

Editorial

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Introduction: How Metaphors Remember and Culturalise Pandemics

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The world responded to the proliferation of COVID-19 in 2020 with dread and despair. It had been over a century since a global pandemic of a similar scale occurred (Davis 6), and as politicians and policy makers scrambled to curb the spread of the novel contagion, scientific interventions became a prioritised, and sometimes controversial, topic of discussion (Shah) (Al-Arshani). Although the humanities were largely excluded from these pandemic discourses (Shah), artistic narratives, from famous plays like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1602) to revered paintings like Edvard Munch's *Self-Portrait After the Spanish Flu* (1919-20), have an established tradition of exploring the unique ways in which societies remember and culturalise pandemics.

The essays in this *Plague as Metaphor* special issue continue the storied humanistic tradition of culturalising contagion by using a plethora of multi-genre works to make a persuasive case for the validity and vitality of metaphors in plague narratives. In other words, these essays rethink Sontag's (in)famous *Illness is not a Metaphor* declaration (3) by arguing that the trope of illness as metaphor endures because it is capable of addressing how we perceive and respond to the existential threats posed by the rapid spread of infectious diseases.

In "The Humanities of Contagion: How Visual and Literary Representations of the 'Spanish' Flu Pandemic Complement, Complicate and Calibrate COVID-19 Narratives," I use works of literature (D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox* and Josep Pla's *The Gray Notebook*) and visual culture (John Singer Sargent's *The Interior of a Hospital Tent*) to examine how metaphorical depictions of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic eerily foreshadow and ethicise critical discourses about COVID-19 such as biological abnormality and collective amnesia.

Toni R. Juncosa directs our focus to the realm of poetry, where he considers the impact of HIV on spatial metaphors in Danez Smith's verse. Titled "And the House Burned Down: HIV, Intimacy, and Memory in Danez Smith's Poetry," Juncosa's paper presents a comparative analysis of Smith's poetry by, first, focusing on the metaphors used to interrogate the penetration of HIV into the body and, second, unpacking how this transformative experience alters perceptions of intimacy and memory.

Eamon Reid's "We've Forgotten Our Roots: Bioweapons and Forms of Life in *Mass Effect*'s speculative future" tackles discourses about biopolitics in role-playing video games by examining the implications of *Mass Effect*'s simultaneous critique and endorsement of liberal and conservative biopolitical tendencies. Reid ultimately argues that *Mass Effect*'s biopolitical discourse offers an agnostic-leaning political vision that is neither utopian nor dystopian.

And finally, in "The holobiontic figure: Narrative complexities of holobiont characters in Joan Slonczewski's *Brain Plague*," Teun Joshua Brandt uses Slonczewski's novel *Brain Plague* as a conduit for comprehensive explorations about the narratological aspects of the holobiontic figure. While referencing the trend of newer science fiction works, which are rethinking the relationship between humans and germs in pandemic narratives, Brandt discusses essential features of the holobiontic figure and investigates what happens when a scientific concept leaves its discursive borders and exists between materials.

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The valuable insights presented in this special issue demonstrate how metaphors effectively scrutinise the varied human dimensions of plague experiences and offer potential solutions, or visions, for post-pandemic societies. The global defunding of the humanities, however, poses a serious threat to the proliferation of these ideas. In the ominously titled “The End of the English Major,” Heller of *The New Yorker* discusses how funding cuts for humanities have contributed to historically low enrollment numbers, both in the United States and globally, for university subjects like English and history. The overwhelming feeling seems to be that in our tech-obsessed modern world, there is no “demand” for humanistic skills or insights (Heller).

The *Plague as Metaphor* special issue is thus a modest attempt to address this worrying trend by underscoring the societal value of the humanities. The ability of these four essays to demonstrate how plague metaphors distinctly remember and culturalise pandemic narratives ultimately reveal that the humanities can complement scientific knowledge with another kind of knowledge, which possesses the potential to rethink hegemonic perceptions about the nature, spread and impact of contagion. Because the human condition is invariably complex and often difficult to scientifically quantify, humanistic narratives are thus a vital vehicle to put pandemic-related human experiences into words and give them meaning.

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