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REVIEW ESSAY

Undisciplined Reading

AVIVA BRIEFEL

Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

IN their field-shaking 2020 essay, "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong set out to "think carefully and deliberately about how we can develop a truly relational thinking and set of practices that engage scholarship across fields and disciplines, enabling a cross-fertilization of ideas, a coalition-based politics and activism, and even a refashioning of academic structures to better serve the purposes of equity and justice."[1] Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan D. Fong, and Helena Michie make a similarly powerful call in their introductory essay, "Widening the Nineteenth Century," for a 2021 special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*. This "widening" occurs across different fields and dimensions, stemming from a "wish to examine the interpretive and methodological possibilities that emerge when we expand our objects of study beyond what has been ordained by the temporal—and spatial—purview of the British nineteenth century, which is to say that we wish to put further pressure on the geotemporal linkage that has largely tethered studies of the nineteenth century to the geographic confines of Britain."[2] My sense is that central to these projects to "undiscipline" and "widen" the Victorian field should be a reexamining of our reading practices as scholars. What do we read, and when? Do we stick to our "subfields," however we define

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these, or do we venture elsewhere? And what does it look like to read "elsewhere" while continuing to produce meaningful scholarship?

Elizabeth Hope Chang's *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* and Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb's *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* model this undisciplining and widening, both in terms of their capacious subject matters and the reading practices they illustrate and promote. Both authors begin their discussions with statements of instructive care for their readers. Chang starts her book by identifying readers according to their visceral interest in her subject: she writes that her project is intended both for "those who want to think more about plants" and "those who don't particularly care about plants but want to think more about novels" and narrative conditions of representation, realism, and fantasy (21). She humorously adds that her attempt to generate botanical interest on the part of the book's readers leads her to "echo the beleaguered popular plant writers of the Victorian era," such as Mordecai Cubitt Cooke in his *Freaks and Marvels of Plant Life* (1881): "We confess to a design of endeavouring to interest those who are not botanists, and do not pretend to any but a most superficial knowledge of plant life" (21). Although, sadly, this description captures my own reading identity, *Novel Cultivations* drew me in as voraciously as the carnivorous plants depicted in its final chapter.

For her part, Raza Kolb maps out various trajectories for her readers. If Chang's book is "undisciplined" in using the world of plants to examine the imperial wanderings of Victorian fiction, Raza Kolb's illustrates the spatiotemporal "widening" discussed by Banerjee, Fong, and Michie. To examine her central premise that the figurative conflation of contagion with terrorism dates back to the first cholera outbreak in India in 1817, she propels us through sources as seemingly disparate as Victorian narratives of the 1857 Indian Mutiny, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and *Joseph Anton* (2013), and the *9/11 Commission Report* (2004). In her introduction, Raza Kolb offers us the choice to read her chapters "serially, to reveal a two hundred–year literary and discursive history, or as standalone contributions to their respective periods and areas" (22). For those who opt to read the book in its entirety, she offers a nonsequential reading, grouping chapters according to their focus on the literary or nonliterary. This alternative grouping encourages the reader to become undisciplined in how they approach a text, finding their own assemblages and connections through

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the material. A further method of reading, which Raza Kolb had not anticipated when writing the majority of her book, is the establishing of continuities and contrasts with the reader's own experiences during the Covid pandemic. In regard to this particular methodology, she writes that she hopes the book will help her students—a more intimate set of readers—"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).[3] Raza Kolb defines her scholarly practice as "epidemiological reading," a method through which she maps out the complex and violent imperial histories of epidemiology as a discipline. "From the disease mappers and shoe-leather physicians of the nineteenth century," she writes,

> I draw a belief in the actual existence of multiemergent phenomena, in both health and in broader material senses. Understanding such phenomena necessitates a shuttling reading practice that is comparative in temporal and geographical terms, localized in particular sites of close analysis that function exemplarily (bacterias, viruses, tissues, symptoms, local outbreaks), and posits narrative—written narrative in particular—as being, itself, a genre of data interpretation. Some of the most moving moments in my research came when I was least prepared. (10)

I find myself returning to this passage for its rare scholarly transparency, its laying out of a methodology based on "shuttling," network-building, and the affective and intellectual experiences that come from being caught off-guard. This description may apply to many of our own scholarly practices—that careful balance between planned research and an openness to discovery—but what distinguishes *Epidemic Empire* is how much this reading practice is intricately woven into the book's argument.

The first chapter, "Great Games," for example, draws astounding linkages from the spurious vaccination campaign launched by the United States in its efforts to capture Osama bin Laden, an instance of what Raza Kolb terms "health imperialism" (31); to the proliferation of nineteenth-century Mutiny narratives that "set the terms and install the attendant doxa for a reading of terrorist violence in the twenty-first century" (45); to the imperialist thrill afforded by Rudyard Kipling's description of the "Great Game" in *Kim* (1901), which retroactively reads as an early rehearsal for the war on terror. In its own revelatory network of connections, the third chapter, "Circulatory Logic," links the use of blood transfusion to dilute the vampire's racialized contagions in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to the surprising (and sadly unnecessary) rise of transfusion volunteerism in the United States following the events of 9/11. We

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read, "The immediate impulse to give blood, however reflexive and warm-hearted it may have been, invites us to reimagine this simple story in more complicated terms. Urged on by charitable institutions that supported an ever-more pathological health care system, 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 Sewards and Van Helsings to share of this vital resource" (124–25). Crucially, Raza Kolb addresses the origins of her method of "epidemiological" reading in the very colonial and racist structures she seeks to dismantle through her writing: "At the same time as I draw from epidemiological insights and optics, . . . I am also sharply critical of the disciplinary and discursive history of epidemiological science, its related fields of study, and their literatures" (11). Inasmuch as epidemiological methodologies trace the essential connections and causalities identified by *Epidemic Empire,* they instated the metaphorical systems and biopolitics that aligned nonwhite bodies with contagion and rebellion: "the epidemic figuring of terror obscures motive, agency, and legibility behind a veil of monstrosity and dehumanizing organicization of the pathogenic other" (287). As a reading practice in addition to a medical one, epidemiology initiated a metaphorical system that perpetuates racism and white supremacy: "the epidemic thesis produces an 'inhuman,' natural enemy in order to negate political demands, and to justify a global security apparatus in defense of 'humanity,' a category that is constituted by its exclusion of phenomena perceived as contagious: like terror, like Islam" (17).

What has made these epidemiological linkages so persistent is the ease with which they generate a figurative language of symptoms and cures, imposed on those embodying threats to empire. By assiduously tracing these metaphorical systems and their violent consequences, Raza Kolb employs epidemiological reading to undertake a radical process of defamiliarization. This process occurs both through the exposure of connections that have been taken for granted for too long (i.e., the terrorist or anticolonialist as a threat to the body of the nation) as well as by tracing new connective paths and networks. These associations provide "needed lessons for reading the global political and public health landscapes of today" as well as for challenging the institutional structures in which we teach and learn (4). Raza Kolb rightly views her work as "reparative" and "grounded in the observation that in the hands of their most capable practitioners, subaltern history and comparative postcolonial approaches always resist the homogenizing impulse of both Eurocentric comparative literature and the center-periphery models of

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imperial power and the vehicular languages of empire" (20). This challenge to our disciplinary systems—powerfully delivered in each chapter—is what makes *Epidemic Empire* so essential right now. Raza Kolb's book offers a concrete response to the challenge posed by the authors of "Undisciplining Victorian Studies": "Scholarship is always political. What if we were all to become more deliberate in the ways we politicize our scholarly labor?"[4]

Although *Novel Cultivations* operates on a more contained spatiotemporal scale—its discussion of horticultural practices and literary texts is planted in the nineteenth century, with a few forays into later periods—it offers another model of undisciplined scholarly work. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong propose that undisciplining can occur in two ways, either through "breaking open" or through "re-making" (370). If Raza Kolb's study represents the first category, Chang's embodies the second. It re-makes and defamiliarizes new historicist approaches by examining the metaleptic aspects of literary plants, which function "as a buttonhole between fiction and reality, existing in and following the rules of both realms" (2). By shuttling between these realms in each chapter of her study, Chang challenges how we approach literary objects and the contexts through which we analyze them. Her insightful attention to questions of cultivation, transplantation, and personhood allows for a far-reaching argument about the dehumanizing logic of empire.

Like *Epidemic Empire*, *Novel Cultivations* focuses on imperial circulations, but in this case on the global and literary migrations of plants. By the nineteenth century, Chang argues, most plants in rural and urban British spaces came from "elsewhere," which "included the far-flung botanies of South America, Africa, and Asia, and other territories of the expanding British Empire" (1). Victorian novels—including detective fiction, the gothic, imperial romance, and science fiction—implanted botanical specimens in their pages, thereby generating their own representational, racial, and narrative logics. Chang contends that plants possess a "transcendent referentiality . . . existing as they did both within and outside of the novel's narrative world—to explore questions of exoticism, foreignness, selfhood, and subjectivity amid the global exchanges of the British Empire and the revisions to the content and form of narrative setting that such exchanges wrought" (3). This focus on the powerful referentiality of plants—which she associates with Elaine Freedgood's discussion of "colonial metalepsis" (32)—opens up another dimension of inquiry, one that effectively links the implantation of "real" persons and things into literary works with the imperial labors of circulation and transport. As Chang demonstrates throughout her book,

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such literary implantations can have radically different effects on their narrative worlds: "Plants make the realist novel more real, but they also make the genre novel more fantastic" (2).

Chang's methodology is not "epidemiological" in the ways defined and illustrated by Raza Kolb, but it does adopt a similar "shuttling reading practice." In each of its five chapters, the book moves fluidly between accounts of Victorian botany, the impact of Victorian plant life and cultivation on genre fiction, and the ever-proliferating implantations of empire. In her first chapter, for example, Chang begins by describing the practice of shipping exotic plants in glass cases designed by Nathaniel Ward. She then reads the effects of these botanical transplants on the construction of clues in detective fiction, specifically in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) and in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" (1893). Rather than following the predictable pattern of illustrating how a "real" phenomenon plays out in a literary narrative, Chang dynamically shifts between her objects of inquiry. In this initial chapter, she incorporates a wonderful discussion of the ways in which novels create environments that are "hospitable to clues" (36), including when and where to plant particularly suggestive wildflowers or roses. Whether she is examining the role of the urban garden in gothic-inflected novels, including Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), or the significance of the prickly pear and the eucalyptus to colonial narratives, such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and H. Rider Haggard's adventure fictions, Chang maintains this undisciplined approach to her subject.

Through its meticulous attention to nineteenth-century contexts, *Novel Cultivations* suggestively directs our gaze to the present. Chang concludes her study by writing that "Victorians of many kinds, as well as those who carried forward their fictional forms and genres, . . . used the lives of plants to become a part of their expanding world in ways which imagined a kind of liberation even as they, in the scouring exhaustions of their industries, more readily ensured botanical and planetary destruction" (181). This statement marks a tacit but nonetheless pressing return to readers and their willingness to apply these ideas of liberation and destruction to our current racial and environmental catastrophes. This is another crucial way of "widening the nineteenth century," through an explicit or implicit presentism. As Anna Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan remind us, "To study the nineteenth century is to be struck almost daily by the sense that it never really went away: ours is also a

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gilded age of income inequality, of financial speculation, of de facto debtor's prisons, of capitalist exploitation, of global inequity, of misplaced faith in evolutionary psychology, of widespread reliance on coal-based energy."[5]

Appropriately, Chang's book ends with a chapter on plants in horror and apocalyptic fictions, offering botanical revenge narratives of sorts, including H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897) and Algernon Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1907). These stories of carnivorous plants—terrifying in their balance of fictional horror and vivid referentiality—haunt their readers with their "evidence of an active and directive consciousness somehow available, though in ways not necessarily evident to humans" (159). Narratives of "plant sentience" create imaginary and vindictive observers of our environmental and imperial crimes, implanting us with a conscience that emerges out of fear rather than responsibility. Perhaps we can only save the planet if we are terrified of what it can do to us, as evidenced not only in the daily environmental catastrophes we encounter but in literary gothic narratives of bloodthirsty, vengeful plants. As Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles suggest in the introduction to their collection *Fear and Nature,* "Ecohorror in the Anthropocene presents a vision of [the] terraformed planet as frightening rather than promising and reflects both the horrors we face now and those we fear will occur in the future."[6] Chang's *Novel Cultivations* locates this shift in the late nineteenth century, when plants took on the horrific aspects of our own destructive voraciousness.

To capture the significance of the new directions in which both Raza Kolb's and Chang's books take us, I want to conclude with the definition of "relationality" with which Alicia Mireles Christoff begins her own brilliant book, *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis*. Following her resonant statement, "We never read or write alone," she writes:

> In Victorian studies, keeping pace with movements in contemporary critical thought, we say that we believe in relationality: in our profound interdependence with other people and their labor, in our inextricable connections to the natural world, in our merger with our technologies, and in our ongoing relations with our ancestors, who shape us and future generations. And yet I think these ideas are much easier to grasp intellectually than to really believe. Most of us continue to act, in our daily living and interacting and in our scholarship and daily institutional and pedagogical practice, from a place of deeply conditioned individualist assumption. We think we are reading and writing alone.[7]

During my time spent with *Epidemic Empire* and *Novel Cultivations*, I never felt that I was reading alone. I experienced a care for my reading practices and presence in the book, as each writer transparently explained

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her own scholarly methods and connections. Chang and Raza Kolb demonstrate that undisciplining is a collaborative process that relies on both expanding our objects of study by centering race and the logics of empire and creating new connections among us as scholars and readers. While Christoff writes that these types of connections tend to be "easier to grasp intellectually than to really believe," Chang and Raza Kolb model the possibility—and necessity—of doing both.

Notes

1. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," 372.
2. Banerjee, Fong, and Michie, "Widening the Nineteenth Century," 2.
3. This passage reminds me of a line in Andrés Neuman's *Fracture* (2018; trans. 2020), which I was reading while writing this review: "Catastrophes spark revolutions that no one would otherwise attempt. We all want to return to normal, but I wonder if we can or if we should" (267).
4. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," 380.
5. Kornbluh and Morgan, "Presentism, Form, and the Future of History."
6. Tidwell and Soles, "Introduction," 3.
7. Christoff, *Novel Relations,* 1.

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