What we took away from our conversation with Dr Esther L Jones.

For our second event, we had a rich and rewarding conversation with [Dr Esther L Jones](https://www2.clarku.edu/faculty/facultybio.cfm?id=806), who is Associate Provost and Dean of the Faculty at Clark University, where she is a professor in the department of English and the E Franklin Frazier Chair of African American Literature, Theory and Culture. We don’t have the space to summarize all the great insights Esther shared with us, but the conversation is available to listen to as a [podcast](https://anchor.fm/convoartshealth).

We do want to share some of the key messages we took away from engaging with Esther’s important work at the intersection of black speculative fiction, medical humanities and gender, especially around justice and equity in our care systems and the power of engaging with the arts.

**Journeying through academia**

Esther started by telling us about her personal academic journey. She is professor of English literature, but started her graduate career thinking she would be a folklorist, while embarking on an MA in African American and African studies at Ohio State University. Whereas folklore studies are typically housed in anthropology or other social science departments, Esther instead found herself in an English department, and reflected on how her graduate school experience equipped her with an interdisciplinary lens on literature.

Esther’s story was not only a reminder of how interdisciplinary training equips scholars with an eye for approaching their topics of study from novel perspectives, but also of how interdisciplinary journeys are often deeply contingent. Being in a particular place, at a particular time, with particular people often has a profound impact on the interdisciplinary approach of scholars – but that particularity is usually not something we are fully aware of at the start of the journey, let alone something we consciously seek out. Sometimes what shapes us the most in our teaching and research results from chance (which does not necessarily mean good fortune), including how our academic and personal journeys intersect.

**The value of speculative fiction**

Esther’s experiences compelled her to pursue the study of health, race and gender through the lens of black speculative fiction – at a time when science fiction writing by black authors like Olivia Butler was burgeoning in America. For Esther, the “distance” created by the counterfactual worlds of speculative fiction – where things exist and events occur that run counter to the facts of the world we live in – allow us to deal with real-world concerns and problems. In these worlds, we find that metaphor is literalised; they are fictional places where society’s perception and treatment of real-world groups, like illegal immigrants, can play out through stories about outer space aliens.

When we read realistic fiction, the proximity to reality can make it more difficult to engage with the problems of our world. When we read stories that explicitly deal with issues like systemic racism, they may hit too close to home, so that our justified indignation prevents us from really engaging with the work – or our guilt, if we are members of majority groups that have historically perpetuated and continue to perpetuate injustice. Speculative fiction acts as a distancing mechanism – a sideways entrance – that creates a psychic space for us to think through the dynamics of race, gender, sexuality and all modes of difference where there is fraught engagement. It is a tool that helps us to address questions like: How do we create that difference in our minds?  How do we organize ourselves socially? How do we think about power? About hierarchy?

**Relating across difference**

We were particularly struck by the artistic power of speculative fiction as a tool that we can use to relate ethically and humanely across difference, including (but not limited to) differences across race and ethnicity – and of the practical implications for improving equity in healthcare. Esther told us how she uses a clip from Jordan Peel’s speculative horror film *Get Out*in discussion settings, including with health professionals, to highlight different points of entry to experiencing what she calls “the horror of the mundane for black people.” In the opening scene, suspense builds as we see a black man, Andre, walking through dark and (for him) alien suburb at night, talking on the phone to his white girlfriend, who is directing him to her home. A car drives by and conspicuously pulls up alongside Andre, while the driver listens to *Run Rabbit Run*by the British music hall duo Flanagan and Allen at high volume. Andre, who fears confrontation, just tries to walk away, but as he turns around, he is violently abducted by the driver who sneaks up on him off screen.

Esther’s explanations of the different points in time that different people pick up on the terror of the scene are profoundly insightful, and you need to hear the podcast to get the true impact and understanding. It sparked a further discussion ranging across racism, empathy and understanding that was challenging but hugely valuable.

Esther’s research about black speculative fiction clearly demonstrates the role of arts and humanities in healthcare, as health professionals must every day relate ethically and humanely across differences in contexts of life and death – and need tools to do so. We are grateful to Esther for not only highlighting the crucial contribution that arts like speculative fiction can make to healthcare, but also why we need approaches developed in humanities teaching and research to engage with and study these arts. During our conversation, Esther celebrated the value of reading, re-reading, and reading together as ways of engaging with literature that we cultivate in our libraries and seminar rooms. We pay tribute to her work, illuminating and allowing profound discussion of racism. We acknowledge how Esther’s work can guide us to new understandings of these issues, and continue to drive us to try to change ourselves and the world to be better.

**Listen to the podcast**

We recommend you have a listen to our [podcast](https://anchor.fm/convoartshealth) to hear the full story.

If you have any further questions or comments, do contact us at [aestheticsandhealth@kent.ac.uk](mailto:aestheticsandhealth@kent.ac.uk).

Dieter and Ian