

Reading Bodies in European Literatures and Cultures

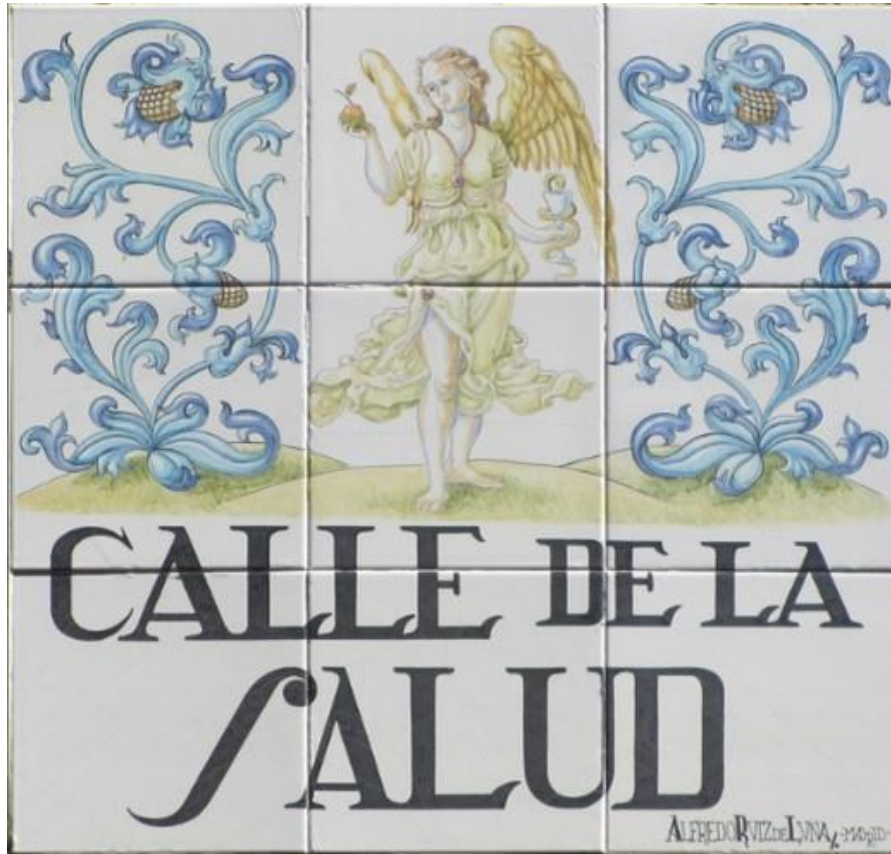
[Katharine Murphy](#) introduces her new project, “Reading Bodies”, and reflects on what languages and non-anglophone literatures, particularly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have to offer the field.

Working across five languages, the AHRC-funded project on “[Reading Bodies: Narrating Illness in Spanish and European Literatures and Cultures \(1870s to 1960s\)](#)” brings together a group of scholars to discuss literary and cultural representations of the body from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in Hispanic Studies, French, German, Italian and Portuguese. The literary emphasis of this project does not just focus on the language of pathology, although this aspect is implicit, but also seeks to extend conceptual approaches to the intersections between literature and medicine. Literary, cinematic and visual culture continues to play a key role in illuminating the ways in which society understands and disseminates ideas about bodies and minds, health and illness. With these issues in mind, this piece will reflect on the contribution that “Reading Bodies” seeks to make to transcultural approaches to the medical humanities.

The project has developed over several years, drawing on my previous research on gendered readings of degenerationism in early-twentieth-century Spanish literature, especially the integration of theories from science, medicine and psychiatry in cultural discourses. My book, [Bodies of Disorder: Gender and Degeneration in Baroja and Blasco Ibáñez](#) (Murphy 2017), provides a foundation for the “Reading Bodies” project in two main ways. Firstly, the volume examines the circulation of ideas across languages and cultures in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe, by considering the ways in which degenerationist theories by Bénédict Morel, Cesare Lombroso, Max Nordau and others were assimilated in Spain. Secondly, the book foregrounds the interconnections between medical discourses, the cultural mythologies that surrounded them, and their application to understanding socio-political and ideological contexts, thereby informing my current project.

I mention these brief examples to support my view that medical humanities research, which already bridges academic disciplines, is well-placed to integrate new scholarly perspectives on the circulation and exchange of ideas across languages and national borders. Interdisciplinary approaches to medical humanities that place languages at their centre therefore have a unique role to play in the analysis of the cultural dissemination, adaptation and popularisation of medical terminology and discourses. As I outlined in a recent [article](#) (Murphy 2023), *abulia* (apathy or loss of will) was widely discussed among early-twentieth-century intellectuals in Spain as an explanation for the country’s predicament in the context of economic stagnation and imperial decline. Fuelled by the 1898 War with the United States and loss of the remnants of Spain’s New World Empire (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines), the term *abulia* was particularly prominent in regenerationist debates

about the nation's future. This process of linguistic assimilation exemplifies the culturally-specific use of medical terminology to convey ideological discourses, informing the literary representation of pathology as a cipher for periods of socio-political change and upheaval, as "Reading Bodies" explores.



Azulejo street sign, Calle de la salud, Madrid.
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The challenges of interdisciplinary research

Multilingual approaches to medical humanities present both potential advantages and obvious risks, not least the need to balance inclusivity with coherence of understanding between different areas of analysis and disciplinary specialisms. A process of selection is also necessary in this type of project, to ensure sufficient depth of analysis whilst remaining open to collaborative ideas that emerge as the research develops. For these reasons, we have grouped the topics addressed by the research network into three key strands: transnational and decolonial perspectives; representations of gender and the body in literature and film; and the relationships between society, illness and artistic form. In April, the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies (ILCS) will host the first "Reading Bodies" [academic workshop](#) to further these interconnections between topics and language areas.

Among other aims, the project advances Iberian contributions to multilingual medical humanities, bringing together Hispanic and Lusophone Studies scholarship (for example, Fernández-Medina 2018; Glaze 2021; Murphy 2017; and Novillo-Corvalán 2015) in dialogue with specialists in French, Italian and German. It seeks, therefore, to participate in redressing to some extent the existing balance of languages approaches to the medical humanities by enriching this field of research, and attempts to reframe traditional assumptions about centre and periphery that persist both in Anglonormative scholarship and in perceived language hierarchies. Although the project focuses on Europe, the research questions remain open to transatlantic connections, including Latin America. As mentioned above, through reading illness and the body as the site of ideological concerns, our collaboration aims to further advance this stimulating field of study, thereby strengthening connections and shared perspectives across language disciplines. Finally, by incorporating new research on the powerful interconnections between psychological and physical explanations of ill-health, and their representation in literature, we seek to reframe traditional divisions between mind and body that persist in scholarship of this period (see Fifield 2020).

With these research strands at the centre, the [network](#) is particularly concerned with the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, age and social class inform our readings of health and illness. For example, the network is investigating the ways in which medical terms such as hysteria, neurasthenia, *abulia* and neurosis were applied differently to men and women, and according to class-based criteria. This research strand will examine the cultural construction of illness in relation to diverse social groups and categories. Alongside our aim to contribute new insights to scholarship on the body, through its foregrounding of metonymic representations of historical turning points as illness, the project engages with and builds on a rapidly evolving body of work at the intersection of languages and medical humanities.

In this regard, we seek to extend the illuminating insights of transnational scholarship in languages disciplines (such as Craig and Linge 2017; Elsner and Wilson 2022; Lemos and Ramalhete Gomes 2017; and Wong 2024). Through its interdisciplinary focus, the project intersects closely, too, with the aims and rationale of [The Polyphony's Multilingual Medical Humanities](#) series, which highlights Steven Wilson's opening [manifesto](#) and Marta Araldi and Charles Forsdick's conference "takeover" on [translational thinking](#). Wilson reflects on the literary and artistic expression of illness in different languages as an example of what Whitehead and Woods term "creative boundary-crossing" (2016, 8). Challenging Anglocentrism in scholarship, moreover, both pieces argue for the importance of linguistic sensitivity and an expanded definition of epistemological diversity in forging new interdisciplinary approaches to the field.

A literary and cultural focus

Complementing current multilingual projects in medical humanities, many of which focus on the modern and contemporary period, "Reading Bodies" foregrounds literature and visual culture from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The project thereby responds to the call to include historical perspectives in medical

humanities discussions, alongside innovative approaches to transcultural encounters and the complex interactions between mind and body (Whitehead and Woods 2016, 6–7, 16–17). Otis (1999, 3) has theorised the creative intersections between nineteenth-century literature and medicine in her study of metaphor, arguing that “the relationship between literature and science is one of mutual feedback and suggestibility, each contributing to and drawing upon the ‘culture medium’ out of which it grows.” Valtonen and Lewis (2023) make a similar point in the context of mental health humanities, explaining that the methodologies of literature and science need not work in tension, against each other, but instead hold the potential to produce new understanding through their interactions.

Furthermore, “Reading Bodies” underscores the unique discursive potential held by literature and other cultural texts, which both reinforce and subvert the medical discourses and terminology that they expound. The novels of the so-called “Generation of 1898” in Spain, for example, famously debate the theories of positivism, degenerationism, determinism and naturalism, without subscribing fully to the tenets of any of these movements and doctrines. Literary and visual texts may thus resist and critique medical narratives, whilst also assimilating and transforming them. For these reasons, the project analyses cultural texts as sites of education, dissemination and legitimisation, alongside adaptation and subversion of dominant discourses of the body, by approaching critically their use of the language of pathology and resilience.

Although my project focuses primarily on literary and visual representations of bodies and minds in the past, there are powerful implications for our present-day understanding of how illness is conceptualised, including the legacies of colonial and gendered discourses. For example, the tensions between nineteenth-century theories of reading as deleterious to women’s health and contemporary insights into the therapeutic properties of reading will inform our research. The project facilitates collaboration with a small group of specialists in Psychology, Public Health and Creative Writing with an interest in burnout, stress and resilience, and promotes strategies for wellness in these research contexts. Incorporating psychologically-informed studies of these concepts, alongside evolving research on the interconnections between physical and mental health, the project team will co-create [resources](#) in partnership with the wider community.

Taking inspiration from selected exemplars, our planned creative writing activities aim to support the analysis of how burnout and resilience are understood by society and how they are communicated by cultural texts, including literary fiction and visual images. The project seeks to foreground the therapeutic potential of telling stories as a means of connecting with others, especially in the context of the isolation that often accompanies the unwell body and mind. We hope therefore to offer valuable space for reflection, reading and creative expression. To conclude, collaboration between an interdisciplinary network of researchers and the community allows us to move beyond a single linguistic context and to engage in comparative work on reading bodies and minds, health and illness across languages and cultures.

About the author

[Katharine Murphy](#) is an Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies and Comparative Literature in the Department of Languages, Cultures and Visual Studies, University of Exeter. She has published widely on interdisciplinary approaches to Spanish Modernism, and is the author of two books: *Bodies of Disorder: Gender and Degeneration in Baroja and Blasco Ibáñez* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017) and *Re-reading Pío Baroja and English Literature* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004). Her recent publications in the field of medical humanities include research on *abulia* in early-twentieth-century Spanish literature (*Hispanic Review*, 2023) and social pathologies in the novels of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez ([Open Library of Humanities, 2022](#)). Katharine is an affiliate member of the Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health, University of Exeter, and was awarded a UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship for “Reading Bodies” 2023-2025.

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