Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020 by Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb (review)

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ism and austerity” that predominate in the twenty-first century (190). His characterization of our current moment as “neo-Malthusian” will strike a chord with both British and American readers, if not more broadly as well; and although Mangham does not broach the subject directly, his critique of contemporary inequities in resource access opens a pathway to considering the relevance of his arguments to food disparities between the Global North and South. Further, Mangham’s call to resist by “look[ing] at bodies and how they suffer” reads as especially prescient on this side of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we know, statistical abstractions have done little to teach much of the public how to “see” the material realities of life in a pandemic and what these realities demand of us in ethical terms. The Science of Starving suggests that we might learn something from the epistemology of starvation at work in Victorian novels, even as the author bleakly observes “how little has changed” in the intervening century (190). In particular, Mangham attends to these novels as reminders “to question the convenient stories whose conclusions have become complacent” (190, emphasis in original), and whose narrative techniques work to abstract or elide the true complexities of embodied life.

—Diana Rose Newby


In this ambitious and illuminating scholarly debut, Anjuli Raza Kolb deftly traces the genealogy of what she calls the “disease poetics of empire” which have continued to shape narratives of primarily Islamist insurgency both before and after 9/11 (4). She argues that this tendency of presenting insurgent or terrorist violence in terms of “epidemic” has its roots in the same cultural, literary, and scientific practices indispensable for the management of colonized people in nineteenth-century imperial formations. In order to show the ubiquity and tenacity of the “terror-as-epidemic” metaphor, Raza Kolb takes us on a sweeping tranhistorical and comparative journey: from British India in the nineteenth century, to French Algeria in the middle of the twentieth, and finally to our current neoimperial moment of global (though challenged) American hegemony. Kolb’s study is a welcome addition to the fields of not only postcolonial studies and cultural studies but also literature and medicine and the “global health humanities.”
Raza Kolb’s preface to the book, “Politics and Scholarship in a Time of Pandemic,” is a must-read in order to understand the larger contexts driving her scholarship, contexts which have influenced her personal and intellectual life in material ways: the Islamophobic fallout of 9/11, the aftermath of the Trump administration’s “Muslim Ban,” and the rise of global Islamophobia tying COVID-19 to Muslim minorities in India and China. Indeed, the preface displays in stark relief the feminist dictum that the personal is political: Raza Kolb stresses that her project had been percolating ever since 9/11 and her encounters with Islamophobia as the child of Pakistani Muslim immigrants in the United States, where Islamist insurgency continues to be framed in epidemic terms such as “cancer” or “virus.” While this personal history is not readily apparent in the rest of the work, the preface prepares the reader to confront the subsequent subject matter not as an abstract theoretical project but one with tangible consequences for real people and the real world. This mode of scholarly inquiry is thoroughly in the tradition of Edward Said, who argued in “The World, The Text, and the Critic” (1983) that the literary scholar must attend to the “worldliness” of the text. This worldliness deeply informs Raza Kolb’s analyses of a rich and capacious literary, cultural, and medical archive, including novels, medical treatises, films, poetry, and government documents. She shows that the place of the Muslim in the current epidemic imaginary should not be a surprise at all; in fact, this pathologization of race (or conversely, the racialization of epidemic) has been an ongoing project for at least the past two centuries.

_Epidemic Empire_ can be said to combine and elaborate on the visions of Said’s massive intellectual corpus and of Susan Sontag’s _Illness as Metaphor_ (1978). Sontag had famously argued that we must let disease be what it is—just disease—instead of metaphorizing it as something else, partly because such figuration inevitably leads to blaming the sick person for her own illness. Adopting a method of “Saidian discourse analysis” (19), Raza Kolb follows in Said’s footsteps by focusing on an array of British, French, and American cultural artifacts—but she inflects these readings with Sontag’s admonishing against pernicious disease metaphors. She offers a sustained critique of one Orientalist metaphor in particular: the Muslim insurgent as epidemic. From the first cholera epidemic in India in 1817 to the 1857 Indian War of Independence, from the Algerian revolution of the mid-twentieth century to 9/11, the discursive links drawn by Euro-American powers between Islamic insurgency and epidemic disease have been, according to Raza Kolb, consistent and rife. In a clever twist of words,
Raza Kolb also inverts George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) to refer to these pernicious terror-epidemic figures as “metaphors we die by” (4).

In order to further develop her own method of literary criticism attentive to “the point of contact between an idea of disease and narrative form,” Raza Kolb looks to the work of Priscilla Wald and Cristobal Silva as models (18). Both Wald and Silva have noted that the material practice of epidemiology is itself a narrative genre that emphasizes times, places, and characters to explain disease transmission. In this vein, Raza Kolb devises her own method of “reading epidemiologically,” a practice privileging breadth over depth in literary research. Just as epidemiology strives to create a horizontal picture of a disease-event with attention to region, timing, and scale, so too does epidemiological reading situate disparate texts in a single field of analysis, facilitating conversation between texts rather than solely relying on a hermeneutics of suspicion which, as Raza Kolb argues, resembles the depth-interior model of the clinical gaze. While she sharply critiques the capacity of epidemiology to flatten disparate locales and experiences, epidemiological reading allows her to make astonishing connections across time and space and thereby defamiliarize historical and contemporary events. For instance, in the first chapter she reads Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* alongside narratives of how a sham public health campaign played a role in identifying and killing Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011. The third chapter, while performing historicized close readings of *Dracula* alongside Bram Stoker’s lesser known works, also shows how the former text was taken up by contemporary artists and audiences after 9/11. In an interesting twist, Raza Kolb ties the blood donated to Lucy Westenra in Stoker’s novel to how, after 9/11, “Americans read the terrorists’ theft of life as a theft of blood. In order to keep the wounded state alive, they lined up like so many Swards and Van Helsings to share of this vital resource, and in doing silently ratified the securitization of the coming War on Terror in the terms of public health” (125). This transhistorical reading method, I suggest, is another instance of Raza Kolb’s commitment to the worldliness of texts; the colonialist discourse of Victorian novels continues to inform and haunt world events into the present.

The novelty of Raza Kolb’s “epidemiological reading” and the vast breadth of her archive, while allowing her to make astute connections and observations across time and space, also engender the book’s limitations. There are moments where certain historically contingent terms such as “contagion” and “immunity” are taken for
granted and deployed ahistorically. For instance, Raza Kolb reads the use of the word “immunity” in a text from 1849 to suggest that its sense isn’t “limited to legal immunity” because it is followed by the words “Nothing is more contagious than rebellion” (41). However, as Ed Cohen has convincingly shown, it was not until the development of the “immunity as defense” paradigm in the 1880s that juridical immunity was recast into its present biological connotation. This minor flaw is exemplary of a larger trend in *Epidemic Empire*, which privileges historical continuity over historical change, perhaps in order to trace the genealogy of today’s gratuitous use of the terror-epidemic metaphor. Raza Kolb passingly refers to Robert Koch’s discovery of the *Vibrio cholerae* in 1883 but she does not elaborate upon how historical developments in epidemiology or bacteriology left their mark on changes in literary form. While there are passing references to the conflict between contagionists and miasmatists, it is not emphatically underscored that the epidemiological language in Kipling’s *Kim* (1900) and Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) means something different than, say, similar language deployed in texts from the 1850s.

The ahistoricism that sometimes accompanies epidemiological reading does not always detract from its merits. The rewards of this method appear in full force in chapter 5, which demonstrates how disparate texts about the Algerian Revolution constructed a pernicious narrative about Muslim women needing to be saved by European colonial powers, a narrative that was coopted in the United States’ War on Terror. Raza Kolb stresses how her source materials are highly “mediated” through national culture and genre: a Martinican psychiatrist, a French writer, a Spanish painter, and an Italian film director all gravitated to the horrific medicalized torture of Algerian revolutionaries. Frantz Fanon examined the psychology of French colonial violence and the Algerian revolution, Simone de Beauvoir published a book on the torture of Algerian revolutionary Djamila Bouacha and the cover of the book was in turn graced by an illustration of the woman by Picasso, and finally Gillo Pontecorvo directed *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which was screened in the Pentagon in 2003 as a primer for the counterinsurgency in Iraq. The national and generic diversity of these interventions suggest the usefulness of reading epidemiologically to understand how representations of anticolonial insurgency spread across the globe. While the choice to whisk through so many different genres is not theorized, nor is it discussed how epidemiology may inform these genres in distinct ways, it aligns Raza Kolb’s approach with that of cultural studies, where texts from many genres are ex-
amine together as an archive of culture. Moreover, it demonstrates that the mediation of texts may be as important to the method of epidemiological reading as the texts themselves. Once again, their mediation and circulation speak to their worldliness.

This generic promiscuity and attention to mediation reappears in the final chapter of the book, with the juxtaposition of published government documents and poetry. Raza Kolb closely reads the 9/11 Commission Report as a profoundly literary document laced with epidemic and medical metaphor, the inevitable culmination of two centuries of epidemic empire. But she supplants the power of this document by juxtaposing it with texts which hold the US accountable for its own practices of literal and epistemic violence, such as The Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture as well as contemporary poet Solmaz Sharif’s formal experiments with the specialized language of the US military in her collection Look (2016). Raza Kolb’s readings of Sharif’s poems are incredibly perceptive, showing how Muslim immigrants in the wake of 9/11 are conceived by the Immigration and Naturalization Service as “health” threats. She also reads the white space of some poems as rejoinders to the “black bars of redaction” which populate official US government documents and perpetuate a hermeneutic of suspicion and paranoia (283). Sharif’s collection exemplifies mediation par excellence as it subverts the vocabulary of the 2007 edition of the US Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, another government document. Epidemiological reading, as it is deployed here, allows imperialist state discourses to be contaminated and disabled by anticolonial art.

The above section, for all its superb readings, falls into the same trap as does much postcolonial studies scholarship, which imagines the US empire as developing sui generis after World War II and the end of the formal European empires. Though Raza Kolb begins her Introduction with the Moro Rebellion (1899–1913) in the Southern Philippines, noting how it was invoked by Donald Trump on the campaign trail to make his case for the Muslim Ban—thus showing the “history and mythology of anti-Muslim violence at the root of American imperialism” (1)—more could have been said about the development of epidemiology and tropical medicine in the United States after it acquired its overseas colonial empire in the Caribbean and Pacific following the Spanish-American War of 1898. Indeed, for a genealogy of disease metaphors in the 9/11 Commission Report, one would not even have to look at British and French antecedents—the American ones would suffice.
Putting aside the issue of US imperial historiography, there is also a telling lack of engagement with disability studies, a field which would have had much to add to the book’s final section. (Raza Kolb’s engagement with Jasbir K. Puar’s *The Right to Maim* is the one exception.) In fact, disability studies, a field that has long argued against the medicalization of impairment and averred that experiences of disability are not essentialist attributes of individual bodies but are instead produced socially, has also underscored the deleterious effects of using disabilities and illnesses as metaphors, especially as metaphors for postcolonialism and vice versa. In the chapter on Salman Rushdie, Raza Kolb argues that *The Satanic Verses* (1988) resists the epidemic imaginary of Rushdie’s later work by depicting “noninfectious” ailments such as falling sickness and breast cancer, thereby “finding potential for revolutionary politics in both illness and disability, even at the risk of romanticizing both” (246). While her readings of these disabilities in the novel are fresh, she does not acknowledge the scholarly baggage around the tendency to allegorize or metaphorize—or indeed, romanticize—disability in postcolonial fiction. In fact, the binary that she draws between non-infectious disability and infectious disease is spurious, given that she refers to injuries sustained by pellet guns in Kashmir—which one would conventionally consider disabilities or debilities—as epidemic. In other words, Raza Kolb missed an opportunity to engage meaningfully with a discipline which already has much to say about irresponsible metaphors and the stigmatization of “Other” bodies.

Finally, and this is the other side of the issue outlined above about what counts as infectious or not, the term “epidemic” itself often seems unstable or ill-defined. Its referents are legion: contagion, cholera, plague, blinding by pellet guns, parasitic tapeworms, medical torture, and more. In this way Raza Kolb’s deployment of “epidemic” engenders its own “epidemic of signification.” But perhaps that is the point—that the epidemic imaginary which emerged in the colonial era and latched itself so parasitically to representations of Islamist insurgency is both all-encompassing and virulent. It is surprising that no one else has identified the ubiquity of this metaphor until now, and we all should be grateful for Raza Kolb’s demonstrated ingenuity, passion, and eloquence in taking up this formidable challenge. *Epidemic Empire*, read amidst a global pandemic and the rise of anti-Asian racism in the United States, paves the way for more interventions on how colonial medicine and literary cultures continue to inform our troubled present.
NOTES

2. As Neel Ahuja, Warwick Anderson, John Farley, and John Ettling have respectively shown, the American colonial state and organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation played a major role in the pathologization of people of color both in the mainland South and in offshore territories. See Ahuja, Bioinsecurities; Anderson, Colonial Pathologies; Farley, Bilharzia; and Ettling, Germ of Laziness.
3. See for instance Sherry, “(Post)colonising Disability.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Steven Wilson’s The Language of Disease makes a significant contribution to ongoing efforts to de-anglicize the medical humanities by focusing precisely on language, for it is this often neglected linguistic dimension, he contends, that will enable us to move towards a “truly global medical humanities” (133). In this short yet impactful monograph, Wilson offers “the first extensive study on disease in French literature that takes as its methodological approach the critical medical humanities” (6). Accepting the symbiotic relationship between language and literature, Wilson presents readings of his corpus—comprising canonical and non-canonical texts—that direct our attention away from the literary and rhetorical functions of disease and onto the (linguistic) body. In so doing, he presents a rich and convincing argument that establishes