paper title: Debating Inexplicability of Pain in Selected Women’s Poetry

Abstract: Individual poetic expression has been a crucial means of channeling pain and suffering otherwise not available to the outsider. To problematize this expression particularly in women’s poetry as associated with their gendered position, I take up two pieces in juxtaposition to each other which draw from similar experience rooted in the body- Meds by Cynthia Huntington and Living with Pain by Angela Davis. Meds traces the experience of pain amidst medical intervention while focusing on the particulars of suffering happening to individuals. Living with Pain perceives pain from a philosophical distance while personifying it as a demanding lover. Both showcase the resolve necessary to survive in the world of pain every day. Taking both of these as the primary texts, the focus of this paper is an inherent inexplicability of pain through language as referred to by Elaine Scarry in The Body in Pain. The pain Huntington’s narrator experiences is transcribed through metaphors and images but is still not as specific as medicine intends it to be, whereas Davis’s pain requires complete surrender to the limitations of the body. The main argument of this paper
stands on two premises; First that pain as written in these poems can be perceived as more intimate than its medical interpretation, because it should be understood in a phenomenological sense where lived body is the locus of language, experience and expression; Second, with the unease of not fitting in and being rendered passive by systemic agents, these voices echo of womanhood. Beneath their inexplicable pain lies the lived experience of womanhood, where pain is not only familiarized but is doubly constraining as well. Hence the paper explores the gendered nature of the inexplicability of pain as the poems attempt to subvert it.

**Bio:** Sakshi Srivastava is a researcher in the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, India. She is working in the field of Critical Medical Humanities focusing on the relationship between narratives and the experience of illness. She has published online in Café Dissensus Blog and Borderless Journal.

**Alex Henry**

**Paper title:** In a ‘Time of Undiagnosis’: ‘Unexplained’ Symptoms and Chronicity in Ali Smith’s *Hotel World* (2001)

**Abstract:** In Ali Smith’s *Hotel World* (2001), the intertwined narratives of five womxn combine to reflect on temporal structures shaped by chronic illness. Hotel receptionist Lise falls ill without medical explanation and spends her days struggling to complete a disability welfare form in her fragmentary narrative section titled ‘future conditional’. Lise’s fatigued perspective of uncertain patienthood and disrupted temporality is supplemented by the homeless character Else’s narrative which complicates the novel’s engagement with chronic illness and time by focussing on ‘unexplained’ symptoms (in Else’s case an unidentified cough) caused by socio-economic disenfranchisement. Smith’s novel directly grapples with the interface of debility, chronic illness and economic precarity, showing how womxn with starkly different socio-economic statuses like Lise and Else, who are for different reasons without diagnosis and medical verification, prove especially problematic for welfare systems which continually rely upon and epistemically privilege biomedical and psychiatric evidence over ambiguous individual testimony.

In this paper I read Smith’s novel as a multi-perspective treatment of narrative time which represents chronic illness temporalities through crip, queer and anti-capitalist lenses. I use the term ‘unexplained symptoms’ to describe chronic illnesses that exceed or challenge diagnostic categories, which cause significant disruption to patient ontology and biomedical epistemologies, and follow historical trends regarding the uneven treatment of gendered illnesses. Through the work of Jack Halberstam, Alison Kafer and Jasbir Puar, I seek to expand the concept of ‘undiagnosis time’ and Puar’s concept of debility to describe the ‘strange temporalities’ of chronic illness experiences shaped by social exclusion and produced by enveloping economic and political contexts. I suggest that by adopting patient-centred phenomenological and crip approaches, the ‘unexplained’ can mobilise readings of chronic illness temporalities which challenge privileged positions of narrative authority while supporting accessibility and intersectional solidarity.
Bio: Alex Henry is currently a PhD student in the School of English at the University of Leeds where his research interests are in (chronic) illness narratives, specifically focussing on the representation of ‘unexplained’ chronic conditions and global health concerns in twenty-first century British womxn’s writing.

11:15am – 12:45pm – Parallel sessions 2A, 2B, 2C

2A – Ageing

Chair: Shirley Jordan

Veronika Schuchter - Menopause Imaginaries in Twenty-First Century Women’s Writing

Teri Szucs - Writing about dementia home care and lesbianity: interweaving experiences and narratives

Zuzanna Zarebska Sanches - “Forgetting the “A” Word: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne on female agency in her short story ‘Little Red’.”

Veronika Schuchter

Paper title: Menopause Imaginaries in Twenty-First Century Women’s Writing

Abstract: While there has been a steady academic interest in the depiction of women’s embodied experiences, resulting in rich cultural and literary analyses of women’s health issues such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, abortion, and ageing, representations of the menopause remain understudied. One reason for this omission might be the continued abject status the menopause still carries, since it brings together a number of taboo subjects, such as ageing, women’s corporeality, and their renewed potential autonomy that comes with exiting the predominantly fertility-driven discourses around women’s bodies.

In this paper, I turn to two recent autobiographical texts, Ulrike Draesner’s Eine Frau wird älter: Ein Aufbruch (2018) and Darcy Steinke’s Flash Count Diary (2019), to discuss the aesthetic and feminist aspects of the self-representations of those experiencing menopause and late middle age. I show that autobiographical writing by contemporary women writers serves as a community-building device while also creating menopause imaginaries that allow for affirmative discourses around women’s ageing bodies. In order to demonstrate how contemporary writing also draws attention to the experiences of those going through menopause whose identities go beyond the white, cisgender and heterosexual body, I juxtapose my reading of Drasner’s and Steinke’s texts with selected autobiographical essays from two recent edited collections, Caroline Harris’ M Boldened: Menopause Conversations We All Need to Have (2020) or Jane Cawthorne and E.D. Morin’s Writing Menopause: An Anthology of Fiction, Poetry, and Creative Nonfiction (2017), to show how these works also serve to make visible the narratives of trans men and non-binary people experiencing menopause.
Thus, this paper sheds light on how autobiographical writing on the menopause can destabilise discourses of biological essentialism around the normative female body and post-reproductive age, and therefore highlight one possible way to remove some of the stigma around this marginalised experience.

**Bio:** Veronika teaches at the University of Oxford and completed a PhD on supermodernity and contemporary British and Canadian women’s writing in 2020. Her current post-doc project looks at representations of the menopause in twenty-first century women’s writing in German and English. She is on the executive committee of the Contemporary Women’s Writing Association (CWWA) and the Feminist Studies Association (FSA); her recent publications include “Rich Women in Literature and Film” (*Text Matters*, 2019), “Toward a Feminist Archival Ethics of Accountability: Researching with the Aritha van Herk Fonds” (*Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2019), and “Long Thoughts With Aritha van Herk. An Interview” (*Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 2020).

**Teri Szűcs**

**Paper title:** Writing about dementia home care and lesbianity: interweaving experiences and narratives

**Abstract:** “Ko mne vernulas pamyat.” “My Memory Returned to Me.” This will be the title of our book, she says. She chose this. And I must write about her, about her sickness, her life, and about all of us, she says. It’s important to her; she still remembers that she used to love books, and that I love them, too. She knows that it will give us both a purpose during this time. And so we cling to it, both of us.

In my presentation I would like to focus on the intersecting experiences and interweaving narratives of dementia home care and lesbianity, by introducing my multilingual blog project titled 'My Memory Returned to Me – Visszatért hozzám az emlékezet – Ko mne vernulas pamyat'. In the past few years I have been involved in caring for my mother who is living with dementia. Through biographical-autobiographical writing, my aim is to describe dementia care as a dynamic bond in which we both actively participate, and which involves our joint endeavour to remember and to learn. The space for care is in the closeness of intimacy, and this allows me to reconsider my own positionality in the contexts of ageing, gender roles and kinship. Beyond personal, societal and artistic intentions, such writing necessarily becomes a political act, as it describes invisibilised, silenced and tabooed identities.

**Bio:** Teri Szűcs is a critic and independent researcher of literature. Her research focuses on the literature of the Holocaust, and on Hungarian Romani literature. Over the past decade she has been involved in home care, and in the last few years, in dementia care. She has started her blog titled “Visszatért hozzám az emlékezet” – “My Memory Returned to Me” to collect and recount the experiences and adventures of caring for her mother who is living with dementia.
Zuzanna Zarebska Sanches

Paper title: “Forgetting the “A” Word: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne on female agency in her short story ‘Little Red’.”

Abstract: Following the scientific predictions by the year 2030 one in five Irish citizens will be fifty years or older. This situation is not different from any of the other Western country as living longer has become a global phenomenon. For its novelty, ageing still lacks an adequate and viable narrative that could reflect the experience on individual and collective level.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, a contemporary Irish writer, shares with us a glimpse of all the conflicting emotions living the third age implies nowadays in her most recent collection of short stories launched in October this year and entitled Little Red and Other Stories (Blackstaff Press, December 2020). In her short story “Little Red” she gives us a more viable representation of the “contemporary” ageing through an insight into the life of a sixty-year-old plus female character who is on a way to forgetting the “A” word sparring with the “misogynistic” idea that presents “a woman alone (...) as a deficient in some way”. As we accompany the first-person narrative through travelling, making new acquaintances and signing up for an on-line dating website we re-evaluate the concepts of solitude, desire and self-care.

In this presentation we will intertwine Ní Dhuibhne’s “Little Red” with theories of literary gerontology looking at ways the main character, Fiona, reconstructs herself as an agent of her own life.

Bio: Zuzanna Zarebska (PhD, Post-Doc) is a researcher at ULICES/CEAUL at the University of Lisbon in the fields of women’s and ageing studies. She was a visiting scholar at NUI Maynooth, Ireland and University College Dublin working on Irish women’s contemporary writing. Her research interests include Irish and British literature and culture, diaspora studies, feminisms, gender and identity studies, gerontology. She is a member of the RHOME and the Medical Humanities projects. She teaches at the Department of English Studies at the University of Lisbon and is currently developing a project on women and ageing, Women and Ageing: Towards equality, dignity and improvement of life and well-being.

Afiliação DEA/FLUL/CEAUL/ULICES.

2B – Reading Bodies: Gender and Illness
Chair: Margarita Saona

Shareen Z. Hamzah-Osbourne - Written in the body? Medical procedures and gender in Winterson’s novels

Anna Ovaska - How Bodies Are Read? Roxane Gay’s Hunger and Forms of Pain

Jane Hartshorn - Body as medical object: interrogating the subject/object
relationship in contemporary women’s poetry

Hannah Kalverda - Browning the Grim Grass: Narrative Agency in Amelia Rosselli’s Hospital Series

Shareen Z. Hamzah-Osbourne

Paper title: Written in the body? Medical procedures and gender in Winterson’s novels

Abstract: Jeanette Winterson’s novels habitually deconstruct the body to show the fragmented nature of gender and the fluidity of sexuality. From her first novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985), to her most recent, Frankissstein (2019), the effect of medical interventions on the body are intertwined with the identities of her characters. The surgeries they undergo destabilise any notion of the body’s fixity and inviolability, mirroring their shifting and mutable sexual and gender identities.

This paper discusses chemotherapy, cosmetic procedures, and gender confirmation surgery in Written on the Body (1992), The Stone Gods (2007), and Frankissstein (2019) to show how internal and external concerns and desires are embodied by Winterson’s characters. For instance, in Written on the Body, Louise’s body is imaginatively dissected and examined by her ambiguously gendered lover as the changes wrought on it by cancer become a metaphor for their relationship, depicted in the language of medical textbooks. The Stone Gods portrays a science-fiction future in which “cosmetic surgery and genetic Fixing are considered normal”, and it raises important questions around how the medical technology to alter appearances and reverse aging impacts on women’s bodies in a society dominated by men. In the near future of Frankissstein, Ry lives with doubleness following gender surgery, becoming not quite one thing or the other, as the gender binary is challenged by their body. The status of “man/woman” and the formations of “masculinity/femininity” are strained by their liminal existence, although once more, patriarchal power systems attempt to classify what medical intervention has made physical.

Psychoanalytical theories will be used to suggest ways to interpret what these procedures mean for Winterson’s characters and their relations to the society around them, and how gender and sexuality find new modes of confrontation with the androcentric world in which choice and autonomy still depend on power structures like the medical industry.

Bio: Shareena Hamzah-Osbourne is an Honorary Research Associate in the College of Arts & Humanities at Swansea University and the author of Jeanette Winterson’s Narratives of Desire: Rethinking Fetishism, which will be published by Bloomsbury in June 2021. She has been a Research Fellow in the Florence Mockeridge Fellowship group (2019/2020). Prior to her academic career, she worked in media and advertising in Malaysia, and she has since taught at universities in Malaysia, Iran, and the UK.

Anna Ovaska
**Paper title:** How Bodies Are Read? Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* and Forms of Pain  

**Abstract:** In *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017), writer and critic Roxane Gay tells the story of a “fat” body: a body that is often either ignored in the western culture or read through cultural and medical frames that hide or deny its experiences. Her aim is, as she writes, to make herself seen and heard and to fight against stories that are told about a body like hers. My talk focuses on the question of reading non-normative bodies that is highlighted in Gay’s work: I look at how Gay’s writing reveals the lenses through which we “read” bodies of others and how the text invites new forms of perception and interpretation. I bring Gay’s writing into conversation with feminist phenomenology, narrative theory, and the literary practice of close reading. The aim is to show how Gay’s text develops feminist and queer phenomenology of the body that focuses attention to the ways different subjects and bodies (gendered, bisexual, racialized, “fat”) are situated in the world, and how the text guides its readers towards an embodied and politically aware practice of close reading. Gay’s writing brings forth traumatic experiences and invites reflection on the (unconscious) cultural narratives that shape subjectivity and experience. Creating a dialogue with critical medical humanities, *Hunger* explores different forms of pain and makes them visible: 1) traumatic pain that is situated in the body memory and shapes a person’s possibilities of action in the world, 2) pain involved in cultural and medical narratives through which bodies are seen, 3) physiological pains of the body, and 4) pain involved in inhabiting normative spaces. Moreover, Gay creates narrative agency through writing and directs readers to recognize our common frames of reading: the medical and cultural notions of the female body that shape our perception of others as well as ourselves.  

**Bio:** Anna Ovaska (PhD, M. Soc. Sc.) is a postdoctoral researcher at Narrare (Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies) at Tampere University. Her current project develops narratological, feminist and phenomenological approaches to reading experiences of pain in modernist and contemporary Finnish and American literature. Her doctoral thesis *Fictions of Madness: Shattering Minds and Worlds in Modernist Finnish Literature* (2020) explored the text-reader interaction in first-person narratives of mental distress. She is also the co-editor-in-chief of Finnish philosophical magazine *niin & nään*.  

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**Paper title:** Body as medical object: interrogating the subject/object relationship in contemporary women’s poetry (working title)  

**Abstract:** In *Lost Bodies*, Laura Tanner writes that ‘in the examining room, the person with illness becomes the white space in the picture, the absence which allows the illness to be seen’ (2006: 21). Under the gaze of the clinician, the patient becomes a medical specimen, an object of scientific scrutiny, a body to be acted upon, rather than a person with an identity and a history. In this paper, I will explore how patients can experience a transition from active, embodied subject to medical object at the hands of medical practitioners. Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze and focusing on poems written by
Tamar Yoseloff, Lucille Clifton, Constance Bourg, Marian Fielding, and Sharon Black, I will explore the possible tensions and resonances between the objectification of the patient body by the medical gaze and the objectification of the female body by the male gaze. Through a close reading of these poems, I will interrogate the imbalance of power in the patient/doctor dynamic, and the role gender plays within this relationship. I will explore the expectations placed on the patient to be passive and compliant, and how this feeds into the roles women are expected to assume in sexual relationships. I will then demonstrate how these power dynamics can lead to a loss of agency, fragmentation of the self, and dislocation of mind and body.

Bio: Jane Hartshorn is a poet and PhD candidate at University of Kent. Her first pamphlet Tract was published in 2017 by Litmus Publishing, and her second pamphlet In the Sick Hour with Takeaway Press in 2020. She has had poems published by Boudicca Press, Dostoyevsky Wannabe, amberflora, & para-text. She is poetry editor at Ache Magazine. @jeahartshorn

Hannah Kalverda

Paper title: Browing the Grim Grass: Narrative Agency in Amelia Rosselli’s Hospital Series

Abstract: According to the psychologists Paul Lysaker and Bethany Leonhardt, being heard is crucial for the recovery of a patient with a mental illness. They argue that “being heard” affects the patient’s capacity for agency and that the experience of having a voice is crucial to a positive treatment outcome. All too often, however, recovery is determined based on clinical tests only, whereas recovery from a patient’s perspective is perceived as epistemologically less valid. Lysaker and Leonhardt emphasize that enhancing the patient’s agency does not simply allow them to tell their story but further facilitates the capacity to have that story recognized within the psychiatric context. Lysaker and Leonardt define agency as necessarily including “flexible and coherent accounts of the meaning of events which can be understood by others.” In my talk, I will challenge this clinical need for coherence.

Drawing on a feminist perspective on agency, which defines the term as the capacity for sense-making, I argue that agency without coherence needs to be clinical recognized. Lysaker and Leonards identify a relevant issue within the medical field, but their conceptualization of what agency includes needs a feminist rereading. I analyse Amelia Rosselli’s volume of poetry, Hospital Series (1969) and its history of reception to show how the reader can become equipped in the apprehension of fragmentation and alternative language materialities. The aim of it is to find methodologies and modes of reading that allow for the ability for sense-making through narrative practices that are far from coherent. I complexify the concept of agency drawing from literary and philosophical definitions which emphasize the capacity to agency as relational and in search of recognition.

Bio: Hannah Kalverda (NL) is a ResMA student at KU Leuven, Belgium. She holds a MA in Cultural Analysis from Leiden University and a BA in photography from the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague. She also holds a degree in art education from the Willem de Kooning
Academy in Rotterdam, for which she won the Social Practice Award in 2015. She has a special interest in postcolonial psychiatry in literature and art.

2C – Textual Narratives of Cancer
Chair: Mona Baie

Caroline Verdier - Overcoming Hodgkin’s lymphoma: Anne François’ Nu-tête

Janet Mathieson - The “she-wings” of cancer and care: an autofictional narrative.

Vera Kazartseva - Aesthetics of Testimony: Voices of the Pediatric Cancer and Hematology Ward of Sant’Orsola in Wax tablet by Franca Mancinelli

Roxana Doncu - Sorana Gurian : The Admiraible and The Abject in Recit d’un combat (The Story of a Battle)

Caroline Verdier

Paper title: Overcoming Hodgkin’s lymphoma: Anne François’ Nu-tête

Abstract: The sick body has been the focus of narratives by quite a few contemporary francophone women writers, and several of them shared their experiences of breast cancer treatments and recovery – for instance, Annie Ernaux, L’usage de la photo (2005) or Lydia Flem’s La reine Alice (2011). There has, however, been less attention given to some other forms of cancer in literature written in French. This paper thus proposes to explore the work of a lesser-known Belgian writer, Anne François (1958-2006), who wrote about Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a form of cancer not as widely discussed as others in contemporary illness narratives. Anne François explores this cancer and its treatment in her 1991 novel Nu-tête (Prix Rossel), through the character of Cécile. Although Anne François claimed that the novel was a work of fiction, the narrative is clearly based on her own experience of the illness in 1980 and takes the reader through the various steps of the diagnosis and treatment from the perspective of three narrators: the patient and two doctors. This paper seeks to explore how this illness narrative, written before pathographies became a more popular genre in contemporary literature, was already addressing some of the key themes found in most cancer accounts, and highlighting the fundamental relationship between the patient and doctors throughout the journey. This will be achieved by notably drawing on the works of Anne Hunsaker-Hawkins, Rita Charon or Arthur W. Frank on the importance of giving a voice to the sick bodies.

Bio: Caroline Verdier is a lecturer in French at the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow). Her research interests include contemporary French and Francophone literature, in particular Belgian women writers. She is also interested in issues surrounding cultural identities in Francophone countries and currently works on contemporary Francophone illness
narratives in relation to trauma and gender. She published several articles on women writers like Delphine de Vigan, Elisa Brune and Amélie Nothomb, and co-edited _Francographies: Identité et altérïté dans les espaces francophones européens_ with Susan Bainbrigge and Joy Charnley (2010), _As Time Goes By: Portraits of Age_ with Joy Charnley (2013) and _Solitaires, Solidaires: Conflict and Confluence in Women’s Writings in French_ with Elise Hugueny-Léger (2015).

**Janet Mathieson**

**Paper title:** The “she-wings” of cancer and care: an autofictional narrative.

**Abstract:** In this paper I position an original practice-based research project that co-narrativises the art of care and the motions of cancer. Central to my autofictional novel, the figure of the carer simultaneously binds and refracts the multiple narratives of cancer. In caring for her terminally ill husband, she assumes a unique, and, I argue, privileged position. Named Julian, after Julian of Norwich, her experienced trajectory allows for the creation of new knowledge, a new discourse. She reveals, and seeks to heal, a hierarchical rift at the heart of medical discourse: the body as object/subject. Using Kristeva’s theories as methodology, the “productive violence” of text is exploited in her narrative. The factuality of science is exposed as obfuscating, dehumanizing, when countered with the emotionality of her lived experience. Scientific discourse, that monument to the symbolic, is challenged through play, through the poetic. Body and text merge experimentally, creating a new interfacial space. As carer and woman, she hovers, I attest, on an edge, more apt to represent that which threatens - “the fragmentation, the drive, the unnameable” - and, with greater porosity, her identity is more apt to blur through a maternal inclusion of the other. She is, however, not fearless. With fractured being and tenuous subjectivity, she wrestles with her role. Old anchors have been lost, and she lives instead with that “repulsive gift” the abject and looming mortality. The gifts of care are not easily borne, I affirm, but care truly felt can, I propose, like Julian of Norwich’s “shewings”, be revelatory, and can, like love in Plato’s _Phaedrus_, water, “the outlets of the feathers”, initiating a slow and painful wingedness. Finally, if caring for the singularity of another with disability has the potential, as Kristeva says, to transform norms, then, I claim, her care becomes a “political act”.

**Bio:** After fifteen years teaching at home and internationally, Janet Mathieson is now in her final year of study for a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Essex. Her project, an autofictional novel entitled _The Cells_, seeks to create a new discourse about cancer, narrativising this disease through the prism of a carer. _The Cells_ will be her second novel.

**Vera Kazartseva**

**Paper title:** Aesthetics of Testimony: Voices of the Pediatric Cancer and Hematology Ward of Sant’Orsola in _Wax tablet_ by Franca Mancinelli
Abstract: In 2016 a group of collaborators of Centro di poesia contemporanea of the University of Bologna took part in the humanitarian art project *Parole necessarie*, during which they were integrated into the everyday life of the hospital Sant’Orsola. Through this experience they produced poetic pieces, thus giving a voice to the protagonists of this medical space.

One of the results of this art lab is the cycle of lyric proses *Wax tablet* by Franca Mancinelli (translated into English by John Taylor) which represents the ambiguous and complicated literary form that is poetic as well as documentary. *Wax tablet* is a polyphonic symbiosis of voices, testimonies, and lyric reflections. In the Pediatric Ward, Franca Mancinelli encountered the problem of the representation of the brutal reality, invisible to the unaided eye and too terrific to be expressed in verses. Throughout the entire cycle, the leitmotiv of the impossibility of writing about this painful experience is strongly present. The particular literary form of testimony of *Wax tablet* is a research object of the present article.

On the example of *Wax tablet*, the article sets out to foreground the ontological paradox of the literature of testimony: it should find a way to avoid the fiction and the rhetorical figures trying to remain true to the harsh experience, but also it is important to adapt it in the artistic way because it is more than just description of events. The question posed by Mancinelli intersects with the concept of New Prose proposed by the repressed soviet writer Varlam Shalamov. Methodologically, the article is based on the theory of the literature of testimony that enters the Trauma studies.

Bio: Vera Kazartseva, born in Chelyabinsk (Russian Federation), has a double Master’s degree in Italian studies by Bologna University together with Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow) and is an ex-collaborator at Centro di poesia contemporanea.

Roxana Doncu

Paper title: Sorana Gurian: The Admirable and The Abject in *Recit d’un combat (The Story of a Battle)*

Abstract: Regarded as a minor writer in Romanian interwar literature, Sorana Gurian (Sara Gurfinchel), nicknamed “the Jewess with the crooked legs” on account of a deformity acquired after an episode of bone tuberculosis, nevertheless managed to impress the patriarch of Romanian letters, Eugen Lovinescu, who called her writing both “admirable and abject”. Having fled to Paris after the Communist regime seized power in Bucharest, she established herself as a French writer with the publication of *Les Amour Impitoyables*, and shortly thereafter developed an aggressive form of breast cancer. *The Story of a Battle (Recit d’un combat, Paris, 1956)* written during the years of her successive surgeries and hospitalizations is a semi-fictional rendering of her experience in three Paris hospitals, her breakdown after finding out that her right breast had been removed (without her consent), and her attempts at re-defining herself as a woman and a writer at every stage of the disease. Gradually deprived of the signs of her womanhood (breast, womb) and finally confined to bed, she turns her - abject - story of bodily disintegration into an admirable tale of human survival by connecting to others – her Paris friends, her co-sufferers, oncological patients from the various hospitals she had been admitted into. While the cancer diagnosis
throws her into the grisly carousel of hospital care, insensitive personnel and world-weary, inflexible surgeons, she tries to preserve, along with her dignity, her sensitive antennae, finely tuned to register the wonders of the natural world, of which she is so fond of. Taking issue with one of Goethe's pronouncements (“as long as there is light we will stand up and nothing that can be done will be done without us”), she claims that instead that “we should live like grass: we should be, just so, in all humbleness”. Her final novel, published shortly before her death, seems to do justice to Lovinescu's observation, turning the abjection of disease and disintegration into an admirable song of love both for the natural world and the people she cares about.

**Bio:** Roxana Elena Doncu graduated from the University of Bucharest with a degree in English and Russian studies. She completed her Ph.D. in cultural and literary studies at the same university, She is currently a lecturer in the Modern Languages Department at the “Carol Davila” University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest. Her research interests cover areas such as postcolonial and post-communist studies, world literature, translation and medical humanities. She is a member of the international research group on Literary Modeling at the University of Münster, where she has been invited to teach at the graduate school on British, American and Postcolonial Studies. She has translated over fifteen books from Russian, English and German.

3:45 – 5:15 – Parallel sessions 3A, 3B, 3C

**Panel 3A: Narratives of Labour**

**Chair:** Kathryn Bryan

**Adriana Páramo Pérez** - Making visible the invisible: how to subvert the image of labour that films have helped to perpetuate

**Clare Archibald** – Unwording Expected Perinatal Death

**Kaliane Ung** - Marine Life, “Kinnovations,” and Reproductive Futurities

**Héloïse Ducatteau** – Pregnancy by Julien Blanc-Gras’ *In Utero* and Andrea Grill’s *Cherubino*.

**Adriana Páramo Pérez**

**Paper title:** Making visible the invisible: how to subvert the image of labour that films have helped to perpetuate
Abstract: Filming the theatre play Anatomy of a Mermaid, based on the author and actress Iria Pinheiro’s experiences of obstetric violence she went through during and after labour changed me as a woman, as I didn’t know this kind of abusive situations could happen and, as a filmmaker it made me wonder where the image of labour that I have came from. Writer and activist Jesusa Ricoy (2018) states that Hollywood films have helped to shape the image that (western) society has of labour. I take this idea further by arguing that these portrayals have been framed by the representations of the pregnant Virgin Mary. As painters have repeatedly left out details such as cutting the umbilical cordon or the removal of the placenta these have also been made invisible in films. When I filmed Pinheiro, I saw she created a portrayal of the pregnant woman that we are not used to see in films and I wondered how I too could create a disruptive portrayal using my camera. In my video essay I take the performative images of labour that have been perpetuated in films and paintings and juxtapose them to Pinheiro’s performance to show how another portrayal of the pregnant woman can be possible. By this as I explore ways in which disrupt I want to open up a conversation about how to use the camera to shift perspectives.

Link to work in progress version of proposed video essay for this paper: https://vimeo.com/506440851/431524e0d3

Bio: Adriana Páramo was born in Galicia, Spain (1985). She is a filmmaker that counts with two internationally awarded short films as a director and with more than 5 years experience producing corporate, branded and indie films. She is also the co-founder of the Galician Film Forum an organisation that exhibits films from Galicia (Spain) in the UK. At Royal Holloway University she is doing a PhD exploring documentary practice and gender. Her first year’s project ‘The Stronger Experiment’ exploring how patriarchal structures affect the characters seen on the screen has been presented as a 4 video channel installation at the Los Angeles Film & Video Poetry Symposium (2020). She is now working on her thesis project exploring how to subvert the social construct of the pregnant experience on the screen.

Clare Archibald

Paper title: Unwording Expected Perinatal Death

Abstract: My paper will address the potential of interdisciplinary writing to reframe the narrative of how we might articulate nuanced experience of expected perinatal death with subsequent positive impact both artistically and within medical humanities.

A small but important amount of (mainly) women give birth to babies expected to die within seven days. These labours, births and deaths are traditionally framed within medical/legal/ideological definitions of abortion, end of life termination or foetal anomaly. Nuanced articulation of the experience is often further hampered by the inaccurate use of stillbirth as public understanding of the outcome. My paper will draw on my lived experience of giving birth in this context, my related experimental nonfiction practice and my process of unwording in creating a 20-minute abstract media installation structured according to the three stages of labour as practice led MSc dissertation. I will argue that the
medical lexicon currently available to women, trans and nonbinary people birthing expected death not only hampers constructive nuanced expression of the co-existent trauma and beauty of the experience (with impact on wellbeing) but that it also fails to recognise valid artistic and philosophical exploration of the experience beyond narratives of grief.

I will posit that the method of phenomenology applied to experimental interdisciplinary writing practice adds currently absent knowledge to the philosophy of childbirth by interrogating ideas of temporality, knowing and unknowing and the unspoken dialogues of the digital and physical of the birth that leads to expected death. I will argue that there is space occupied by birthing expected death that is not fully attended to either by Arendt’s concept of Towards Natality (1958) or Heidegger’s Being Towards Death (1927) and that by exploring these embodied spaces by means of an experimental interdisciplinary form of the Writer’s Art, there is both artistic and medical benefit. (298 words)

**Bio:** Clare Archibald is a Scottish writer who uses sound, image and materials in her work. Recently awarded a Postgraduate MSc with Distinction in Filmmaking and Media Arts from the University of Glasgow, she plans to further her research with an interdisciplinary practice-based PhD. For her MSc she made a 20-minute time-based art media installation, *Can You Hear the Interim*. Can You Hear the Interim forms the concluding part to *The Absolution of Shyness* a hybrid memoir exploring articulation, baby loss and non-cathartic expression. A section of the work was longlisted for the RMIT/Lifted Brow International Experimental Nonfiction Prize. She is currently recording a site responsive album, *Birl of Unmap*, with Scottish composers Kinbrae in relation to the Fife Earth Project, an abandoned Charles Jencks land art site and former mine in the kingdom of Fife where she lives by the coast. She has a pamphlet of words and images forthcoming with Gorse editions, the publishing imprint of Irish experimental art and literature journal Gorse, and has recent and forthcoming gender and place-based work in anthologies from Manchester University Press, Leuven University Press and Chroma Editions. Widely published, Clare has read and exhibited her work at literary and arts festivals, in galleries, car parks and woods. She runs Lone Women in Flashes of Wilderness, a collaborative project exploring women’s ideas on and experiences of aloneness, darkness and wilderness.

[https://www.clarearchibald.com/](https://www.clarearchibald.com/)

[https://www.lonewomeninflashesofwilderness.com/](https://www.lonewomeninflashesofwilderness.com/)

**Kaliiane Ung**

**Paper title:** Marine Life, “Kinnovations,” and Reproductive Futurities

**Abstract:** This paper examines two examples of marine animals in contemporary French films to rethink queer reproduction and parenthood: the starfish in Lucile Hadzihalilovic’s *Evolution* (2015) and the axolotl in Olivier Babinet’s *Poissonsex* (2019). Marine life immediately conjures up new patterns of family life, looked upon with tenderness as these animals are often on the verge of extinction: the “pregnant” seahorse has been claimed by the #seahorsedads (trans men who carry their children); penguins who share parental
duties, including the incubation of the egg, could inspire humans to revalorize domestic labor and childcare. Being on the animal side contributes to “decentering” and “decolonizing” the concept of family. Taking up Donna Haraway’s slogan “make kin not babies,” I will examine sterility as it is presented in both films as it is related to “life after the human catastrophe” (Rebekah Sheldon), deciphering attempts to reproduce as a creation of ties outside of ancestry or genealogy.

Particular attention will be given to precarious “hospital” structures in both features: in a barren world, the clinical space of the hospital is closer to “pollution” rather than “care” or the preservation of the human body. In Evolution, young boys are kept by mermaids for the gestation and delivery of a new generation: their predicament will be analyzed through Donna Haraway’s “The Promise of Monsters”. Poissonsex is a poetic reflection on the impossibility of fatherhood in a world devoid of marine life, with animal and human specimens having to be conceived in labs. Daniel, a shy biologist, dreams about having a baby. He begins to nest, decorating a room for his dream child. One day, he discovers a “poisson à pattes” on the seashore, in fact an axolotl, a Mexican salamander who lives in fresh water and is used as a model organism by scientists studying regenerative biology (Catherine Malabou’s notion of plasticity). Investigating the starfish and the axolotl, I argue that thinking about animals in a way that goes beyond the metaphor or the allegory – literally becoming the animal – contributes in crafting more inclusive, plastic models of parenthood.

**Bio:** Kaliane Ung is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Her book project Wounded Writings: Joë Bousquet, Hervé Guibert, Violette Leduc, Simone Weil analyzes how the text becomes a tool for survival when violence and suffering alter the body. Alongside Todd Reeser, she is currently co-editing a special issue of Simone de Beauvoir Studies on “Situating Masculinities”.

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**Héloïse Ducatteau**

**Paper title:** Pregnancy by Julien Blanc-Gras’ In Utero and Andrea Grill’s Cherubino.

**Abstract:** Pregnancy is not a common in the literature although we find it in Marguerite Yourcenar’s Souvenirs pieux. The presentation will focus on Julien Blanc-Gras’ In Utero (2015) and Andrea Grill’s Cherubino (2019). The first book is in part autobiographical and deals with the first pregnancy of his wife in Paris. What appears lot of interest is the embedding of the "event" into anthropological, political considerations - the writer is a journalist who makes reports all around the world in an ethnological way. Moreover, the book throws taboos out. Strangely, the book has been analized in no publication so it lets space for a study. The second book describes an oper singer -Iris- whose pregnancy is unexpected and the consequences it provokes: is it more convenient to prefer abortion when the father is not identified and when the carrier is in the foreground? No publication has focused on the novel.

**Bio:** Héloïse is a PhD student in Cultural Studies at the University of Aveiro in Portugal. Her investigations go from the Visual Arts (film, painture) to society (feminism, migration,
language politics regarding the Occitan) with insights in the literature (fairy tales).

3B – Decolonising Bodies

Chair: Maria Tomlinson

Noreen Kane - Narrating Pain: Female Genital Mutilation in Afro Italian literature

Lucía López Serrano - Indigenous Health after the Colonial Epidemic: Reading Lee Maracle’s Ravensong and Celia’s Song

Anne Mutidjo - Performance and construction of the experience in Gerty Dambury’s The Restless

Noreen Kane

Paper title: Narrating Pain: Female Genital Mutilation in Afro Italian literature

Abstract: The practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) takes a central position in the debate between universal human rights and cultural relativism, testing the limits of the latter for many (Hernlund and Shell-Duncan, 2007: 7). This issue recurs frequently in Italy’s postcolonial literature, predominantly written by women with origins in Italy’s former colonies in the Horn of Africa. While many critics have focused on the foregrounding of the female body as a site of patriarchal and colonial violence in these texts, few critics have turned their attention exclusively to their representation of FGM. Bond (2018), writing extensively on the body in relation to migration in Italy, excludes an in-depth analysis of this practice. Ponzanesi (2000, 2004), on the other hand, has analysed its portrayal, but only in relation to one Somali Italian writer.

To address this gap my paper critically examines the representation of FGM in a selection of texts by Somali Italian writers. The narratives I analyse include Sette Gocce di Sangue (1996) (‘Seven Drops of Blood’) by Sirad Hassan, Madre Piccola (2007) (‘Little Mother’) by Cristina Ali Farah, and Oltre Babilonia (2007) (‘Beyond Babylon’) by Igiaba Scego. While Hassan and Scego are clear in their denunciation of the practice, Farah’s critique is more nuanced, with attention paid to the sense of corporeal belonging inscribed by the ritual.

Through a sustained analysis of the portrayal of FGM in these texts, I show that whether condemning it outrightly or entering into dialogue with the issue, the narrators achieve a more holistic subjectivity through its expression. I contend that each text, by bringing attention to the role of storytelling in the narrative structure, is concerned with the healing potential inherent in giving voice to one’s experience in the presence of a listener.

Referencing a framework of feminist narrative theory (Warhol and Lanser, 2015), I explore how by self-reflexively bringing the role of the reader/listener into question, these texts challenge the Western tendency to render abject the victims of FGM rather than view them as empowered, multifaceted subjects.
**Bio:** Noreen Kane has a first-class BA and MA in Italian Studies from University College Dublin (2008, 2011). She has been working in adult language education and yoga teaching for the past decade, and currently volunteers with an organisation providing English classes to migrants in Dublin. She is due to begin a PhD with the Italian Department of University College Cork in September 2021 with a thesis entitled ‘Trauma and the Gendered Body: Transnational Female Narratives in the Context of Italy’.

**Lucía López Serrano**

**Paper title:** Indigenous Health after the Colonial Epidemic: Reading Lee Maracle’s *Ravensong* and *Celia’s Song*

**Abstract:**

“Our stories are about our recovery, not our demise”

—Lee Maracle, “Understanding Raven”

In Ravensong (1993) and its sequel, Celia’s Song (2014), Lee Maracle engages with Indigenous notions of health and sickness and illustrates the nuanced and complex dynamics of a Stó:lō village facing different moments of crisis across the generations. In the process, she addresses the still largely unacknowledged consequences of colonialism upon Indigenous health, not only according to the biosanitary model, but the more encompassing Indigenous notions that see health as a “product of a complex web of physiological, psychological, spiritual, historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and environmental factors” (Waldram et al.). By establishing a parallel between epidemic disease and the “soul wound” of colonialism, she demonstrates the inability of a Westernized model of health to provide solutions for the Indigenous communities, taking a stance for the self-determination and sovereignty of the Native peoples of North America.

Ravensong’s focus on a historical flu epidemic that devastated the Indigenous population in the 1950’s, and Celia’s Song depiction of its consequences (and those of the colonial government’s health policies) work particularly well to bridge the gap in the mind of the white reader between what we may often perceive as “lesser” emotional ailments and physical life-threatening maladies, overcoming the cartesian dualism that separates mind and body sickness in the Western biosanitary model. In this paper, I will analyze what I understand to be the author’s proposed vision of healing for the indigenous people of North America: the validation and incorporation of Indigenous systems of knowledge to the process of decolonization by means of contraposing visions of individual and communal health and sickness and a vision for community resurgence based on self-reliance and self-determination.

**Bio:** Lucía López Serrano is a research fellow funded by the Spanish government and PhD student at the University of Salamanca, Spain. Her postgraduate studies focus on the
analysis of the intersection between vulnerable bodies and the medical establishment in contemporary Canadian Literature, with a focus on the encounter of postcolonial thought and the field of the medical humanities.

**Anne Mutidjo**

**Paper title:** Performance and construction of the experience in Gerty Dambury's The Restless

**Abstract:** This essay analyzes Gerty Dambury's aestheticized (re)construction of the experience of the incidents that shook Guadeloupe in May 1967, during which an undetermined number of strikers were killed by law enforcement after exiting a failed negotiations' meeting. While this account is not without echoing of the events of May 1968, the massacre in Guadeloupe was considered classified information until 2016 and has been largely unaccounted for by the French media.

This partially autobiographical first novel questions the modalities and limitations produced by dominant, linear models of knowing. In Les Rétifs (2014), Gerty Dambury examines the relationship between the facts of historical events and their subsequently fictionalized accounts. She does so by offering retellings in which she repositions the events into broader geographical and temporal spaces (the local Caribbean and the global colonial empire). Integrating elements of neurology and psychology, my analysis demonstrates how Dambury mobilizes death and madness, through an aesthetic that resists language and questions the modalities of the dominant narrative.

Thus, Dambury unsettles the space of narration by letting marginalized voices speak (the mad, women, homosexuals, children, and the dead), and by using a very hybrid genre (oscillating between poetry, prose, and drama). She places the narration into a temporal and special environment that cannot be objectively located but instead, a space that focuses on the interaction of its various components. By focusing on the implications behind the discourse surrounding the events, and how the discourse makes sense (or not) of the event, Dambury challenges the ways in which events are re-membered, effectively deconstructing the “know”, and taking on an explicit criticism of capitalism itself. Focusing on the epistemology of “truth”, Dambury’s text makes rhetorical space for the reader to challenge the foundational myths of French society.

**Bio:** Anne Mutidjo is a PhD candidate (ABD) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation looks at how women Caribbean writers reappropriate madness to reconstruct the various discourses elaborated about their identities. Her work aims at challenging the notion of empirical, scientific observation as the primary source of valid knowledge. It inscribes itself within the larger context of health humanities, and through the lens of decolonialism.
**Darian Goldin Stahl** - The Enduring Lives of Artists’ Books

**Beth Kearney** - The Vitalities and Vulnerabilities of the Cancerous Body in Photoliterature by Lydia Flem

**Adina Stroia** - Battling Cancer and Cinematic Genres in Valérie Donzelli’s La Guerre est déclarée (2011)

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**Darian Goldin Stahl**

**Paper title: The Enduring Lives of Artists’ Books**

**Abstract:** For the Contemporary Womxn’s Writing and the Medical Humanities 2021 Conference, I propose an investigation into the productive tension between text and image included within patients' artists’ books. In particular, I will focus on the practice of Martha Hall and the unique life of her artist’s books on the topics of cancer and dying: from creation, to activation in the clinic, to archive, and finally, to their mobilization in medical classrooms. Hall’s bookmaking practice and patient activism serve as a case study for the potentiality of artists’ books within medical contexts. Employed in the examination room, an artist’s book presents a destabilizing ‘flipping of the script’ on the typical doctor-patient encounter that may ultimately lead to more productive communication and a sense of holistic care. Within a medical or health humanities classroom, a sensory study of artists’ books focuses a reflexive lens onto the systemic injustices of Western medicine, such as disparate priorities of time, knowledge hierarchies, and dehumanization. Since Hall’s passing from a reoccurrence of cancer in 2003, her artists’ books exemplify how one’s lived experiences endure in the archival book form, as her legacy continues to influence new generations of health learners as part of medical school library collections. To this day, Hall’s artist’s books are used as primary resource materials to sensitize future health practitioners on differences in communication styles and expectations for quality time they can expect to encounter with their patients. Following Hall’s lead, I argue for further integration of the medium into medical humanities pedagogies because artists’ books not only give an authoritative account of what it is like to be chronically ill that is otherwise absent from medical textbooks, but they also provoke critical dialogues that scrutinize the Western medical paradigms at the root of patient and practitioner discontents alike.

**Bio:** Darian Goldin Stahl is an American research-creation printmaker and bookmaker based in Montreal, Canada. Darian graduated with distinction from Concordia University’s Humanities PhD Program in 2021, where she held Canada’s most prestigious graduate award, a SSHRC Vanier Scholarship. Her dissertation, “*Book as Body: The Meaning-Making of Artists’ Books in the Health Humanities,*” investigates how artists’ books can become multi-sensory objects of lived experience on the topics of illness, disability, health, and wellbeing. In the Fall of 2021, she will start a Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship at the UNBC Northern
Medical Program to continue merging creative health practices and health humanities pedagogies.

Beth Kearney

**Paper title:** The Vitalities and Vulnerabilities of the Cancerous Body in Photoliterature by Lydia Flem

**Abstract:** Lydia Flem's autofictional novel *La Reine Alice* (2011) [*Queen Alice*] and many of the photographs contained in the volume *Journal implicite* (2013) [*Implicit Diary*] are autobiographical works that use fantasy to narrate the author's personal experience of breast cancer and its treatment by chemotherapy. The works have previously been examined together for the rich dialogue that they establish between text and photographs (Monjour 2020; 2015b; 2015a) and the complex intertextual ties established with Lewis Carroll's fantastic universe (Dusailtant-Fernandes 2016). However, given that the holistic trauma of treating breast cancer is a central focus, it is surprising that Flem's representation of the diseased body and its relationship to a medical environment has not yet been examined.

My paper will analyse feminist embodiment in *La Reine Alice* and *Journal implicite*, focusing in particular on how Flem's use of fantasy offers an intriguing perspective on the lived experience of disease and breast cancer treatment. In fact, the fantastic mode allows Flem to evoke her resilience in the face of hardship, thus portraying the body's vitalities and vulnerabilities, its "adventures and misadventures" (*La Reine Alice*, p. 47). Applying Rosemary Garland-Thompson's theory of misfitting (2011), I first show that fantasy allows Flem to narrate the highs and lows of disease and of a medical experience, nonetheless offering a critical perspective on the confusion and disillusionment endured while combatting cancer. Second, I borrow from Rosi Braidotti's perspective on life's biological vitality and vulnerability (*zoē*) (2010) to explain that the two works also encompass a positivity and resilience. Ultimately, Flem's hopeful, and specifically fantastic, representation of life-threatening disease offers a nuanced perspective on embodied subjectivity and the cancerous body, as she uses text and image to expose an interconnectedness between vulnerability and vitality, death and life, inertia and creativity.

**Bio:** Beth is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, where she researches feminist deployments of photography in women's life writing in French (2000-present). She serves as Communications Officer and Postgraduate Representative for *Women in French (WiF): Australia*, a sister association of *WiF* in the United States and the United Kingdom. Beth's cross-disciplinary research is primarily anchored in the fields of modern and contemporary literatures, cultures and visual studies in French, and she specialises in the interactions between photography and the written word, as well as in feminist philosophies and aesthetics.
Adina Stroia

**Paper title:** Battling Cancer and Cinematic Genres in Valérie Donzelli’s *La Guerre est déclarée* (2011)

**Abstract:** Following on from Theodor Adorno’s infamous statement that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’, in her seminal text *Illness as Metaphor* (1977), Susan Sontag puts forth the representational challenges posed by an inner, life-threatening enemy: ‘Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease.’ In a different artistic domain, in the movie *La Guerre est déclarée* (2011), Valérie Donzelli sets out to explore the formal *défi* of representing cancer when it threatens a child, the very symbol of futurity. In this autofictional work, the filmmaker transposes to screen her own real-life experiences of being a mother to a cancer-stricken child who is diagnosed with a brain tumour when merely a toddler. While exploring the potential ‘limit-experience’ (Emma Wilson) of losing a child, Donzelli employs a deft and confident cinematic touch, recognizing that under the *emprise* of cancer, genres too must mutate. I suggest that Donzelli avoids pathos and excessive melodrama by mobilising a pop sensibility through cinematic citation, ruptures of rhythm, and dynamic montage in order to evoke at a formal level the affective kaleidoscope that a life-altering medical diagnosis opens. The movie explores at once the mutation of the oneiric space of childhood through illness and medical intervention, and the young parents’ journey into established adulthood as the experience of parenthood is forced out of the familial and familiar realm and into a medically-coded world. I further propose that the ludic tonalities of the movie are an offering to their real-life son, Gabriel, giving him a panoramic view of the early years he spent in a clinical setting. Lacking the tools to acknowledge his condition through his very innocence, the child had remained unaware of the uninvited and undesirable guest that had taken residence in his body throughout his illness. Through *La Guerre est déclarée*, the child not only knows that the parents bore witness to his disease for him, but that they declared war and won.

**Bio:** Adina Stroia is an early-career researcher in the field of women’s life-writing and visual culture. She holds a PhD from King’s College London and is a former Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women’s Writing at the IMLR (London). Adina’s research focuses on psychoanalysis, thanatography, ageing, queer studies, ethics of care, and visual studies. Her most recent publications include ‘Camille Laurens: L’écriture depuis soi’ in *Dalhousie French Studies* and ‘The Traumatic Structure of the *récit de mort*: Camille Laurens’s *Philippe*’ in *French and Francophone Studies*. Her ongoing project investigates representations of ageing female bodies in contemporary French literature and visual culture through the prism of an ethics of care.
1:30pm – 3:00pm – Parallel sessions 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D

4A – Biotech, Capitalism, and Biopolitics
Chair: Victoria Oana Lupascu

Jana Vanecek - ID9606/2a-c [Genealogien eines Virus]

María Díaz - Juana y la cibernética: Insanity or Cybernetics?

Margarita Saona - A(n)aesthetic Response: Mind and Senses in Literary Works by Women Patients.

Jana Vanecek

Paper title: ID9606/2a-c [Genealogien eines Virus]

Abstract: Due to the rapid developments in the field of medical biotechnology, the transactions that are connected with the body have developed into the most important areas of the market economy in the last few decades. This has lead to massive changes in political, economic and social structures, but also to new power relations between the institutions and social classes involved. With the methods of artistic research my upcoming book ID9606/2a-c [Genealogien eines Virus] addresses the question of how biotechnological inventions, as areas of capitalist investment, can affect political decisions in health care. The reference point of my investigation is the rationing of the new Hepatitis C drugs in Switzerland. I am assuming a personal experience. My infection with the hepatitis C virus. For a long time, the infection was considered impossible to treat or only treatable to a very limited extent. This fact only changed when Pharmasset Inc. developed PSI-7977, which was brought to market by Gilead Sciences a few years later. The possibility of an almost one hundred percent chance of recovery has been celebrated as a historic event in science and medicine. But while Gilead was able to run an unrivalled business with the new hepatitis C drugs for a long time, the "miracle of healing" remained out of reach for most of those affected. The therapies were simply too expensive and were immediately rationed by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health. For examining the given situation, I chose an interplay of various text genres (dialogue, advertising, diary/hypomnemata, scientific text, essay and documentation) that not only encircles the subject from multiple perspectives but also crosses various disciplines in terms of content. By bringing together different forms of knowledge and genres, readers are offered different readings on the same subject.

Bio: Jana Vanecek was born in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and lives currently in Switzerland. She holds degrees in fine arts, critical theory and transdisciplinarity in the arts. She works as a research associate at the Zurich University of Arts. As an artist and writer her projects operate at the interfaces between art, research, science and literature. Vanecek often chooses her topics on the basis of personal, but the focus is not on her "individual person". She sees herself rather as a "contact area" or "biopoe" in which the prevailing discourses and practices are brought together. Inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s poetic auto-
theory and Annie Ernaux's auto-ethnographic literature, the writing "Self" is decentralized in her texts in order to reveal the cultural, political, economic and social entanglements that shape this "Self" - but also the social realities of many other lives. Vanecek illuminates her topics from different disciplinary perspectives and uses a combination of diverse voices as a structuring principle.

María Diaz

**Paper title:** Juana y la cibernética: Insanity or Cybernetics?

**Abstract:** *Juana y la Cibernética* (1963) was written by Elena Aldunate during “The Golden Age” of science fiction in Chile. Darrel Lockhart asserts that “[c]ommunication is the means to overcome the loneliness in which some of her [Aldunate’s] characters live (13).” In this sense, *Juana y la cibernética* tells the story of a working woman in her 40s who finds herself locked in in the factory where she oversees a machine that cuts zinc planks as part of an assembly production. While there, she starts reflecting on her life and gives full freedom to her imaginative mind. This paper looks at the protagonist’s actions using a psychological approach, analysing the hints the narration gives to portray her mental state. Theories by Gilbert Durand and Donna Haraway are used. It is argued that the protagonist’s mental state is influenced by her loneliness and the pressure she feels from a diurnal and patriarchal society. The factory and her machine act as catalysts that help her find her nocturnal self. It is concluded that the post-colonial, diurnal and patriarchal society of those times influenced her self-esteem and the way she perceived herself being poor and lonely. Also, the transformation of the setting, which became the protagonist’s dwelling for three days, helped emerge her nocturnal self. Finally, the empowerment process Juana went through due to the relationship she had with her machine made her liberation possible. Depending on the view, the resolution of the protagonist’s death will have different outcomes: it was suicide under a diurnal and patriarchal view, she liberated herself under a diurnal view, or she became a cyborg under a Harawayan view.

**Bio:** María Francisca Díaz is a MA Englis-Speaking Cultures student at the University of Bremen. Her main fields of research are literature, gender studies, autobiographic narratives and science fiction.

Margarita Saona

**Paper title:** A(n)aesthetic Response: Mind and Senses in Literary Works by Women Patients

**Abstract:** Although people going through health-related experiences and those who treat them often reject the term “patient,” I purposely embrace this term in its etymological sense: its Latin origin, “patiens,” from “pator,” to suffer or bear. The women whose works I examine here have experienced extreme suffering and often an enduring confrontation with
their own mortality and their writings reflect two distinct ways in which the written word responds to the bodily estrangement caused by illness.

On the one hand, illness is a sensorial phenomenon: changes in temperature, pain in all its different manifestations, and, often, visual, olfactory, hearing, and taste disturbances. Illness is an aesthetic experience if we go back to the Greek origin of the word *aisthetikos*, meaning “of or for perception by the senses.” Illness awakens our senses, often in undesirable ways. Its symptoms make it impossible to ignore what we perceive. And this aesthetic experience has been translated into poetry by many authors. On the other hand, illness creates a cognitive dissonance that makes the sufferers search for ways to understand why their bodies act in unexpected ways, to question the idea of “normalcy,” and to inquire into the medical responses to their pain. Writers often search into the history of their illness and its treatment, the philosophical aspects of suffering, the fragility of life, the meaning of medical terms, and the limits of the self.

In this presentation, I will explore the analytic perspective in the works of Susan Sontag and Susan Gubar and the aesthetic response in the poems of Lila Zemborain and Victoria Guerrero Peirano, and demonstrate the interweaving of the mind and the senses in these very diverse texts.

**Bio:** Margarita Saona studied linguistics and literature at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. She received a Ph.D. in Latin American literature from Columbia University in New York. She is interested in issues of memory, cognition, empathy, and representation in literature and the arts. She has published numerous articles, two books on literary and cultural criticism, *Novelas familiares: Figuraciones de la nación en la novela latinoamericana contemporánea* (Rosario, 2004) and *Memory Matters in Transitional Perú* (London, 2014), two books of short fiction, *Comehoras* (Lima, 2008) and *Objeto perdido* (Lima, 2012), and a book of poems, *Corazón de hojalata/Tin Heart* (Chicago, 2017). She is currently working two books, one entitled *Despadre: La masculinidad y la crisis de la identidad en la cultura peruana* which examines the way representations of men in Peruvian literature and film reveal deep fractures in the country’s imaginary, and another one, entitled *Vital Signs*, on the literary genres of infirmity.

**4B – Narratives of Transition**
Chair: Kaliane Ung

**Blase Provitola** - Narratives of Medical Transition in Contemporary French Literature

**Sabine Sharp** - New Trans Genres: Reimagining Medical Transition through Trans Science Fiction Writing

**Blase Provitola**
**Paper title: Narratives of Medical Transition in Contemporary French Literature**

**Abstract:** Since trans people have been required to affirm certain recognizable narratives in order to access medical care, it is challenging to access the complexity of their lived experiences. Literary expression is one window into learning how such individuals frame the process of gender transition. In this presentation, I will explore how medical narratives shape the way that transgender writers portray themselves and market their work, as well as how their work helps us question and reframe medical authority. I will do so through contemporary French trans narratives, thus also decentering the dominance of English in trans studies.

This presentation will give a brief overview of recent French literary works depicting gender transitions, such as Léonor de Récondo’s award-winning *Point cardinal* (*Cardinal Point*, 2017) and Inès Rau’s *Femme* (*Woman*, 2018). I will argue that such works tend to present doctors and psychologists as saviors who help transgender people embody the truth of their identity. However, this focus on “embodying” truth and authenticity often occults the complex exchanges between medical officials and their transgender patients, as both groups seek to legitimize trans narratives.

Adel Tincelin speaks about the compromises inherent in that need for legitimacy in *On n’a que deux vies: Journal d’un transboy* (*You Only Live Twice: Diary of a Transboy*, 2019). Published as part of Éditions Cambourakis’s feminist and capitalist *Sorcières* series, this diary details an individual account of medical transition which pushes back against dominant tropes of trans literature (being born in the wrong body, changing one’s outside to match one’s inside, being at home in one’s skin). In doing so, it fleshes out the complexity of trans experiences, framing them in terms of structural violence, and leads to a richer understanding of how identity is constructed in the interplay between individuals and the medical establishment.

**Bio:** Blase A. Provitola is Visiting Assistant Professor of French at Trinity College (Hartford, CT, USA). Their research bridges contemporary French and comparative literary studies, postcolonial studies, and gender studies. They have published on issues ranging from queer activism and identity to postcolonial literature to transgender-inclusive pedagogy.

**Sabine Sharp**

**Paper title: New Trans Genres: Reimagining Medical Transition through Trans Science Fiction Writing**

**Abstract:** How might science fiction enable us to reimagine medical gender transition? Historically, autobiography and memoir have figured as the primary genres for transsexual and transgender creative expression. Key twentieth century trans writing such as Lili Elbe’s *Man into Woman* (1931) and Jan Morris’ *Conundrum* (1974) narrated the authors’ experiences undergoing surgical transition. While trans authors such as Juliet Jacques (2015) and Daniel M. Lavery (2020) have experimented with memoir in exciting ways, this paper...
will focus on trans authors who explore other generic possibilities for writing about medical transition.

I offer close readings of two works of recent trans women’s science fiction writing: Torrey Peters’ novella ‘Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones’ (2016) and Isabel Fall’s short story ‘I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter’ (2020). These two works indicate the value of science fiction for exploring the relationship between transness and twenty-first century medical pathways for transition. Through tropes of biohacking, cyborgs, and dystopian futures, Peters and Fall link trans ways of being to cyberpunk themes of redefining the human, resisting capitalist exploitation and utilising technology for liberation. These works offer alternative approaches to transition that critique the pathologizing medical models of gender identity disorder, gender dysphoria, and gender incongruence.

To understand the intervention Peters and Fall make, I situate their writing alongside theoretical works such as Dean Spade’s ‘Mutilating Gender’ (2006), Paul B. Preciado’s Testo Junkie (2008), and Harry Josephine Giles’ Wages for Transition (2019). I argue that Peters and Fall extend these critiques of the medical construction of transness as pathology into new and unsettling dimensions. In the contemporary context of tense debates over trans rights, the speculative futures imagined by Peters and Fall suggest science fiction might offer new approaches to thinking about trans healthcare.

Bio: Sabine Sharp is a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester, and has recently submitted their thesis, titled ‘Monsters, Time-Travel, and Aliens: Tracing the Genealogies of ‘Trans’ through Feminist Science Fiction Writing and Film’. Their article exploring science fiction’s colonial histories through Asian Canadian SF was published in Contemporary Women’s Writing in January 2020. Alongside their research, they also co-organise the Sexuality Summer School, a week of events for postgraduates taking place each May.

4C – Analysing Women
Chair: Shareena Hamzah-Osbourne

Francesca Lewis - “I am a proponent of aporia”: Johanna Hedva and Autø/gnøsis

Elena Lopez - Clinical analysis of the character in Gioconda Belli’s The Inhabited Woman.

Cristina Robu - Care and the chronotope: reflecting on the space-time of care in Soigner, aimer by Ouanessa Younsi

Francesca Lewis

Paper title: “I am a proponent of aporia”: Johanna Hedva and Autø/gnøsis

Abstract:
“I am not a representative for a specific kind of experience; I am presentative of it. That is, I’m doing it right now, in front of you, and in front of myself. […] My address is from an affirmation of messiness, a testimony of and to disorder, an honouring of incomplete-ness.”

Through my doctoral research, I have been engaged in a reflexive counter-diagnostic exploration of borderline experience, sometimes known by the clinical label “borderline personality disorder”. The aim is to refocus our collective gaze away from stigmatised borderline behaviour, and towards borderline experience; the embodied existential feeling of being borderline. I do this from within the subject position of the “borderline”, as someone who was given the BPD label, who rejects the pathologisation, and yet wants to find ways to know and value this experience, for myself, for other “borderline” selves, and for us all.

To this end, I have developed a methodology: autø/gnøsis. Like counter-diagnosis (Price, 2009), autø/gnøsis seeks to queer and disrupt psychiatric labels and the foundations they are built on. It rejects binaries (doctor/patient, self/other), and makes space for multiplicity and aporia. The autø/gnøstic approach is about self, knowledge, and self-knowledge, while also acknowledging the shifting, unsteady void at the centre of these concepts.

Using a diffractive method (Barad, 2014) of autography and close reading, this paper will consider my autø/gnøstic methodology with/through the work of writer/artist/musician/astrologer, Johanna Hedva. As the author of the influential essay “Sick Woman Theory” (2016), Hedva has become something of a luminary in the disability activism sphere. I will focus on their less famous essay of the same year, “In Defence of De-persons”, showing how Hedva could be said to work autø/gnøstically, simultaneously building and dismantling self, knowledge and self-knowledge.

**Bio:** Francesca Lewis is a doctoral candidate in Women's Studies at University of York. Following her BA in English Literature & Creative Writing, she studied for an MA in Interdisciplinary Psychology at Leeds Beckett University, where her dissertation received the highest grade ever awarded on the programme. Her current research builds on that work, exploring counter-diagnostic meaning and queer cripsistemologies through creative and diffractive methods and methodologies. Her research interests include the self/subject and autography; trauma, madness and (self-)definition/diagnosis; phenomenology and new materialism.

**Elena López**

**Paper title:** Clinical analysis of the character in Gioconda Belli's The Inhabited Woman.
Abstract: Lavinia, a 23-year-old woman, was born in the imaginary city of Faguas. Belonging to the Central American bourgeoisie, she could go to study in Europe, she studied architecture at university. The novel is set when she returns from Europe to Faguas, where she stays independently in the house of her aunt Inés (now deceased) and begins to practice her profession in an architectural firm where she meets Felipe, who introduces her to the guerrilla. Lavinia is presented to us as an intelligent, imaginative young woman, transgressor with the canons imposed by both her social status and gender, and well-marked ideals.

She recognizes herself as a lonely girl. It is possible that she has resorted to fantasy to disconnect from a reality where she is criticized by her mother and thus compensating for the narcissistic flaw. Despite an apparent self-esteem, there is a perceived narcissistic flaw, a desire to be liked/accepted by her mother, to be the object of her mother’s desire. The failure to recognize the mother’s need for affirmation of the little girl may have attacked the security sought in the attachment relationship that allows her to explore the world, so that she finds in fantasy that place of protection.

The different transgressions that recompose her self-esteem can be seen as a constant opposition to what her mother represents for her - the social class she interprets as having abandoned her - and the traditional pattern of femininity. There are conflicts in her ideal of self: it implies a rejection of the traditional femininity she sees represented in her mother and a desire to be independent; on the other hand, she experiences distance or rupture of that relationship, since differentiation is experienced as separation and rupture of the relationship.

Bio: Elena López is a PhD student from the Pompeu Fabra University, in Barcelona. Her thesis is based on Latin-American Literature written by women in the 1980s. She is investigating about three best-seller authors as Gioconda Belli, Angeles Mastretta and Isabel Allende whose novels has been translated into several languages and sold around the world.

Cristina Robu

Paper title: Care and the chronotope: reflecting on the space-time of care in Soigner, aimer by Ouanessa Younsi

Abstract: With her dual background in medicine and literature, the psychiatrist and poet Ouanessa Younsi operates in the intricate maze of language as both doctor and patient in order to reflect (on) the time-space of sickness as it is perceived (objectified) and lived (experienced). In her fictional, but also somewhat theoretical text Soigner, aimer (2016), Younsi retraces her professional and personal journey in the clinical time-space and expresses the idiosyncrasies of each experience through different registers of language.
Theorized by Bakhtin, the time-space – the chronotope – is a constitutive element which shapes textual and clinical encounters. Identified by Peter Good, the “care chronotope” and the “patient chronotope” speak to the dichotomy of experiences and translate the positions, or roles (Talcott Parsons) of each participant. This particular critical framework allows a manifold reading of the clinical space(s), of the encounters, exchanges, and forms of care.

This paper explores the complexities of lived and narrated spacetime in Younsi’s *Soigner, aimer* using the concept of chronotope and its variants in order to show how language(s), both medical and poetic, construct, define, and transcend the doctor and patient positions and exposes their limitation.

**Bio:** Cristina Robu holds a Ph.D. in Literary Theory (Academy of Sciences of Moldova, 2018) and she is currently working on her second Ph.D. in French/Francophone Studies. Her dissertation is tentatively titled *Maladie et Récit : La Mise en récit du corps malade dans la fiction Québécoise contemporaine (Sickness and Story: The narrativization of the sick body in contemporary Québécois fiction)* and it explores the pain narratives in Quebec literature and cinema. Her research interests are Medical Humanities, Quebec studies, literary and critical theory, cultural studies, and French modern and contemporary literature and cinema.

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**4D – Psychosis and Psychiatry**

**Chair:** Antonia Wimbush

**Leah Sidi** - Compulsory positivity and theatres of despair: 4.48 Psychosis in contemporary performance

**Ines Faro** - « Sors-tu du gouffre noir ou descends-tu des astres ? » Voice-Hearing in PsycoZe by Marie-Christine Arbour

**Leah Sidi**

**Paper title:** Compulsory positivity and theatres of despair: 4.48 Psychosis in contemporary performance

**Abstract:** This presentation asks how it is possible to stage narratives of despair and suicidality in a contemporary culture imbued with discourses of wellness, compulsory positivity, and consumer-focused happiness. Sarah Kane’s play *4.48 Psychosis* was first staged in 2000 shortly after the author’s death and remains one of the most interesting and
polemical representations of mental illness on the UK stage. Initially dismissed as a disturbing ‘75 minute suicide note’, the play presents its audience with a radical encounter with psychosis and suicidality which is not orientated around the logic of cure.

Recent productions of this work generate a kind of cultural dissonance with contemporary mental health discourse, which is structured around the concept of wellness and ‘compulsory positivity’. This ‘compulsory positivity’ is based on a neo-liberal understanding of personhood as autonomous and self-making, in an environment in which the individual is compelled makes themselves into cultural capital. The pervasiveness of this attitude becomes ‘compulsory’ when all expressions of mental pain are only able to signify through a framework which orients all expression towards the productive. As Lauren Berlant suggests, it contains within it a ‘promise of happiness’ which comes to structure the limits of self-expression.

Recent productions of 4.48 Psychosis provide accounts of mental suffering which thwart the parameters of compulsory positivity. Through its extreme invitation of the spectator into its dramaturgy, 4.48 Psychosis suggests that suicidality is not an isolated form of mental pathology that can only signify through cure. Instead it is a painful ongoing means of relating with the outside world which is to be met with recognition and participation. I examine this through two productions: the Lyric Hammersmith’s 2017 opera of 4.48 Psychosis, and the Belarus Free Theatre’s 2015 London production. These productions emphasise the role of queer desire and female solidarity as alternative sites of expression and meaning in the face of diagnostic reductionism. Together they open up a site of contemporary cultural dissonance, in which it is possible to articulate pathologized despair beyond the compulsion to be positive.

**Bio:** Dr Leah Sidi is a Lecturer (teaching) in Health Humanities at UCL. Her research focus is on contemporary theatre and mental health, with a special focus on feminist theatre and psychoanalysis. She is currently recipient of the Feminist Review Archive Award, researching feminist conceptions of community care. The abstract below is based on research conducted as part of a Wellcome/ISSF postdoc at Birkbeck, University of London. Leah has published in *Performance Research* and is a regular contributor to the Institute for Medical Humanities’ *The Polyphony*. She is currently working on a monograph on Sarah Kane’s *Dramaturgy of Psychic Life*.

**Ines Faro**

**Paper title:** « Sors-tu du gouffre noir ou descends-tu des astres ? » Voice-Hearing in *PsycoZe* by Marie-Christine Arbour

**Abstract:** In my presentation, I shall examine how French-Canadian writer Marie-Christine Arbour uses the subjective domain of the experience of hearing voices to investigate the relationship between language, voice, identity, and culture in her novel “PsychoZe” (2016).
To do so, I shall use an interdisciplinary framework drawing on concepts from literary theory and medical humanities, specifically transcultural psychiatry and medical anthropology. I will start by analyzing how Arbour engages with details of her experience of living with schizophrenia to construct the main character and plot of her novel. Second, I briefly explore contemporary research on voice hearing phenomena from Western and non-Western case studies to popular approaches, such as the Hearing Voices Movement which contests the psychiatric discourse around the experience of hearing voices. After, I draw on literary theory, and specifically Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of “heteroglossia” (1981) or diversity of speech and “polyphony,” to analyze how a multiplicity of voices coexist and is reflected in and within the text. To conclude, I shall argue that Arbour’s narrative practice relates to acts of signifying what it means to have marginalized voices and minds. Through an analysis of the main character’s relationship with the Grand Zorg, S’s voice and Marie-Christine’s conviction in fighting the NaZ, the emissaries of evil, I hope my presentation contributes to the ongoing debate on different phenomenological modes of voice hearing while expanding the concept of voice in fiction.

**Bio:** Inês Faro is a former journalist and current PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the Université de Montréal with a doctoral grant from the Fonds de recherche du Québec—Société et culture. She is also an advanced candidate at the Canadian Institute of Psychoanalysis—QE. Her doctoral research aims at filling two gaps within the field of literary studies and the medical humanities: first, the lack of interdisciplinary studies of literary works that represent the experience of hearing voices, known as auditory hallucinations according to the Western biomedical discourse; and second, the few attention given to the role of language, gender and culture variables of voice in writing.

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**SATURDAY 31 JULY**

9:30am – 11:00am – Parallel sessions 5A, 5B, 5C

**5A - Wording Chronic Illnesses**  
**Chair:** Marie Allitt

**Katja Herges** - Writing a New Disease: (Crip) Time, Affect and Long Covid in the Digital Diary

**Elinor Cleghorn and Dorothy Lehane:** [performance] with sequelae

**Charlotte Hallahan** - Endometriosis and the Language of Pain in Hilary Mantel’s *Giving Up the Ghost*
**Katja Herges**

**Paper title:** Writing a New Disease: (Crip) Time, Affect and Long Covid in the Digital Diary.

**Abstract:** Initial clinical reports of patients with covid-19 indicated that the pulmonary covid-19 infection lasted about 2-3 week with age as major risk factor of mortality. However, it soon became apparent that several patients, in particular women, who had officially recovered from covid-19, continued or restarted to experience symptoms over weeks and months. Long COVID was reportedly first used in May 2020 as a hashtag on Twitter by Elisa Perego to “summarize her experience of disease as cyclical, progressive and multiphasic.” While many patients felt dismissed and discriminated by clinicians and the public, often pointing at the psychogenic origin of the condition, an international health advocacy movement emerged that initiated patient-led and traditional scientific research. In addition, along with a general increase in life and diary writing in the pandemic, Long Covid patients have started to document their symptoms and creatively engaged with their experiences mostly in digital formats.

This presentation analyses diaristic and digital representations of Long Covid from a patient’s perspective. While traditional memoir has been the predominant genre of illness narratives, in the past years, digital formats ranging from illness blogs, comics and social media platforms have proliferated. With covid-19, a new genre of illness life writing emerged on microblogs such as Twitter and Instagram which Shannon Pearl calls “the Covid-19 symptoms thread.” This presentation examines Karoline Preisler’s twitter diary under the hashtag #coronatagebuch (corona diary), Monique Jackson’s Still Ill Corona Diary on Instagram and Phyllis Weliver “Long Covid Haiku.”

Drawing on scholarship in queer, affect and crip studies, I examine how these digital diaries confirm and open fractures in concepts of linear medical time and affects and envision live with multiple often circular temporalities and a range of affective states.

**Bio:** Katja Herges is a researcher at the Institute for Ethics and History of Medicine at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. Previously, Katja has practiced as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist in different clinical settings. In addition to her medical degree, she has earned a Ph.D. in German studies and feminist theory and research from the University of California, Davis. Her academic interests include medical humanities, life writing, visual cultures of illness, gender studies and mental health. She has published on queer death and cancer photography, body theory in autobiographical fiction and illness narratives by migrants in Germany. Her edited volume *Contested Selves: Life Writing and German culture* (together with Elisabeth Krimmer) has been published with Camden House in 2021.
**Elinor Cleghorn and Dorothy Lehane**

**Paper title: with sequelae**

**Abstract:** In this collaborative performance, Cleghorn and Lehane delve into the possibilities and limitations of language to convey enmeshed yet divergent experiences of chronic, incurable, medically unexplained illnesses. *With sequelae* was created through shared meditations on the tensions between illness as lived, illness as clinical entity, and illness as cultural phenomenon. In a complex, curious, and often absurd dialogue of call-and-response, provocation and pronouncement, *with sequelae* opens out the parameters of illness writing and explores how collaborative authorship between sick womxn can undermine and destabilise hierarchies of medical knowledge which disavow ‘feminised’ articulations of illness. *With sequelae* is a work that strives towards a minor language for uncontainable and indecipherable womxn’s bodies; bodies that exceed understanding, bodies that society and science alike strive to quieten and control; bodies that resist the order and cleanliness of ‘cure.’ As they haunt and heckle, mock and meander, remember and redress, Cleghorn and Lehane reclaim their sick bodies through a defiant voicing of the mutable meanings of illness-as-writing.

The performance of *with sequelae* lasts approximately 12 minutes. We would be thrilled to invite questions following the performance, or to offer a short discussion afterwards on our creation and method.

**Bios:** Elinor Cleghorn (she/her) is a feminist cultural historian and freelance writer. She has a PhD in Humanities and Cultural Studies from Birkbeck College, and her critical writing has been published in various academic journals including *Screen*. She has reflected on her experience of living with autoimmune disease in publications including *Ache*, *Westerley*, and *Litmus*. Elinor’s debut non-fiction book, *Unwell Women: A Journey through Myth and Medicine in a Man-Made World*, will be published by W&N in the UK, and Dutton Books in the US, in June 2021.

Dorothy Lehane (she/her) is the author of four poetry publications: *Bettbehandlung*, (Muscaliet Press, 2018), *Umwelt* (Leaf Press, 2016), *Ephemeris* (Nine Arches Press, 2014), and *Places of Articulation* (dancing girl press 2014). Recent poetry and reviews appear in *Westerly Magazine*, *Glasfryn Project* and *Modern Philology*. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Kent and is currently writing a memoir on the lived autoimmune experience, titled: *Reactive: a memoir of an unknowable body*.

**Charlotte Hallahan**

**Paper title: Endometriosis and the Language of Pain in Hilary Mantel’s Giving Up the Ghost**
**Abstract:** In her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003), Hilary Mantel narrates her suffering of endometriosis, a disease of the womb that causes her intense, protracted pain. Mantel’s memoir details her personal traumas caused by not only the disease, but years of misdiagnosis and mistreatment. Throughout this essay, I argue that autobiography forms the basis of Mantel’s ‘textual recovery’: the memoir is a space where she can reclaim her body from cold, clinical, and sometimes even tyrannical medical authorities. To gain new agency, Mantel writes about her mutable, leaking, and abject body, exposing its ‘unseen, smoking meat […] and finding out its truth’.

Mantel’s is no ordinary memoir. Along with her tales of power struggles with various doctors and her visceral descriptions of the suffering body, Mantel describes supernatural occurrences—ghosts that seem to haunt her house, unknown ‘absences’ that appear at the end of her garden path. I suggest that ghosts interrupt the memoir so that Mantel can access a transient, sublime space between life and death, self and other, material and immaterial. Ghosts signal her contact with knowledge that surpasses the female bodily subject. From the place of the embodied abject, I believe, Mantel can more effectively explore and overcome the boundaries of the ill body. Where Julia Kristeva sees a confrontation with the abject as the discovery of unwanted knowledge, for Mantel the abject is a liberating catalyst that opens up a new thrilling landscape filled with apparitions. In this article, I argue that ghosts become the language for Mantel’s memoir, and signal the ambiguous, silent space that only she can see.

**Bio:** Charlotte Hallahan is a Faculty-funded PhD candidate in the School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK. Her thesis examines the relationship between modernist literary practices and British psychoanalytic and medical institutions during the Second World War. She is interested in the intersections between psychoanalytic and literary understandings of materiality and the body.

**Claire Jeantils**

**Paper title:** Contemporary women’s writing on epilepsy: a case study on metanarrativity

**Abstract:** Epilepsy is a complex chronic illness which is not yet fully understood by science. The patient experiences seizures surprising her or at least troubling her life-rhythm. Sometimes the patient loses her memory or her memory is “merely” blurred. That is why the patient’s narrative is a key element to understand the way she talks about, perceives and experiences her illness. So, when we talk about contemporary epilepsy narratives, we actually talk about a large variety of texts genres: memoir, autofiction, fiction, testimony collection, essay, etc. As physicians say: there is no one epilepsy but as much epilepsies as patients. Since the 1990s, metanarrativity in women’s epilepsy narratives is more and more present.

In this paper I will consider the consequences of such a literary choice. What are the differences between texts reflecting on the narrating process and those which chose a
simpler diegetic pattern? What are the consequences for the reader about her understanding of epilepsy? And what can feminist theories bring to the subject?

Here, I understand metanarrativity as a practice where a narrative reflects on itself whilst taking into account the importance of narratives generally speaking for human existence (Meretoja, 2017). This simple and yet broad stance will lead me to suggest that metanarrativity along with feminist criticism challenge the medical assumption that epileptic patients need a fixed illness narrative to go forward.

With a case study on The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down (Fadiman, 1997), Lying (Slater, 2000), and Le cas singulier de Benjamin T. (Rolland, 2018) I will finally argue that metanarrativity brings awareness to the benefits of putting into words what is like to live with epilepsy and to accept this narrative as it is.

**Bio:** Claire Jeantils is a second year PhD student in literature and medical humanities (CNRS – Sorbonne Nouvelle). Specialized in French and English literature, she researches the literary representations and perceptions of epilepsy in contemporary literature (from 1980 to present). She is in charge of the PhD students’ network of the Medical Humanities IRN of CNRS in France. Her work is supervised by Alain Schaffner (Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris) and Catriona Seth (All Souls College – Oxford). In 2020-2021, she has a 10-month placement at the Maison Française d’Oxford.

**5B – Terminal Illnesses and Palliative Care**
**Chair:** Adina Stroia

**Brooke Kowalke** - “The beautiful, vibrant, living world goes on”: Bearing Witness to One’s Own Dying in Nina Riggs’ *The Bright Hour*

**Yianna Latsos** - Grief Memory and Relationality in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*

**Diana-Andreea Noveceanu** - Looking Eastwards: Postsoviet Womxn Illness Discourses in Contemporary Art

**Brooke Kowalke**

**Paper title:** “The beautiful, vibrant, living world goes on”: Bearing Witness to One’s Own Dying in Nina Riggs’ *The Bright Hour*

**Abstract:** To “bear witness” is to “open a window on the unknown.” And this is what Nina Riggs does in her 2017 memoir, *The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying*, published just months after her own death. When she stands in front of *herself* as “the other and says
'here I am', [s]he acts as a witness of the good, the Infinite, or God (Levinas 1985, 1998),” and so do we. By bearing witness to her own suffering, Riggs makes visible this under-seen form of emotional labor and reclaims the agency sick women in literature tend to lose. She invites us into her experience as, like the cancer that grows within her, the narrative progresses through stages: one, two, three, and four. Along the way, Riggs also bears witness to her mother’s illness and eventual death—what she calls “some kind of morbid test drive.” Riggs writes each stage of her story in brief episodes, each with a title and each written in the present tense, so, as Nora Krug notes, “it feels present.” That sense of “being present” to her experience enables Riggs’ act of writing to become an act of bearing witness, which, finally, allows Riggs to make visible that which so often goes unseen as we journey with her into the unknown.

**Bio:** Brooke Kowalke is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of English and Medical Humanities at Creighton University in Omaha, NE. She teaches and researches memoirs and other life-writing that deal with illness, death, and grief. She is currently at work on a memoir titled *Grace Notes: Lessons on Parenthood, Personhood, and Love.*

**Yianna Latsos**

**Paper title:** “Grief Memory and Relationality in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*”

**Abstract:** My proposed paper will reflect on the effects of grieving memory in white Afrikaans writer’s Marlene van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat*. The novel, published in 2004, six years after the completion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and at the heyday of the intellectual debates regarding the relation of the Commission to the socio-political and economic afterlives of apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa, functions as the interior monologue of Milla de Wet, a sixty seven year old white Afrikaner in the final stages of ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). The monological novelistic narrative in fact functions as an imaginary conversation between Milla and Agaat, the coloured (mixed-raced) servant who attends to her and is understood as the person who will inherit the farm upon Milla’s death, since the Milla’s only child, a son (who opens and closes the novel with a grieving, interior monologue of his own), relinquished ownership of the land when he left South Africa 10 years earlier for Canada (where he sought political asylum for objecting to serve in the white South African military, an obligatory service for white South African men during the apartheid years). While analysing the four narrative threads that constitute Milla’s grieving reminiscence, I will also address how it sheds light onto a practice of biotic relationality that is founded on an ethic of vulnerability—the kind that is overlooked by triumphant transitional politics.

**Bio:** Dr Yianna Liatsos is a Lecturer in English at the University of Limerick, where she teaches classes in African Literatures, Postcolonial Theory, Literary Theory and Human Rights narrative discourses. She has published essays on South African culture and literature and is currently working on grief narratives.
Paper title: Looking Eastwards: Postsoviet Womxn Illness Discourses in Contemporary Art

Abstract: This paper addresses illness narratives in the works of post-1989 Central and Eastern European womxn artists. Standing at the intersection of visual and literary studies, it aims to highlight autobiographical creations that warrant a critical reading through an interdisciplinary and intersectional medical humanities framework. I aim to analyse the depictions of interactions with the medical establishment as well as artistic practice as a form of self-healing. Such work highlights perspectives outside of Northern American and Western European canon, delving into the health, illness and gender discourse of post-soviet societies.

Several representative artists will serve as loci of this interdisciplinary discussion, with Alina Popa (1982-2019) and Katarzyna Kozyra (1963-) being featured prominently. Kozyra’s reenactment of Édouard Manet’s “Olympia” in a clinical environment, whilst undergoing chemotherapy challenges both the male and medical gaze and will be juxtaposed with her autobiographical writings. Popa, who had established herself as an academic, artist, writer and choreographer, documented her personal journey with illness through both text and performance. Her last published work, “Disease as an Aesthetic Project” fleshes out the singularity of receiving a diagnosis and will be commented upon in relation to the final “artworlds” event “The Clinic”, where a group of artists gathered in a Transilvanian village in the hopes of developing aesthetic healing practices.

The discussion will conclude with an assessment of potential further research directions, and will emphasize how womxn’s artistic discourse may help breche the still lingering East-West divide and contribute to a greater representation in the medical humanities.

Bio: Diana-Andreea Novaceanu is currently a doctoral candidate in Cultural Studies at the University of Bucharest (UB). Her thesis examines how clinical encounters are depicted in contemporary works of visual art. This research takes into consideration both the praxis of professional artists and that of physicians who may lack formal aesthetic training. She holds an MA in “Image Theory and Practice” from the Centre of Excellence in Image Studies (UB). Parallel to her academic career, she has been completing her residency in Epidemiology and Hygiene.

Bio: Diana is a contributing writer for the US based Synapsis: A Health Humanities Journal as well as an independent curator. She has been involved in a number of projects engaging in practice based and practice led research and has published a chapter in the critical catalogue Ion Grigorescu: The Painted Work (2017), as well as was part of the project team curating the exhibit at the National Museum of Art of Romania.

5C – The Undying: Anne Boyer’s Impact on Illness Narratives
Chair: Clare Archibald

Cat Chong - Pain and the creative-critical memoirs of Anne Boyer and Sinead Gleeson
**Gita Ralleigh** - Joining With Gold: Fragmentation and Lyric Assembly in Anne Boyer’s The Undying

**Anne Mulhall** - Impotentiality and Vulnerability in Anne Boyer’s The Undying

**Cat Chong**

**Paper title:** Pain and the creative-critical memoirs of Anne Boyer and Sinead Gleeson

**Abstract:** This paper explores the difficulty in conveying physical pain beyond metric calculation, as an encounter that defies linguistic translation. In particular, I consider the strategies of rewriting medical languages and metrics of pain which attempt to make suffering measurable within a clinical setting in Anne Boyer’s The Undying and Sinéad Gleeson’s Constellations. These texts defy generic expectations of illness narratives as transparent, chronological texts written in a confessional register. In response, this paper utilises the creative-critical form of the lyric essay as an exploratory mode through which to expand, refuse, and complicate conceptions of pain and genre. By parodying and undermining the medical vocabulary and statistics of the pain scale, Boyer and Gleeson consider how pain traverses the public, private, embodied, and textual spheres which overlap within the site of the hospital, the home, and the workplace. I investigate the possibilities for representation and expression of pain from the perspective of a disabled, queer, non-white, and non-cisgendered body, to conceptualise alternative, intersectional ways of knowing which decentre mainstream epistemologies. This paper investigates how Boyer and Gleeson’s memoirs shift between the registers of the poetic, critical, citational, and confessional to centre subordinated knowledges and foreground the interplay between pain, gender, and biomedical rhetoric. By writing from subject positions which intersect these competing discourses, this paper highlights cripistemologies of pain as it centres crip productions of knowledge to question historically privileged modes. This paper problematises linear narrative conventions, presenting pain as a revisional encounter and a generative constraint through which to rethink the possibilities of the disabled imagination.

**Bio:** Cat Chong is a poet, publisher, and proud queer crip. They’re a graduate of the Poetic Practice MA at Royal Holloway, and current PhD student at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore where their working is committed to the intersections of disability, gender nonconformity, and lyric intervention. Their interests include ecology, gender, health, contemporary poetics, medical humanities, lyric essays, and crip theory.

**Gita Ralleigh**

**Paper title:** Joining With Gold: Fragmentation and Lyric Assembly in Anne Boyer’s The Undying

**Abstract:** Narrative’s dominant position within the health humanities has recently been questioned. Standard narrative demands for temporality, causality and coherence have been regarded as at odds with the disruptive embodied experience of living through illness.
The lyric essay, first described by D’Agata and Tall in *The Seneca Review*, is a relatively undocumented mode of women’s writing on illness. A hybrid form, it employs language, imagery, metaphor, gaps and elision to express truths that resist telling another way. Autobiographical breast cancer narratives are often regarded as a ‘users guide’ for other women or as means to awaken empathy in readers. Anne Boyer’s memoir of breast cancer, *The Undying*, uses an extended lyric essay form which allows reparation while refusing to elide the life-fracturing experience of breast cancer. In *The Undying*, Boyer conveys the complex disruption of female subjectivity caused by breast cancer, as well as her embodied experience of illness as a single mother negotiating the US healthcare system. Assembled from fragments of autobiography and feeling, interspersed with historical, scientific, literary and artistic references, *The Undying* uses lyricism, as in the Japanese art of ceramic repair known as *kintsugi*, to repair Boyer’s assembled narrative by ‘joining with gold’ making a whole that is irrevocably altered. The lyric essay in its fragmentation, gaps and silences, its assembly of different modes, its intertextuality and non-linearity would seem an ideal form to convey the body’s disobedient breaking apart and reconstitution.

**Bio:** Gita Ralleigh is a consultant breast cancer radiologist within the NHS and a published poet, who also teaches creative writing at Imperial College’s Centre for Culture, Languages and Communication. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck College, University of London and an MSc in Medical Humanities from King’s College, University of London.

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**Anne Mulhall**

**Paper title:** Impotentiality and Vulnerability in Anne Boyer’s *The Undying*

**Abstract:** Over the past decade, Anne Boyer has published a series of poems detailing the most intimate, mundane aspects of her life in Kansas. Focusing on gender, production and work, her poems foreground precarity, sex, reproduction, child-rearing, consumption, exhaustion, writing, and the refusal of writing. Her most recent collection, *The Undying*, is a meditation on her own experience of breast cancer that searches for a social meaning of the illness in contemporary culture. The collection imagines a porous border between living and dying, something Boyer sees as counter to an approach within modernity that holds life and death to be binary opposites. Across the work, she draws on the ideas of antecedents such as Kathy Acker, Eve Kofofsky-Sedgwick, and Rachel Carson, all of whom reflected on their own experiences of the illness while posing larger critical questions about how the disease is viewed or even constructed within Capitalistic societies. Boyer adds to this critical tradition, in particular picking up on how the neoliberal worldview has recuperated narratives of breast cancer to its own ends, mostly through the “pink ribbon” approach.
At the heart of this collection is a subject conditioned by her own vulnerability, something the poet engenders, ignores, essentializes, despises, but also paradoxically recuperates. Reading Boyer’s recent collection alongside philosophy and political theory engaged with questions of impotentiality and vulnerability, such as theories by Adriana Cavarero, Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler, will, I suggest, enhance our understanding of questions of potential and actuality within narratives of women’s illness. Ultimately, I hope that these readings will complicate categories with implications for feminist politics, such as vulnerability, inclination and lack.
Bio: Anne M. Mulhall is a Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow in Comparative Literature at Trinity College Dublin (2020-2022). She has previously held a postdoctoral position at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University (2016-2017), a Research Fellowship at the Center for Contemporary Women’s Writing at the IMLR (2015-2016), and has taught for three years at the School of Advanced Studies at the University of Tyumen, Russia (2017-2020). She broadly researches the intersections of the contemporary literature and philosophy of work with radical thought across Europe, the US and Russia. Her manuscript on the French philosophical collective, Tiqqun, is currently being revised for publication. She is also preparing a manuscript on the temporalities of the workplace between the financial crisis of 2008 and the contemporary COVID crisis.

11:15am – 12:45pm – Parallel sessions 6A, 6B, 6C

6A – Abortion Narratives
Chair: Adriana Páramo Pérez

Kathryn Bryan - ‘Where was my party when I had an abortion?’: Caitlin Moran and Sara Pascoe Finding the Funny in Abortion

Tom Nys - Countering Abortion Stigma in Contemporary Art: Activist Storytelling in Word and Image

Victoria Oanu Lupascu - Northern Girls Have Feelings: Women’s Bodies and Their Trials in China

Carla Robison-Pinol - Untellable tales: Dacia Maraini and Annie Ernaux’s narratives of abortion

Kathryn Bryan

Paper title: ‘Where was my party when I had an abortion?’: Caitlin Moran and Sara Pascoe Finding the Funny in Abortion

Abstract: Approximately 5% of the world’s women of reproductive age live in countries where abortion is illegal. In Great Britain abortion was legalised over fifty years ago, but it remains a contentious issue with Northern Ireland’s Regulations on legal abortion coming into force in March 2020. It is a question which has long been the subject of intellectual debate but what about the voices of women who have terminated a pregnancy? Even in a society where abortion is no longer considered a criminal offence, there is a stigma attached to the procedure, one which prevents women from speaking of their own experiences. In an article from 2006, Zoe Williams wondered why, when recent data claimed that 25% of women had undergone an abortion, it remained such a taboo subject: ‘Why are there never any abortion jokes? Why is it unthinkable to discuss it without prefacing everything with “of course, it’s terribly traumatic, no woman enters into this lightly”? Williams is not alone in
challenging this attitude towards abortion; other women writers are beginning to find ways to speak out about their experiences without shame. Journalist Caitlin Moran and comedian Sara Pascoe are known for tackling feminist issues in their work, and both address their own experiences of abortion in their unique takes on the memoir form, How to be a woman (2011) and Animal: The Autobiography of a Female Body (2016). I will examine how Moran and Pascoe explore the societal and scientific questions around reproduction and the associated rights, while daring not only to share their own stories but to laugh about them, and encourage us to laugh with them.

**Bio:** Kathryn Bryan is in her third year of a part-time PhD in French at Lucy Cavendish College, the University of Cambridge. Her thesis examines literary depictions of abortion from Belle Époque France, providing feminist close literary readings of largely forgotten texts, such as Jeanne Caruchet’s L’Ensemencée (1904), Maurice Landay’s La Grappe (1904), Jean Darricarrère’s Le Droit à l’avortement (1906) and Camille Pert’s L’Autel (1907). She presented the paper ‘Invisible Chain: The Female Experience of Abortion Across a Century from Jeanne Caruchet’s L’Ensemencée (1904) to Annie Ernaux’s L’événement (2000)’ at the Contemporary Women’s Writing and the Medical Humanities Seminar in February 2021.

**Tom Nys**

**Paper title:** Countering Abortion Stigma in Contemporary Art: Activist Storytelling in Word and Image

**Abstract:** Pregnancy termination is one of the most common medical procedures, yet abortion stigma persists in many countries. Along with the study of what exactly abortion stigma is, how it is produced, and what effects it generates, researchers and activists are trying to find ways to reduce or even to eradicate it. In this paper, I argue that contemporary visual arts are a critical means of challenging abortion stigma. Through a selection of case studies from the late 1990s to the present, I analyse ways in which contemporary artists have narrated and problematised this stigma in a range of socio-political contexts. My examples include Barbara Kruger’s Untitled (Your Body Is A Battleground), created for the Women’s March on Washington DC in 1998; collages made by Aleksandra Mir in 2005; Tracey Emin’s strategic use of narrative to counter stigma by speaking out about her own abortion in both her autobiography and graphic art; Holly Pester’s 2018 poem Comic Timing, a work that addresses abortion in a like-wise personal, but mundane manner; and the collection of comics entitled Comics for Choice (2017) published a group of artists, activists, and writers based in the United States. These works and art projects use innovative combinations of imagery and text to communicate the complexities of abortion and to give voice to different individual experiences. They also function in different spatial contexts and address audiences in unique ways. By showing how artists have tackled the theme of abortion and abortion stigma through a variety of intersecting visual and linguistic narratives, I demonstrate the importance of contemporary arts to public discourses about health care and medical thought.

**Bio:** Tom Nys is a Belgian graduate in Art History, currently pursuing a PhD at Loughborough University. For many years, he combined working as an independent...
curator, cultural event organiser and arts writer with a part-time position as a coordinator with LUNA, the umbrella organisation of abortion centres in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. In 2015, he was responsible for a highly-acclaimed, national awareness campaign about abortion stigma with six art photographers. Now, his research focuses on visual artworks and exhibitions that deal with abortion and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The aim of his study is to explore how contemporary arts can play a part in countering abortion stigma.

Victoria Oanu Lupascu

Paper title: Northern Girls Have Feelings: Women’s Bodies and Their Trials in China

Abstract: This paper analyzes the aesthetic interventions Sheng Keyi makes in Chinese literature and culture through her novel “Northern Girls” when engaging with the topic of forced abortions and sterilizations in China. Taking into consideration the longstanding and violent history of family planning in China that objectified and politicized women’s bodies regardless of historical frame, I argue that the novel bypasses the metaphorical approaches to fertility, pregnancy and its violent termination proposed by male authors such as Ma Jian and Mo Yan and proposes a more intricate aesthetic approach in literature. Herself a migrant worker, Sheng Keyi explores the structural violence young women from rural environments encounter when traveling to coastal areas in search for work to sustain their families. I claim that Sheng interweaves a direct cinematic technique called “slice of life” springing from documentary films with literary realism to underline the tragedy of random forced sterilization performed on young, migrant women under twenty years of age. Furthermore, through this aesthetic association, Sheng openly problematizes the nuanced social, political and cultural conditions that normalized abortions for migrant women in this case, and women in general. The novel shows that women were not only beaten, tied up and dragged into abortion and sterilization clinics, but would go there voluntarily after being raped at work. The juxtaposition between (apparently) voluntary and forced termination of pregnancy, alongside the minimal medical care or lack thereof in each of these situations are mirrored by the novel’s direct style that does not dwell on any description of women’s emotions or need for care. Sheng withholds ‘narrative care’ (de Boever) to question cultural, social and literary attitudes towards migrant workers, forced sterilizations and involuntary, state-sponsored abortions at any stage of pregnancy.

Bio: Victoria Lupascu is an assistant professor of Comparative Literature and Asian Studies at University of Montréal, Canada. Her work centers around women’s writing on forced abortions in China, as well on different concepts of healing during pandemics and epidemics.

Carl Robison-Pinel

Paper title: Untellable tales: Dacia Maraini and Annie Ernaux’s narratives of abortion
Abstract: Contemporary writers Annie Ernaux and Dacia Maraini have been confronting unwanted pregnancy and its impact on young womxn’s development since the rise of the abortion debates. Annie Ernaux’s debut novel *Les Armoires vides* was published in 1974, only months before the Veil law secured legal abortions in France. Dacia Maraini’s *L’età del malessere* was published in 1963, two years after the controversial inquiry on abortion by *Noi Donne* raised the issue in Italian media.

Given their surprising depictions of abortion in a time when it was absent from the literary canon yet omnipresent in national debates, both publications stood out. Narrating with precision the realities of abortion before its legalization, these narratives thus fashioned our writers’ literary careers. Indeed, Ernaux came back to the topic of abortion twenty-five years later with *L’Évènement* (2000) and Maraini also confronted it in latter works – *Donna in guerra* (1975) and *Un clandestine a bordo* (1996) amongst others.

Dwelling on Ernaux and Maraini’s works, our aim is to explore their texts as reliable sources regarding the realities of clandestine abortion in Italy and in France. Opting for a sociopoetic perspective in the wake of Alain Montandon’s research, we will analyze Ernaux and Maraini’s multiple rewritings of abortion so as to grasp the evolutive representations of this practice and its implications on motherhood and womxnhood. Writing at the brink of abortion’s medicalization and legalization, both writers indeed shifted our contemporary representations of this practice. Thus, we will show how their literary embodiment of a legal, as well as political and medical issue not only contributed to the refashioning of its representations, but also to the progressive centrality of womxn’s reproductive health in contemporary literature.

Bio: Carla Robison (M.A.) holds the Agrégation de lettres modernes since 2019. Formerly visiting student at Kings College London (2019-2020), she is currently conducting research on abortion in the female Bildungsroman at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon.

6B – Narratives of Disability
Chair: Veronika Schuchter

*Gabrielle Hanley-Mott* - Acquiring disability and incomplete ideological change: after amputation and in Ursula K Le Guin’s *The Day Before the Revolution*

*Debashrita Dey and Priyanka Tripathi* - Desire and Delirium: Contextualizing the Dis (Abled) Women in Select Indian films

*Elly Walters* - Divinity and Disability in the Work of Akwaeke Emezi

*Gabrielle Hanley-Mott*

*Paper title: Acquiring disability and incomplete ideological change: after amputation and in Ursula K Le Guin’s The Day Before the Revolution*
Abstract: For my dissertation research I interviewed women with upper extremity amputations. I became interested in their struggles to adjust to the physical changes of amputation, and to integrate their previously able-bodied experiences with their now different bodies. As they found themselves visibly marked and forced to defend their bodies and abilities against judgement, their own and society’s, they resisted and questioned what it meant to acquire a “disabled” identity. These women bring to their now “disabled” lives a lifetime of experience as able-bodied, with assumptions and prejudices towards disability. Ursula LeGuin’s 1974 short story The Day Before the Revolution is a sensory reflection on the acquisition of bodily practice. It begins decades after a successful anarchist revolution and follows the aging former leader, Odo, 6 months after a stroke. Odo, through a reflective double gaze, articulates her incomplete acquisition of anarchist bodily norms, her political-intellectual understanding of how she could and should value her body; and the lingering mark of capitalist embodiment as she struggles with her judgmental feelings towards her aging and disabilities. This story makes clear how political ideologies are held and experienced in bodies, even after years of alternative bodily practice and the difficulty of changing one’s embodied politics. This paper will explore how Le Guin’s incomplete anarchist gaze helps me understand my interviewee’s struggles to accept their altered bodies and identities. On a larger scale, while the physical changes of illness, injury and aging may be irreversible, the attendant political changes of an individual may be incomplete. The intersection of women’s writing and medical humanities is an important site of creation and imagination for understanding the acquisition and acceptance of physical/political change.

Bio: Gabrielle Hanley-Mott is a PhD candidate in Cultural Anthropology at SUNY Binghamton, USA. 2017

Debashrita Dey and Priyanka Tripathi

Paper title: Desire and Delirium: Contextualizing the Dis (Abled) Women in Select Indian films

Abstract: Representation of disability in women concerned over their aesthetic and existential anxieties has emerged as an integral component in visual culture and some of the finest celluloid renderings worldwide have effectively focused on it is conceived, perceived and experienced within a distinct cultural framework. As cinema gets denoted for its symbolic significance serving as a ‘cognitive code of reality’, it engages the spectators to question and perhaps re-construct the very nuance of disability beyond medicalised biography and how it predominantly foregrounds the ‘Other’ as a double burden in social, cultural and theoretical discourses. Any dysfunction of the body or of the mind can never be completely comprehended in isolation from the collective social structure from which it erupts. Aparna Sen through her directorial works like Paromitar Ek Din (House of Memories, 2000) and 15 Park Avenue (2005) has used a critical lens to explore matters of identity formation in female characters suffering from psychiatric disability. The deviant, uncontrollable bodies of Khuku and Mithi in the respective films surface as a potent threat.
to the organized structure of the society, with the patriarchal gaze and clinical eye attempting to ‘discipline’ the pathological subjects. However, despite dwelling in their imaginary yet organic worlds, what strikes one is their discernible inability to detach themselves from their internalized roles of becoming a woman and fostering familial ties.

This presentation attempts to show how the otherwise marginalized disabled bodies of women with their varied manifestations from being abused, scarred, delirious and fragmented, confront and seek to challenge the social boundaries of the unnerving normalcy that dictate their lives. One cannot dismiss the on-screen presence of these incapacitated selves pitted against their abled reality, asking us “What makes her reality less real than ours?” (15 Park Avenue) because such transition from autonomous to vulnerable and negating embodied presence is to validate their absence in similar socio-cultural contexts off-screen.

**Bios:**

Debashrita Dey is an Institute fellow (PhD) and Teaching Assistant in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna. She is currently working on literary gerontology for her doctoral thesis and her areas of research interest comprise Feminist Studies, Disability Studies and Medical Humanities.

Priyanka Tripathi is an Associate Professor of English, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna. She has published extensively with *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi), *English: Journal of the English Association* (Oxford Academic), *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Postcolonial Studies*, *Economic and Political Weekly* amongst others. She is also the Book Reviews Editor of *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. She works in the area of Indian Writing in English, Place and Literature, Graphic Novels and Gender and Sexuality Studies. Her ORCID iD is [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9522-3391](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9522-3391)

**Elly Walters**

**Paper title:** Divinity and Disability in the Work of Akwaeke Emezi

**Abstract:** Spanning African, Literary, Queer, and Disability Studies, this project explores the entanglement of divinity and disability in the work of Tamil-Nigerian non-binary trans writer, Akwaeke Emezi. Specifically, I study intimations of mental illness and the Igbo *ogbanje*, a ‘spirit-child’ known for its ailing body and ability to move across worlds, in Emezi’s *Freshwater* (2018) and *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Through the West African cosmological prism, these novels treat themes of self-harm, trauma, grief, panic attacks, personality disorders, anorexia and disordered eating, chronic pain, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Identifying as *ogbanje* and disabled, Emezi writes that: ‘[m]y spirit bends worlds and does things that shouldn’t be possible, not with the way my flesh or this world is set up’. The enmeshing of spirit and flesh lies at the crux of my project, as I compare ‘world-bending’ experiences of divinity and disability across *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*. The former broadcasts the *ogbanje* mind of Ada, Emezi’s autofictional persona who is simultaneously protected and tormented by resident spirits or ‘brothersisters’. The latter narrates Vivek’s undiagnosed ‘sickness’, an ambiguous ‘thing’ steeped in mental and
spiritual dis-ease. I argue that Emezi’s work offers unparalleled scope within the medical humanities to pull at the intersections between illness, cosmology, and also queerness, as Ada undergoes top surgery and Vivek starts presenting sartorially as Nnemdi, his/her more feminine self.

Drifting along a unique materialist feminist undercurrent, I am interested in Emezi’s ability to ‘destroy politically, philosophically, and symbolically’ ruling understandings of disability and the mind. Paternalist epistemologies of the body render unhealth the antipode of health, invalidity the antipode of validity. Emezi, however, imagines extra-binary and supernatural corporealities, penning flesh that is ‘as loud as my spirit […] disabled and furiously alive’. I will explore the intertwinement of Emezi’s materialist feminism and what Monique Wittig would call their ‘idealism’, whilst also drawing on Karen Barad’s work on intra-action and entanglement. This ongoing research is the subject of an 8,000-word MSt essay, to be submitted for examination in March 2021.

Bio: Elly Walters is a postgraduate student at the University of Oxford where she is currently reading for an MSt in Women’s Studies, funded by the Oxford-Wadham Graduate Scholarship for Disabled Students. In July 2020, she graduated from the University of Cambridge with a BA in Modern and Medieval Languages, for which she was awarded a Starred First. Her research background is in French and Francophone Studies, with a focus on twentieth and twenty-first century queer and disability literatures.

6C – Narratives of Care
Chair: Diana Andreea Noveceanu

Eleri Fowler - Towards a poetics of care.

Cynthia Laborde - Like mothers, like daughters: representing the shift from care receiver to caregiver in graphic novels about sick mothers.


Sarah Marie Graye - When the Disease Doesn’t Matter: Sickness and the Self in Elizabeth Strout’s My Name Is Lucy Barton

Eleri Fowler

Paper title: Towards a poetics of care

Abstract: Care is conventionally theorised through disciplines such as public health, sociology and geography. However, care, as it exists in social life, has aspects that these modes of inquiry cannot account for. As Puig de la Bellacasa states ‘to care about something, or for somebody, is inevitably to create relation’. To extend a caring relation comprises elements such as the direction of sustained attention and, in turn, the implication
of concern, interest or importance. This paper will argue for the significance of poetry as a contribution to the growing field of care studies, contending that poetic form can uniquely illuminate these alternate, elusive fundamentals of care. It will focus on recent texts by Anne Boyer, Bhanu Kapil and Verity Spott whose content centres around relations of care in the contemporary landscape of the crisis in social reproduction (such as single motherhood under austerity, working in the privatised care system and how the global and historical dynamics of racial capitalism exclude certain subjects from structures of care). These relations are examined through hybrid prose poem forms which conform neither to the strictures of verse patterns nor the conventions of argumentative or narrative prose. Accordingly, the constituent parts of the text are held in tensile (rather than logical or chronological) relation to each other which animates a dynamic of relationality and dependency. In drawing on uneven, open and contradictory forms of thought and formal arrangements, the poems demand invested and finely attuned labour of ‘care’ from the reader. Consequently, the texts’ formal strategies engender aesthetic experiences that deepen our understandings of the expansive dimensions of care.

**Bio:** Eleri Fowler is a recent graduate from the MA student in Modern and Contemporary Writing at the University of East Anglia. She is interested in poetry as a mode of social critique, and innovative uses of hybrid forms by feminised writers as well as feminist, Marxist and social reproduction theory. She also previously worked as an Engagement Assistant for the NHS.

**Cynthia Laborde**

**Paper title:** Like mothers, like daughters: representing the shift from care receiver to caregiver in graphic novels about sick mothers.

**Abstract:** This presentation wishes to focus on two autobiographical graphic novels: *Tangles: A Story of Alzheimer’s, My Mother, and Me*, by Sarah Leavitt (Canada) and *Sous les bouclettes* (translation: Under my curls, the graphic novel has not been translated into English) by Méléka and Gudule (France). Both of these graphic novels revolve around the roles of the daughter in caring for their sick mothers during the last years of their lives. Both daughters are comic artists who decided to record these last, difficult years, with the frequent intermingling of events from even further in the past, when the mother was the caregiver. Just like parents often meticulously document their children’s lives at the beginning of their lives via pictures, baby books, collecting drawings and crafts, these women compiled both tough and touching moments for the last few years of their mothers’ lives, reversing their roles on more than one level. Despite portraying their mothers during the most dehumanizing moment of their lives, I will show that through these graphic somatographies, both artists actually humanize them by, for instance, superimposing various timelines and becoming their voices when their mothers have become voiceless. I also argue that comics as medium well-suited for embodiment, have a particular strength in conveying these stories and building empathy from the reader.

**Bio:** Cynthia Laborde is Assistant Professor of French at The University of Texas at Arlington.
Erin Soros

**Paper title:** Holding Birdie: Trace Lindberg’s Vision of Care

**Abstract:** Tracey Lindberg has stated that her novel *Birdie* is a narrative teaching of Cree law. How does a novel teach law? And how do such teachings create possibilities for reclamation and redress? What forms of medical treatment and care are called forth by this law and what do they demand of Indigenous or settler community, or at the boundary between settler and Indigenous? My method as I address these questions will weave together legal, ethical and medical frameworks with a close literary examination of key turning points in the story. Theories of Black scholars Sylvia Wynter and Ruth Wilson Gilmore will be braided with theories of Indigenous scholars such as Dian Million and Tracey Lindberg as I consider how mental health challenges can lead toward what Gilmore calls ‘presenting,’ ways to image community beyond carceral control. I will focus on how visionary states—which might be diagnosed as psychosis, as damage, as danger—themselves communicate legal teachings. The title character of the novel survives the settler psychiatric system, an encounter narrated in staccato lines: within the white walls of a segregation unit, her language nears its breaking point. In contrast to the treatment Birdie receives there, and the way her mental state would be understood, the novel portrays a very different possibility. Birdie’s visions are not pathology, but rather a form of testimony. She travels in her mind to a past she has survived—and to the past, present and future of her culture’s ancestral knowledge. While she initially makes this journey alone, by the end of the novel she has gathered her kin, both biological and chosen. These women tend to her. They offer their company, their food, their humour and their own stories. Through this circle of care, the novel presents decolonial possibilities for responding to people experiencing threshold mental states and it reveals how these states can lead in fact to transformation: collective redress through individual psychic journey.

**Bio:** Erin Soros is a settler scholar and Mad writer of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Society for Humanities at Cornell University where she researches psychotic responses to trauma. Next year she will be a Shadbolt Fellow at Simon Fraser University where she will complete her collection of autobiographical essays on psychosis and psychiatric treatment. Her research has been published in *The Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* and *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. An essay on Indigenous literature appeared in the anthology *Literatures of Madness*. Essays weaving narrative, philosophy and psychoanalysis have appeared in *Writing Creative Non-Fiction* and *Women and the Psychosocial Construction of Madness*, with new work forthcoming in *The Futures of Neurodivergence*. She received *The Malahat Review*’s long poem prize, has been included in *Best Canadian Poetry*, and was a finalist for the CBC Literary Award for poetry. She was a Charles Pick fellow at the University of East Anglia and a Harper-Wood fellow at Cambridge University. Her stories have been published internationally and were aired on the CBC and BBC as recipients of the CBC Literary Award and the Commonwealth Award for the Short Story.

Sarah Marie Graye
**Paper title:** When the Disease Doesn’t Matter: Sickness and the Self in Elizabeth Strout’s *My Name Is Lucy Barton*

**Abstract:** Illness narratives traditionally focus on the disease: the name, the symptoms, the possible outcomes. But whatever the disease, these narratives have one thing in common: a person at the centre whose life has been inextricably changed. My interest in illness narratives is not the disease itself, but the “splitting” each ill person goes through, where they have a past as a “well person” and a present/future as an “ill person”.

One example of this "splitting" is *My Name Is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout, where the illness itself feels almost like an afterthought. What matters is that the titular character is stuck in a hospital bed, with her estranged mother by her bedside, and all the time in the world to think about her life. This paper is an exploration of the relationships Lucy has not only with her mother, but with all aspects of her life as she re-evaluates who she is, what her life means and how it will be different moving forward because of her illness.

Bio: Sarah Marie Graye is a PhD candidate on the University of Kent’s Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research programme. Her research focuses on illness narratives, specifically looking at the self, memory and mental/emotional health.

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2:45pm-4:15pm – Parallel Sessions 7A, 7B.

**7A - Liminal Voices in Narratives of Healthcare**

**Chair:**

**Avril Tynan** - Collaboration and Continuity in Women’s Dementia Fiction in French

**Marta Cenedese** - Deconstructing Binary Epistemologies in Stories of Intersex Medical Care

**Clio Nicastro** - Eating Time: On Cinematic Representations of Eating Disorders

**Speak Up! Liminal Voices in Narratives of Health Care**

This panel brings together diverse perspectives on the links between agency, time, and narrative in the representation and treatment of illness and the provision of health care. Centring on representations of typically female domains of illness and health care, these three papers explore how the multiplicity of voices in these narratives both animates and confines the liminal subject’s mastery of their own experience. Bringing together contemporary portrayals of disease, illness, and health care practices, these papers situate embodied experiences of health, illness, and disease within sociocultural and socioeconomic structures of power and value and highlight the vulnerability of the liminal voice within clinical and cultural discourses of health care.

**Dr. Avril Tynan (Chair)**
**Paper title: Collaboration and Continuity in Women’s Dementia Fiction in French**

**Abstract:** The experience of Alzheimer’s disease is gendered: women are not only more likely to experience dementia-related diseases directly – typically as a result of greater life expectancy – but they are also more likely to become the caregiver to someone with an age-related illness. Such gendered differences – particularly in advanced old age – are reflected in the works of contemporary authors who choose, in the majority, to present women as the experiencing subjects of Alzheimer’s disease.

In this paper, I explore the consequences and representation of this gender divide in the novels of two contemporary French authors. In Anne Bragance’s *La reine nue* (2003, *The Naked Queen*) and Caroline Vié’s *Dépendance Day* (2015, *Dependance Day*), the experiences of the female protagonists affected by Alzheimer’s disease are relayed and reconstructed by family members. Such ‘scaffolding’ (Hydén 2017) rejects the common assumption that persons with Alzheimer’s disease lack a narrative self (Hyvärinen and Watanabe 2017) and challenges notions of selfhood as exclusively autobiographical. At the same time, this collaborative effort risks imbalanced assumptions about another’s subjective experience that speaks to the gendered experience of disease more widely, to the alterity of the female voice and to its appropriation in times of pain and distress.

**Bio:** Dr Avril Tynan is a postdoctoral researcher in Comparative Literature at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Finland. Her research explores the polyphonic expression of aphasia in Francophone narratives of Alzheimer’s disease. Along with Marta-Laura Cenedese, she is co-organiser of the SELMA Medical Humanities Seminar Series.

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**Dr. Marta-Laura Cenedese**

**Paper title: Deconstructing Binary Epistemologies in Stories of Intersex Medical Care**

**Abstract:** In this paper I reflect on the ways in which literary narratives challenge the pathologizing gaze that the medical establishment has been resting upon intersex individuals. I suggest that, by juxtaposing narratives told by the experiencing subjects and medical professionals, these novels foreground a critique of neonatal genital surgery and provide a systematic yet nuanced deconstruction of the binary epistemology at the basis of the hetero-patriarchal colonial regime.

In dialogue with critical texts that, from several disciplinary perspectives, have challenged the notion of intersex as a disease, and in particular responding to Paul B. Preciado’s call for the collective elaboration of a new epistemology encompassing the radical multiplicity of practices and forms of life, I will discuss how these literary narratives bring to the fore informed medical accounts about appearance-altering surgery, how they challenge notions of “normalization,” gender and sex, and how they criticize assumptions about intersex as a disease and a threat to the binary sexual order. These novels, I argue, confront the stripping of agency over one’s body afforded by (violent) neonatal surgery (or mutilation), and allow
the “monsters” (Preciado 2020) to speak up and infuse a new, phenomenologically-based knowledge about intersex that questions the normative sexual order.

Bio: Marta-Laura Cenedese is a postdoctoral researcher in Comparative Literature at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Finland. She is currently working on narratives of illness and death in contemporary fiction in relation to embodied and sensuous writing practices. Along with Avril Tynan, she is co-organiser of the SELMA Medical Humanities Seminar Series.

Clio Nicastro

Paper title: Eating Time: On Cinematic Representations of Eating Disorders

Abstract: The alteration of subjective and intersubjective time – both in its everyday modality and as the interaction between past, present, and future – is a crucial dimension of the experience of eating disorders. They interfere with perceived, lived, and shared time on at least two levels: Eating disorders sabotage the conventional subdivision of the day into mealtimes and their ritualistic and social value. They, furthermore, generate the sensation of being condemned to an eternal ‘not yet’, uprooted from concrete narrative temporality and disallowed from recognising one’s self as part of a story (one’s own).

Although film can be considered the most crucial means of temporal-visual narrativization today, cinematic narratives about eating disorders rarely address their temporal aspects and only use time as a conventional plot frame to build a linear story of adolescent women who become anorexic and finally heal after psychological treatment. Beside films like To the Bone (US, Noxon 2017), which falls into the category just described, recent examples like the web series The Skinny (US, Kahnweiler 2016) and Boy Eating the Bird’s Food (Greece, Lygizos 2012) have contributed to shifting the focus on eating disorders by taking into account cases that reveal the blurred borders of these disorders as well as the political context in which they flourish. Especially the latter thematizes, if only at the margins and at the level of diegesis, how a peculiar relationship to food is related to (dead) time and (lack of) productivity. How can this shift in the cinematic narrative of eating disorders be useful to unveil some crucial (less visible) aspects of these widespread issues?

Bio: Dr Clio Nicastro is a postdoctoral researcher in Cultural Theory at Bard College Berlin, Germany. Her current research focuses on the cinematic representations of eating disorders as well as on cinema and labour.

7B – Queer Health and Women

Chair: Habib Zanzana

Rachel Lallouz - Queer Eros and Recreational Drug Use in Contemporary Queer Women’s Writing: Laurie Weeks’ Zipper Mouth and Michelle Tea’s Valencia
Rachel Lallouz

**Paper title:** Queer Eros and Recreational Drug Use in Contemporary Queer Women’s Writing: Laurie Weeks’ *Zipper Mouth* and Michelle Tea’s *Valencia*

**Abstract:** This paper will explore how queer women writers employ recreational drug use as a trope in their fiction to develop a new model of a feminine-focused queer eros that works in resistance to historic biomedical modes of “unauthorized pleasure” (Race 226) criminalizing and pathologizing “drug abusers.” In Laurie Week’s *Zipper Mouth* (2011) and Michelle Tea’s *Valencia* (2008) the main protagonist in both novels moves relentlessly from drug bender to drug bender in their use of alcohol, amphetamines, psychedelics and other intoxicating substances. Eros, in this case, is an undeniable dimension of drug use as these protagonists engage in a variety of sexual, embodied and intimate interactions with other characters throughout their benders. This paper considers how the specifically queer eros that both Weeks and Tea articulate in their novels is a disruptive and subversive pleasure-charged mode of being. Recreational drug use in this writing builds off the long history of witches, women, queer people and other marginalized members of society who have traditionally developed “narco-sexual knowledge” (Preciado 45) of the body outside of dominant biomedical paradigms. Ultimately, I argue that these works of writing sharply interrogate the “perpetual spirals of pleasure and power” (45) that Foucault insists comprises the contemporary embodied subject. I argue that recreational drug use as it is seized by queer subjects in these works necessitates the intertwined forces of play and experiment—specifically “auto-experimentation” (Greer 65)—that can potentially lead to the generation of new forms of being and knowing in our world.

**Bio:** Rachel Lallouz is a PhD student and creative non-fiction writer in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, in Canada. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on queer neurobiology, pleasure, and the intersections between femininity and drug use in literature, visual art, and multimedia. She is the recipient of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Joseph Armand Bombardier Doctoral Award.
**Abstract:** Lesbian and queer women’s identities, practices, and desires are often precluded from HIV discourses. HIV epidemiological categories do not record (potential) female-to-female transmission of HIV; few HIV prevention materials include a focus on lesbian and queer women; and recent academic literature on this topic is scarce. Given these absences, HIV healthcare spaces can be sites of disorientation and distress for lesbian and queer women.

Drawing on Australian qualitative interview and multimedia-based research, this paper contends that lesbian and queer women’s narratives of disorientation offer significant insight into the ingrained inequalities that continue to permeate HIV discourses and practices. Building on Sara Ahmed’s concept of (dis)orientation and Sara Wasson’s work on episodic narratives of chronic pain, it further illustrates the value of short fragments of narrative when attending to lesbian and queer women’s specific experiences of disorientation. Focussing on both genealogical and affective theoretical approaches, this paper concludes that in recognising the emotional dimension of such moments, we might attend to lesbian and queer women’s lived experiences of marginalisation while maintaining a focus on the discourses through which their identities, practices, and desires become (un)intelligible.

**Bio:** Kate Manlik is a Cultural Studies PhD student at Macquarie University in Sydney. Her current research explores lesbian and queer women’s narratives of HIV in Australia. She also works as a casual tutor in Social Science and Media Studies.

Lizzie Merrill

**Paper title:** ‘Candy Darling on Her Deathbed’: Queer Representations of Illness

**Abstract:** In this paper I examine Peter Hujar’s photograph ‘Candy Darling on her Deathbed’ (1973) and explore its depiction of the illness and death of Candy Darling, a trans actress and icon. Using Douglas Crimp’s text *Melancholia and Moralism* (2002), I will unpack the insufficiency of the Freudian model of mourning when applied to queer communities, arguing that queerness posits the potential for an array of alternative mourning practices, due to the instability of queer identity. Looking at the construction of the photograph and how it operates within a contextual narrative, I will outline instances where the unstable categories of queerness, femininity and death intersect. In exploring the outcomes of these intersections, I hope to identify how instability poses the chance for subversive difference. This paper will be split into three sections. “Aesthetic Representations” will situate how Hujar uses aesthetic and classical likenesses to contain the threat of illness, as well as how visual representation is a site for queer communities to reassert control. “Death and Femininity” will consider how these two unstable categories interact. By examining the idea that Darling’s illness was a metaphorical pregnancy, I will suggest that constructions of female monstrosity can be reworked to posit the mutable body as a site for subversion. Finally, “Queer Subversions” will resituate the instabilities of femininity and death in relation to queer theory and queer art-making, addressing how queerness reframes and restituates mourning practices. Building on Halberstam’s suggestion that “borderlands are “uninhabitable” for some transsexuals” (Halberstam 1998, 305). I will argue that the border,
for Darling, presents an ideal site for subversion to take place both from within and outside of the gender category: woman.

**Bio:** Lizzie Merrill is a prospective doctoral student, with an MSt in Women’s Studies from Oxford University and a BA in Fine Art from Central St Martins. Her most recent paper was presented at the Death and Mortality conference held at Balliol College, Oxford. Her research focuses on intersections between the arts and the medical humanities, with a specific interest in feminist/queer representations of illness and death in late 20th Century photography.

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**Habib Zanzana**

**Paper title:** Contemporary womxn’s Writing and the Medical Humanities in Addellah Taïa’s *A Country for Dying*

**Abstract:** *Un Pays pour Mourir* (2015), is a novel penned in French by queer Moroccan writer Addellah Taïa and translated into English by Emma Ramadan as, *A Country for Dying*, and published by *Seven Stories* in 2020. My paper argues that in this contemporary womxn’s narrative, Taïa explores the tension that exists between sexuality, colonialism, gender and the construction of identity in Maghrebi men, women and transgenders living as outsiders in the French metropolis. My analysis probes each individual story which features deeply affecting characters who struggle physically, psychologically and medically to break free from their emotional and sexual confinement and their condition of marginality and erasure. In so doing, the characters challenge the dominant French discourse, deconstruct their status as subalterns, and insert their gendered name, narrative and voice and thus acquire power and agency in twenty-first century French society.

One of the early chapters unfolds in Paris where Aziz, a young exile from Algeria, dresses up and works as a call girl fulfilling perverse bourgeois gay men’s fantasies of race, domination and colonial power, “I prostituted myself as a moderately savage Arab boy from over there, Algeria. The clients liked that. They liked me to smell like my home country, the savagery of the village, as they liked to say.” Later in the novel, on the eve of her gender confirmation surgery under the medical care of a Swedish surgeon, Dr. Johansson, the same Aziz recalls a playful ceremony of gender reformulation and equation that took place in his mother’s home in Algeria and orchestrated by his sisters. The transformation began by dressing up the little boy in deliciously vibrant fabric and colors borrowing his mother’s green caftan, the aunt’s yellow scarf, and a pair of blue babouches that belonged to the eldest sister. The adult Aziz, who has now adopted the Arab female name of Zanouba, describes the ritual of gender reassignment in devastatingly simple and logical mathematical terms: “That’s what happened: the Event. Transform. Be reborn. Return to the source, I didn’t question it. 7 girls + 1 boy = 8 girls. 1 brother + 7 sisters = 8 sisters. The rule of numbers, it’s logic. I witnessed my own transformation. It wasn’t magic. It was real.”

The second part of my analysis examines the intersection of the medical humanities, the female body, and the performance of gender in post-modern Western culture. After her surgery, Zanouba reflects on the loss of her pre-transition male persona and begins to
interrogate the category of gender, her own, fluid sexual identity, and the social construct of womxn and womanhood. She states, ‘I don’t regret anything that I’ve done. I wanted this operation. This disappearance. I’m the one who planned it, orchestrated it. Brought it to fruition. I thought of everything. But not of the essential: how to be a woman? I mean, beyond clothing and make up, what is a woman?’

**Bio:** Habib Zanzana is professor of world languages and literature at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. She has published articles of women’s autobiographies, the Spanish picaresque, Cervantes and the Construction of Dulcinea, Puppets and Pedagogy in the Foreign Language Classroom, and on Contemporary Italian literature.