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Book Forum

Pandemic / Critic

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The assignment: use Anjuli Raza Kolb's *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* as a starting point for a think piece. Hmm. "Epidemic." "Empire." "Colonialism." "Contagion." "Terror." "2020." *Yeah*, I thought, *I should be able to find a hook here somewhere.*

What I didn't expect was to find myself thinking so much—alongside all those other keywords—about words such as *metaphor, canonicity*, and *poesis.* That's to say among the many other things it is, *Epidemic Empire* is a book with which to reconsider the possibilities of criticism in our terrible time.

Raza Kolb herself is ambivalent at best about the role of the critic in our pandemic moment. Noting in the book's opening that she comes from a family of doctors, nurses, and medical technicians, she declares: "Every one of them has infinitely more to offer our immediate collective welfare than I do."[1] Certainly the COVID-19 pandemic has placed the old joke about the relative value of academics—"I'm a doctor, but not *that* kind of doctor"—in a darker light. But I wouldn't be so quick to downplay the contribution a work like *Epidemic Empire* can make to our "collective welfare"; the benefits aren't as immediate as those from the hands of a medical provider, but they are real and significant nevertheless. After all, as she notes later in the book, at the root of the word *crisis*—and its related descendant, *critic*—is ill health and its reversal: "its Greek root *krisis* describe[s] the turning point in the progression of a disease or malady" (162). With the search for a "turning point" in our current pandemic becoming a daily obsession, the critic may indeed have some work to do alongside the medic.

Raza Kolb is a beautiful reader, careful and wickedly smart. Most important, she is a generous reader. I mean "generous" also in the sense of "generative"—just as criticism, in its best sense (as against the more prevalent model of the critic as criticizer), is a creative force. I want to dwell on and with this sense of generosity because from a certain angle there is something vaguely scandalous about reading canonical texts by writers such as Rudyard Kipling, Bram Stoker, and Albert Camus generously. So too some might object to the care given the now-canonical work of Salman Rushdie, who Raza Kolb rightly notes plays a central role in the powerful institutional category of "world literature" as "a depoliticizing scholarly paradigm" (20). Even the *9/11 Commission Report* is a

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1 Anjuli Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), xi. Further citations appear parenthetically in the text.

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beneficiary of her critical generosity: she reads it at least in part as a "cosmopolitan pastoral," replete with "surprising moments of lyricism, literary deftness, and depth of feeling," expressing "an almost unsettling profundity and warmth." This is the case, she adds, "even where these sentiments are entirely bizarre and misguided" (262–63).

That last phrase gets us to the heart of the matter: to be a generous reader is not to be confused with being naive or "uncritical." The *9/11 Commission Report* is, for Raza Kolb, a document of surprising profundity and lyricism that *also* "instantiates a torture-based practice for the extraction of information through interrogation" (277). Indeed, its "marked writerliness" is part of what makes it such an effective agent of this instantiation. In a similar way, the literary achievement of Kipling's most famous novel, *Kim*, is inseparable from its continuing political effects, particularly via Kipling's skillful weaving together of the "particular combination of spycraft and care"; this combination continues to play a key role in underwriting "the US's ongoing neocolonial wars"—she notes, for example, that the assassination of Osama bin Laden was carried out at least partly under the aegis of a fake vaccination campaign (50, 29–30).

Postcolonial criticism is founded upon this kind of reading practice, in which a generous reading leads to both aesthetic and political insights, as well as reminding us of the extent to which the two are inseparably linked. After all, Edward Said's reading of *Kim* in *Culture and Imperialism* was generous enough to be repurposed as the introduction to Penguin's edition of the novel—precisely because Said is keen to enumerate Kipling's literary achievement while also grasping so clearly that the "pleasures of imperialism" as presented by *Kim* include the aesthetic smoothing out of the actual horrors of imperial rule in India. "*Kim* most assuredly is *not* a political tract," he insists—and the larger point is that this makes the novel all the more politically effective and its effects much longer lasting.[2]

Raza Kolb draws on Said for her own readings of *Kim* and Camus's *La Peste*, and indeed Said is an important guiding figure for the book as a whole.[3] This engagement is particularly welcome, given that Said has increasingly become a thinker more nodded toward than read and engaged with. What is lost in the process of this forgetting is a more nuanced sense of the political value of generous yet critical reading, exemplified in his powerful engagements with canonical colonial figures such as Kipling and Conrad, as well as his illumination of the unspoken workings of imperialism in the work of such "nonpolitical" writers as Jane Austen. At times, Said's detractors have been more apt to see the power of these readings than his supposed admirers—I once overhead one of Said's conservative adversaries at Columbia murmur under his breath, "I mean, he's right about *Mansfield Park*, but…."

There is a (largely unspoken) argument about canonicity in such readings, of course. Raza Kolb addresses this directly, noting her emphasis on "famous books" whose political impact "is determined by their centrality and continued popularity in canonical Anglophone and Francophone literature" (289). *Kim*, for example, was published amid a rash of British novels—many of them about or linked to the Indian Mutiny of 1857—that share a reliance on what she calls "the colonial disease poetics of the day." Among this larger body of work, Kipling's novel is deemed worthy of extended

2 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 162.

3 See also her moving meditation on Said in the essay "Scandal Folder," published on the Poetry Foundation Blog (September 19, 2018).

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attention because it "consolidates and transmits" this disease poetics "into a canon of imperial writing in a far more lasting way" (47).

This approach helps Raza Kolb achieve important effects in "mediating between the potentially cloistered concerns of the literary and broader social and political movements." But it also represents a fundamentally different agenda for postcolonial criticism than that followed by an equally Saidian critic like Barbara Harlow, whose imperative to attend to "books that are difficult to get" has been echoed in a moving commemoration by her student Joseph Slaughter.[4] Perhaps, as against those detractors anxious to simplify it into an easily attackable object, postcolonial criticism is in fact many things at once.

Let me not be heard as suggesting that *Epidemic Empire* is derivative of the postcolonial critics that it acknowledges and admires; another aspect of Raza Kolb's generosity is in noting what she has learned from critic-teachers such as Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Gauri Viswanathan—all of them, of course, key figures for the founding of postcolonial criticism. But *Epidemic Empire* is a book that in a sense comes not only in the wake of but *after* postcolonial criticism, which has been not only harshly critiqued but to some extent quietly written off in some intellectual and political quarters. From those on the left(ish), it is attacked for not being sufficiently materialist or for its supposed naivety about the "postcolonial" as an era comfortably after colonialism (which literally no one actually thinks). Meanwhile, from the much more institutionally powerful center-right comes what Raza Kolb describes aptly as "whispered critiques that postcolonial criticism has made its point and needs to move on" (290). She's not moving on; nor should we.

The payoff of the generous readings of *Epidemic Empire* include the pleasures that fine criticism always offers, among them the opportunity to revisit literary works as they are illuminated by a gifted reader. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone insisted that this was the time to reread Camus's *Plague*; the very thought of doing so filled me with loathing. Raza Kolb's generous reading hasn't yet sent me back to the novel, but I'm thinking about it. Similarly, it was a huge pleasure to spend time thinking with her about Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a book I've loved since I first encountered it. But as someone who has written off Rushdie for the past few decades—not only because of his increasingly Islamophobic version of "secularism" and his embrace of the Iraq War, but also because I just don't think he's a very good novelist anymore—I found myself wanting to ask the book: really, *so many* pages on *Shalimar the Clown*? But as is the case when a smart friend insists that you read something, when Raza Kolb turns her attention to a text, you find yourself having to consider it.

But there's a more politically consequential pay off here, because *Epidemic Empire* performs the other task of good criticism: you lift your eyes from the pages to see the world differently. In this case, Raza Kolb turns our attention to the violent uses of *epidemic* as a metaphor for anticolonial violence and, by extension, for contemporary "terrorism" (and, in some cases, for the "Islamic world" as a whole). But she also calls us to attend to the power of *metaphor itself*, particularly the dangers that occur when a metaphor becomes naturalized.

4 Joseph Slaughter, "The Occupation of Literature and Books That Are Difficult to Get," *Jadaliyya* (May 12, 2017).

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Indeed, the danger of naturalization via metaphor is at the center of her analysis. Raza Kolb takes as her point of departure the observation made by Ranajit Guha in "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency" about colonial historiography's naturalization, and thus depoliticization (not to say dehumanization), of insurgency in colonial India through the use of metaphors "assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics."[5] An interesting omission in Raza Kolb's analysis here is what would seem to be the corollary point raised by Mike Davis in *Late Victorian Holocausts* about the extent to which many "natural phenomena" themselves—for example, the Bengal Famine of 1770—were, to a great extent, the unnatural creations of the colonial project.[6]

It is the last of these naturalizing metaphors—"infect like epidemics"—that Raza Kolb hones in on. For, as she notes, this metaphor is omnipresent in our political context—most recently, in Donald Trump's "incessant likening of refugees and migrants to an 'infestation,' and Islam to a 'malignant cancer,'" but before that in almost uncountable ways since 2001: "Terrorism is a disease. An infection. An epidemic. A plague. We have heard these phrases thousands of times since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. They are spoken in Paris, in London, in Nice, Boston, Barcelona, Mosul, Islamabad" (2). One crucial aim of the book is to establish the extent to which this is a "thoroughly colonial metaphor … whose translation and circulation between times and places is isomorphic with the reach and endurance of the vast empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (2–3). There is an important historical argument here, which insists that contemporary views of "Islam"—even when informed by "expert" knowledge—are largely "a function of racial capital and nineteenth-century counterinsurgency" (3).

By forcing our attention on the use of the epidemic metaphor to refigure anticolonial insurgency through "colonial disease poetics," Raza Kolb also draws an important link between this historical moment and the rise of epidemiology as a form of knowing the world. As she notes in a recent interview, while "epidemic" itself is an age-old concept, the discipline of epidemiology is "a historical occurrence that lines up with the East India Company's expansion, and later the establishment of the Imperial government in India in the middle of the nineteenth century … and the French expansion into North Africa and Egypt."[7] It's worth noting that the rise of epidemiology also thus lines up quite nicely with the rise of "English" as a discipline, with colonial India as a crucial site, as Gauri Viswanathan notes in *Masks of Conquest*, another founding text of postcolonial criticism that stands in the background of *Epidemic Empire*.[8] The two strands meet in the work of contemporary political analysts such as Paul Stares and Mona Yacoubian (from the terrifyingly named "United States Institute of Peace") who have

5 Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 46, quoted in Raza Kolb (38).

6 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso Books, 2002).

7 "Epidemic Empire: An Interview with Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb," *Journal of the History of Ideas* blog, January 18, 2021.

8 Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

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explicitly deployed "an 'epidemic' conception as a way of thinking—and acting" in response to terrorism, "draw[ing] on the scientific principles and practices of epidemiology" (258).

The historical link between epidemiology and English—or, if you like, the scientific imaginary and the literary imaginary—is worth noting because, more even than the continuing use of *epidemic* as a metaphor, *Epidemic Empire* is interested in the nature of *metaphor* itself. By my count, the words *metaphor, metaphors*, and *metaphorical* occur more than a hundred times in the book (by contrast, Said's *Orientalism*—a book with a deeply metaphorical approach—contains only about a dozen uses of the term). It's no exaggeration to say that Raza Kolb, who is also a very fine poet, has a deep fascination with the structure of metaphor itself. We are the beneficiaries of this obsession because she reminds us of the strangeness of metaphorical expression, as well as the ease with which such strangeness can be naturalized. Among other things, she insists upon the extent to which *both sides* of a metaphor need to be unpacked to understand the import of their juxtaposition and supposed equivalence. As she puts it in that same interview:

> For me, maintaining a disposition of alacrity toward figural expression is key—if you're not in the space of being head-fucked by a metaphor, the figure has lost its power and you have to work to recover it, find the strangeness in it again.

In terms of the role of the critic in our time of pandemic, "maintaining a disposition of alacrity toward figural expression" is a good place to start. Metaphors, after all, are a deadly serious business, particularly "metaphors that turn, that begin to go in reverse, harden, and become irrevocably material … not just [as] mechanisms of the mind, but of politics." In the case of the long-running metaphor that refigures anticolonial insurgency as epidemic, Raza Kolb inverts a phrase from linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: "They are metaphors we die by" (4).

"It matters what you call a thing," writes Solmaz Sharif in the opening line of her poem "LOOK," and then shows us the horrific way that it might matter a few lines later:

> Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between
> the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile
> landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask
> *Did we hit a child? No. A dog.* they will answer themselves[9]

Sharif, a poet who repurposes keywords drawn from the US Department of Defense *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* in her work, is one of several figures in *Epidemic Empire* who provide a counterpoint to the violent work of the colonial epidemic metaphor: other texts include *The Battle of Algiers*, writings by Frantz Fanon and Djamila Boupacha, and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a text that Raza Kolb rightly reads as encompassing both the colonizing metaphor and its subversive reversal.

But it remains an open question, upon finishing *Epidemic Empire*, as to whether the epidemic metaphor itself can be turned against the colonial ideology that it has done so much to underwrite. This remains a crucial question in our moment, in light of the

9 Solmaz Sharif, *LOOK* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2016), 3, quoted in Raza Kolb (281).

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understandable desire to use the ongoing global pandemic as a metaphor for all those horrors that have been brought into sharper relief: the *real* pandemic is … capitalism, racism, the police, imperialism, gun violence, gendered violence, state violence, global warming—any of them could fit, although they are hardly interchangeable.

A few weeks ago (at the time I write this), the comedian Michael Che told the following joke as part of *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" segment: "A new study shows that coronavirus lowered the average life expectancy for Black Americans by nearly three years. In fact, the coronavirus is so deadly to Black Americans, it's being suspended with pay." This COVID-19 joke hasn't gotten nearly as much attention as the one-liner Che had uttered the previous week, regarding Israel's vaccination program: "Israel is reporting that they've vaccinated half of their population, and I'm going to guess it's the Jewish half."

The subsequent uproar over the supposed antisemitism of that joke has been rightly derided, including by fellow comedian Ilana Glazer, who notes that it was, simply, "truth." That's what also makes it the lesser of the two pandemic jokes: a completely accurate description of vaccine apartheid, it's too on the nose as a punchline. The joke about COVID-19 being "suspended with pay," by contrast, carries the power that Raza Kolb rightly sees as inherent in all metaphor—it fucks, usefully, with our heads. The colonial trope of figuring insurgency as epidemic performs the ideological work of not only naturalizing and depoliticizing anticolonial violence, but as "render[ing] such forms of violence 'inevitable' and 'immutable,' just as they justify responses to those forms of violence as compulsory and unassailable" (17). Che's joke redeploys the metaphor in the opposite direction, forcing us to acknowledge that the state murder of Black people, and the impunity (not to say rewards) granted to the agents of this reign of terror, has, like the inhuman killing power of a deadly virus, been naturalized and thus rendered "inevitable" and "immutable." By reactivating the metaphor in reverse, it asks the question: Will we too accept the invitation to view our response to racialized state violence to be "compulsory and unassailable"?

That thought experiment takes us beyond the terms of Raza Kolb's argument, and indeed she might herself disavow its logic, cautious as she is about overextending her analysis. "Regarding the perennial metaphor of the terrorism epidemic," she writes, "my hope is that facing a viral threat that has already overwhelmed us all and put a stop to the regular functioning of capitalism will also put a stop to the deployment of disease metaphors and the racial and economic injustices they proliferate." Fair enough; it may be that the inherent logic of such a metaphor is strong enough that one can't escape the pull of gravity exerted by its bloody history. But it's worth noting that she can't resist a disease metaphor of her own in her address to future readers of *Epidemic Empire*: "I hope something in this book helps them to make sense of the 2020 pandemic not as an isolated disaster, but as a turning point in the history we want to write and the world in which we can live" (xv). May we continue to have critics like Raza Kolb to help carry us through our *krisis*, and all those yet to come.

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