

# FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

---

*Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film and Medicine* (2020) by Sara Wasson

Review by Rebecca Gibson

Volume 6 Issue 1 - *Embodying Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-6-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

---

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to [editors@fantastikajournal.com](mailto:editors@fantastikajournal.com)



[www.fantastikajournal.com](http://www.fantastikajournal.com)

# **TRANSPLANTATION GOTHIC: TISSUE TRANSFER IN LITERATURE, FILM AND MEDICINE (2020) BY SARA WASSON**

Review by Rebecca Gibson

---

Wasson, Sara. *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film and Medicine*. Manchester University Press, 2020. 232 pp.

Sara Wasson's *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film and Medicine* invites slow consideration. Described by Wasson as a "shadow cultural history of transplantation" (1), *Transplantation Gothic* is intimately concerned with the human reality of tissue transfer, taking a cautious and empathetic approach when analysing its relationship with Gothic. Anyone familiar with Wasson's work will not be surprised by this; her scholarship is characterised by this kind of deliberate compassion, which in this instance allows for equal attention to both donor and recipient figures. No other Gothic cultural history of transplantation yet exists, marking Wasson's work as a watershed moment in the history of medical Gothic. Wasson aims to complicate conventional understandings and terminologies of tissue transfer by emphasising that "transfer is not a single momentary event between two parties but involves multiple parties over an extended duration" (22). Wasson lingers on the strange intimacies of tissue transfer, committed to the consideration of creative representations of prolonged suffering in not only this medical context but in its social consequences too. In doing so, she provides an important critical intervention in medical Gothic but also more broadly in the medical humanities – acknowledging that while transplantation surgery is indeed "astounding and life-saving," "[c]elebrating transplantation does not require denying the suffering that can be part of these complex processes" (3-4). Wasson's attention to all individuals involved in the process of tissue transfer builds on the work of Lesley Sharp (*The Transplant Imaginary*, 2013), who argued for use of the word "transfer" over "transplantation" as it "includes the donor as well as the meditating practices and parties" (2). As well, Wasson's focus on hierarchies of life-value is in agreement with the work of Philip Barrish, whose article 'Health Policy in Dystopia' in *Literature and Medicine* in 2016 argued that "medical humanities should do more to consider the economics of medical care" (20).

Wasson's approach is historicist, but her chapters are divided into consideration of figures rather than proceeding chronologically through history: Chapter 1 focuses on practitioners, Chapters 2, 3, and 5 on donors/suppliers, and Chapter 4 on transfer recipients. Theoretically rich without ever seeming dense or overburdened, *Transplantation Gothic* draws examples from a wide range of material including medical writing, Science Fiction, life writing, and the visual arts to argue that medical science and Gothic have informed each other throughout the history of tissue transfer; the depth and breadth of Wasson's knowledge is immediately felt. Chapter 1 details the use of Gothic

within medical literature on transplantation, beginning with an extensive and fascinating account of definitions of brain death, which vary across the globe. The differing diagnostic entities of “‘whole-brain death’, ‘brain-stem death’, and ‘controlled circulatory death’” present certain challenges to the logistics of tissue transfer, ones which impact the medical team as well as the donor and the recipient (39). One of *Transplantation Gothic’s* greatest strengths is its commitment to analysing all facets of these interactions; in this chapter, Wasson argues that the experiences of medical staff assisting in tissue transfer are often mediated through Gothic imagery and narrative strategies, sometimes in contradictory ways. Gothic can be used variously to “express uncertainty or unease or, by contrast, to manage doubt and normalise” (39).

This acknowledgment that Gothic can be complicit in problematic “hierarchialisations of life that reinforce biopolitical exclusions” is carried through in Chapter 3, which argues that racial inequalities act upon the transfer process in another form of structural violence (23). Wasson demonstrates how forced organ procurement narratives – urban legends imagining children and other vulnerable groups being preyed upon for organs, usually in non-Western environments – “invert real trends in the flow of organs and tissue, the neocolonial predation of transnational trafficking” (94). In highlighting Gothic fictions of tissue predation within India, Britain, and North America, Wasson resists the common assumption that such exploitative practice exists only outside Western territories. This chapter interrogates the debatably voluntary nature of donating tissue under these exploitative circumstances, examining fiction which uses horror registers to explore the often-dystopian consequences of economic precarity and healthcare marginalisation for minorities. In these texts, Wasson argues, slow structural violence – defined as “violence in which time itself is a force of ruination” – forces “the prolonged enduring of vulnerability in time, within neoliberal and necropolitical frameworks of clinical labour” (92, 95). Here as in Chapter 4, in her discussion of surgical time in *Les yeux sans visage (Eyes Without a Face)* (1958), Wasson proves the extent to which the emotional vulnerability of transfer can “colour the apprehension of space and time,” exploring texts which engage fully with the “challenge to find ways to represent suffering that occurs over a long duration” (6, 128). One of Wasson’s key contributions to Gothic critical discourse is her assertion that Gothic is not only an “anxious form” but one which can also be speculative; in the transplantation fiction she discusses, it also provides a space for “speculative theorisations [...] attempts to *think* about biotechnologically mediated states of extreme precarity” (11). Among the most intriguing theorisation strategies discussed by Wasson is the idea of tissue that has agency, found in texts which engage with the uncanniness of both the pre- and post-surgical body as if “both the received tissue and the original body are rife with agencies generating scripts that subjects cannot control” (135).

Wasson synthesises analysis of well-known texts such as *Les mains d’Orlac (The Hands of Orlac)* (1920) with lesser-known examples to weave a compelling cultural history of tissue transfer, arguing that speculative modes such as Gothic and Science Fiction allow for complex and unusual articulations of time and space during the process of tissue transfer. One of the most viscerally horrifying fictional examples of exploitative tissue transfer practice in Wasson’s book illuminates “the strain of living in the knowledge of imminent wounding” (102). In Manjula Padmanabhan’s play

*Harvest* (1997), set in 2010, Jaya's husband Om sells the rights to his organs after losing his job and struggling with economic precarity. Jaya breaks down the horror of Om's impending surgery – which could come at any time – via traditional high-caste mourning rituals: "If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles – but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece? Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time?" (Padmanabhan 21). Such transfer horror foregrounds the mutilating cost of exploitation and exclusion. To expand on this point, Wasson draws on other fictions such as Walter Mosley's short story "Whispers in the Dark" (2001), in which African American man Chill sells his "eyes, legs, spinal nerves, genitalia, and other organs in return for six million dollars" in order to fund his nephew's education and provide a stable home in a near-future era of hyperinflation (Wasson 114). Mosley's story acts as a commentary on the profitable industry of incarceration in the United States, which disproportionately exploits African Americans. As Wasson proves again and again, "[i]n transfer, the repair of certain bodies relies on injury to certain others [...] certain bodies are more likely to enter that encounter as donor or supplier than recipient" (18).

Despite her emphasis on the possibilities of tissue transfer narratives in the Gothic mode, Wasson is cautious to stress emphasise that while Gothic is a useful tool for representing pain, grief, and transformation, capable of "restor[ing] particular suffering to the field of vision," it can also be complicit in the very erasure and marginalisation under discussion (2). Other examples given in *Transplantation Gothic* run the risk of "distan[cin]g atrocities as performed by monsters"; Gothic can be wielded for both progressive and regressive purposes (9). Thus, throughout *Transplantation Gothic* Wasson is alive to the complexities and intricate nuances of language surrounding tissue transfer, discussing in Chapter 3 how the term 'harvest' risks dehumanising donors and "implying that the surgical procurement is a natural and destined reaping" (95). Chapter 5 explores this idea in more depth, focusing on narratives of state-sanctioned harvest in dystopian fictions such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007), which use this trope to examine hierarchies of life which already exist in less extreme forms. Here Wasson builds on her argument from previous chapters that societies render some lives more precarious than others; "[n]ot all deaths are striven against to the same degree" (164). This chapter focuses on speculative fiction in which both the state and privatised groups delineate which deaths are permissible, even desirable, in pursuit of better lives for the few, arguing that in these works, the lexical fields surrounding tissue transfer normalise the state-sanctioned violence which creates such hierarchies of life. Wasson's writing is concise and clear even when mired in discussion of such tragedies; applying critical attention to "lives in permanent precarity, 'ungrievable' because never recognised as quite alive" is tense and important work (163). Wasson interrogates discursive constructions such as the language of organ scarcity to demonstrate how they contribute to "discourses of variable life worth," illuminating the chain of events which must often occur in order for donation to go ahead: "[d]onation after brain death requires neurological failure in an otherwise relatively healthy body, and as such disproportionately involves sudden violent death" (163). As Wasson specifies, "no transplant surgeon ever wants such deaths to increase," but deaths from opioid addiction, gun violence, and traffic fatalities have root causes which stem from failure "to invest collective energy into fostering life under particular conditions" (163). Within such framing, some deaths are less mournable than

others. Wasson argues that the speculative fiction discussed in this chapter encourages readers to reflect on their own contexts in order to recognise “sociocultural dimensions of biomedicalised process and the impact of contemporary metaphors for transfer tissue” (166).

*Transplantation Gothic* will be of obvious interest to readers studying medical Gothic, but it also contributes to wider discussions on the ever-evolving role of the Gothic mode. As pointed out by Wasson, a question which often appears in Gothic studies is “the degree to which fictional representations may be informed by real suffering” (8). Gothic and Horror allow for deep explorations of the kinds of distress often found in medical writing, the bodily disruptions and vulnerability of the patient which can expand in such a mode. Wasson argues in her introduction that this Gothic work is not only valuable but imperative: “non-realist representation may be *necessary* for representing extreme experience [...] distortion may be required in order to convey the epistemological challenge or the affective intensity of an experience” (25). *Transplantation Gothic* leaves us in no doubt that this work is vital indeed.

#### WORKS CITED

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. 1997. Aurora Metro, 2003.

#### BIONOTE

**Rebecca Gibson** is an associate lecturer and researcher at Lancaster University, UK. She recently completed her PhD, titled “Uncanny Incisions: Plastic Surgery in the Gothic Mode.” She has recent publications in *Gothic Nature Journal* and *Horror Homeroom*. Her research interests include medical Gothic and the medical humanities, ecoGothic, gender and queer studies. Her Twitter is [@face\\_of\\_gothic](#)