

REVIEW ESSAY

Pandemic Metaphors

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In her formidable *Epidemic Empire*, Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb examines metaphors of contagion and the contagion of metaphors. She traces the simultaneous inadequacy and harmfulness of the longstanding figuration of terrorism as pandemic, arguing that “In horizontalizing and proliferating signification, the epidemic figure also disrupts metaphorical systems’ customary relationships between the sign and the referent, surface and depth. The mobile legibility of terror epidemics thus bespeaks a reading practice always in excess of, and nevertheless inadequate to, its object.”¹ This metaphorical network reduces humans to the status of “viral vectors or infectious agents,” while “sanitizing the prophylactic measures and retaliations of sovereign and governmental actors.”² These transformations are effective neither in preventing terrorist acts, rectifying the sociopolitical and racial injustices that trigger them, nor in addressing the spread of contagious diseases. In fact, as Raza Kolb contends, the metaphorization of illness may have hindered our own initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic: “This figural operation didn’t just keep us, passively, from observing the practices and standards that would prevent a pandemic; it pointedly suppressed these priorities in the belief that the immense wealth of the new imperium would by some trickle-down method keep ‘us’ safe from diseases afflicting the poor, the brown and Black, the hungry, and the weak.”³ The metaphor of terrorism as epidemic is both dehumanizing and contagious because it “circulates and proliferates” as effectively as a gothic monster.⁴

In reading *Epidemic Empire*, I kept thinking about another contagious metaphor, which has burgeoned since the early days of COVID: racism as a pandemic. I

¹ Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror 1817–2020* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 14.

² Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 287.

³ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, xiii.

⁴ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 89.

first started noticing this figuration around the time of the summer of 2020's Black Lives Matter protests following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. The metaphor appeared in social media posts, news headlines, and even on apparel—for instance, a t-shirt sold on Amazon bearing the phrase “Racism Is a Pandemic, Black Lives Matter,” surrounded by a peace sign and a red, spiky, COVID virus. Professional groups and publications have also contributed to the spread of this metaphor. On May 29, 2020, the American Psychological Association (APA) released a statement from its president, Sandra L. Shullman, that “We Are Living in a Racism Pandemic,” while shortly afterward the *BMJ* medical journal featured an article from its editor in chief titled, “Racism: The Other Pandemic.” Examples of this metaphor are not hard to find; a Google search will reveal many more.

In some ways, it might be misleading to describe these sources as relying exclusively on a figurative poetics. Particularly in professional sources, the metaphor gives way to concrete accounts of how the pandemic has exposed and intensified social and racial inequities in the United States and globally. As Shullman writes in her APA release, for instance, “We are living in a racism pandemic, which is taking a heavy psychological toll on our African American citizens. The health consequences are dire. Racism is associated with a host of psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety and other serious, sometimes debilitating conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders. Moreover, the stress caused by racism can contribute to the development of cardiovascular and other physical diseases.”⁵ Likewise, the authors of a paper for the biology journal *Cell Systems* titled “A Pandemic on a Pandemic: Racism and COVID-19 in Blacks” describe the very concrete psychological and physical toll that the pandemic has taken on Black bodies and communities.⁶ However, in so many of these cases, even in the most specialized, there is rapid slippage between discussing disease as actuality and using disease as metaphor. The APA release, for instance, shifts unobtrusively from using “racism pandemic” to describe the pervasiveness of racist violence against Black bodies in the United States to enumerating the health consequences of the pandemic on Black bodies. These are very different things. The article from *Cell Systems* follows a similar pattern in alternating between detailing the health consequences of racism on those whom it targets and using a vague metaphorical language: “The United States now faces a pandemic on a pandemic, with the most virulent of the two being racism.”⁷

In contrast to racist and imperialist discourses, whose longstanding linkages of terrorism and epidemics produce their own modes of violence, these more recent metaphors may seem benign, particularly as their ostensible goal is to combat (or cure?) racism. Indeed, Raza Kolb gestures toward metaphorical systems that may work on the side of social justice: “I am acutely aware of a parallel story that can and indeed ought to be told about the uses of the epidemic

⁵ “‘We Are Living in a Racism Pandemic,’ Says APA President,” *American Psychological Association*, May 29, 2020 (<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/05/racism-pandemic>).

⁶ Cato T. Laurencin and Joanne M. Walker, “A Pandemic on a Pandemic: Racism and COVID-19 in Blacks,” *Cell Systems* 11.1 (July 22, 2020): 9–10.

⁷ Laurencin and Walker, “A Pandemic on a Pandemic.”

imaginary, not for the furtherance of existing structures of biopolitical control, but against them. In other words, discourses of disease and disability can and have been appropriated to revolutionary and affiliative ends.”⁸ But I doubt the “racism as pandemic” metaphor would fit this revolutionary model. To write about systemic racism as a contagious disease obscures the very real histories, structures, and identities that have worked to produce it. As my friend and colleague Monica Miller put it during a recent conversation, this metaphorical language makes it seem as if “the ‘spread’ just happens and like [Harriet Beecher Stowe’s] Topsy, ‘jes grew.’” This may be as ineffective and harmful a model for pandemics as it is for racism.

In a lecture from April 2020, shortly after the coronavirus outbreak in the United States, Ruha Benjamin addressed the limitations and dangers of thinking about racism through metaphors of contagion.

We’ve all heard or seen the public health catchphrase, “viruses don’t discriminate, and neither should we.” As an aspirational slogan, I appreciate how this tries to push back on the different forms of racism and xenophobia we are witnessing, from the dog whistle phrase “Chinese Virus” to the verbal harassment, denial of services, and physical attacks on our Asian American friends. But as a soundbite, the idea that “viruses don’t discriminate” conceals the fact that the virus is not simply a biological entity, but a biopolitical reality which travels along well-worn patterns of inequity.⁹

Benjamin offers another perspective on the problems of the figurative language of racism as disease. The slogan she cites misguidedly asks us to model our non-discriminatory behavior on a disease that allegedly does not differentiate among its victims. As Benjamin explains, despite its explicit anti-racist intentions, the phrase (perhaps inadvertently) obscures the fact that the effects of the virus are extremely discriminatory in its effects on Black and indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and low-income communities in the United States. Modifying another slogan that emerged in the early days of the pandemic, she asserts, “The coronavirus is NOT the great equalizer.”¹⁰ Her pronouncement resonates both for its call to examine the structural inequities produced and exposed by the pandemic *and* to evaluate the consequences of our metaphorical language.

These metaphors are hard to abandon. It is difficult to find mainstream or even professional sources that address the problem of racism during the pandemic that do not, somewhere, slip into a figurative language of racism as contagion. The phrase “pandemic of racism” emerges repeatedly in lieu of the less poetic, but more accurate phrase, “racism of the pandemic.” Why is this metaphor so seductive, even in sources that otherwise favor scientific over figurative language? Raza Kolb’s chapter on vampirism helps us begin to address

⁸ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 288.

⁹ Ruha Benjamin, “Black Skin, White Masks: Racism, Vulnerability & Refuting Black Pathology,” Department of African American Studies, Princeton University, April 15, 2020 (<https://aas.princeton.edu/news/black-skin-white-masks-racism-vulnerability-refuting-black-pathology>).

¹⁰ Benjamin, “Black Skin, White Masks.”

this question. Here, she argues that Bram Stoker's gothic novel *Dracula* (1897) deploys a "circulatory logic" that disseminates associations with monstrosity prevalent since the nineteenth century. She contends that the novel, "in both theme and form, registers the terror of the circulatory logic of empire, and concentrates this terror in the circulation of disease. For this reason, and because its villain stalks the very streets of the metropole, *Dracula* is the monstrous text that most menacingly embodies—and, in its investigative plot and synoptic form, also theorizes—its own late-colonial moment, and points most clearly toward the monstrous metaphors the define our own."¹¹ In a breathtaking analysis, Raza Kolb argues that Stoker's novel packages discourses of disease (particularly cholera), imperialism, and gothic monstrosity into a narrative that is itself about the supernatural and technological spread of information. Blood transfusion is an essential part of this technology as it becomes a crucial disseminator of knowledge and identities. Through these multiple transfers, metaphors take on the associate slippages of metonymy: "As *Dracula's* metaphors and media proliferate, they grow increasingly slippery and wide-ranging, producing a secondary circulation of metonymic material as a complement to the circulation of the vampire... . In light of this abundance of mobile signifiers, we see how figure itself, in Stoker's hectic, haptic text, becomes another name for contagion writ large at the turn of imperialism's most anxious century."¹² In yet another brilliant move, Raza Kolb traces this metonymic spread from Stoker's novel to the rise in voluntary transfusions immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. She writes, "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."¹³

The idea that even the most "reflexive and warm-hearted" acts can emerge from troubling histories informs our current systems of metaphorization around racism and pandemics. The monstrous metaphors of contagion and imperialism launched by *Dracula* find their way to the act of blood-giving as a form of solidarity and healing. For Raza Kolb, this effort "to keep the wounded state alive" also "silently ratified the securitization of the coming War on Terror in the terms of public health, as if such a construct had ever been or could ever be free of its colonial history."¹⁴ Similarly, the conflation of racism with pandemics obscures both the systemic forces that perpetuate racism and the causal relationship between white supremacy and the spread of disease to BIPOC communities. In an article for the *Atlantic* from the summer of 2020, Calvin Baker writes:

Staring down at the streets of Brooklyn now, I think less about the plague and the 1918 flu than smallpox-infected blankets knowingly given to Native Americans; the syphilis transmitted by Europeans into a population that

¹¹ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 96.

¹² Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 103.

¹³ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 124–25.

¹⁴ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 125.

had never encountered the disease before; the yellow-fever epidemics of the 18th and 19th centuries that spread, port to port, from the Caribbean, like a florescent trace mark of the economics of slavery; and the malaria-ridden swamps where Africans died by the boatload to produce cotton, rice, and sugar. Homegrown tragedies for a nation that is as frail as it has ever been, and has still less care for the world.¹⁵

Baker's X-ray vision into the history of injustice as it relates to pandemics serves as a corrective to the metaphorizations of racism as a pandemic, which bears the risk of erasing these histories.

I want to conclude with one moment in Raza Kolb's study that gestures toward new ways of metaphorizing systems of power in terms of contagion. She closes her chapter on Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) by examining the author's own implicit conflation of colonialism and epidemic spread in his novel and in his essay "Contagion" (1947). She writes that, taken together, these texts represent:

The epidemics of colonialism, which ... begin to reveal themselves as continuous with the pathological nationalism of the Third Reich. Like the plague bacillus, which Rieux predicts will rise again from beneath the happy city, the "colonial problem" will shape the history for the next fifty years, reemerging in moments of intensity as various forms of terror in Algeria, in France, and beyond. At the risk of oversimplifying a vast number of contributing factors, the problem of colonialism—in Camus's moment as in our own—is also at the heart of the problem of the kind of violence we call terrorism.¹⁶

Here, Raza Kolb at once addresses the problem of conflating categories of violence and oppression (colonialism, imperialism, terrorism) with metaphors of epidemic transmission, while also pointing to ways in which they might sometimes be constructive, or even essential, in exploding their unexamined use. In certain cases, references to contagious disease, when used intentionally and historically, can be useful.

Indeed, the way in which the image of disease can be used strategically and responsibly forms the core of Raza Kolb's study. The critical approach she uses to trace the spread of the pandemic metaphor draws from epidemiology, a discipline that "shares foundational methods with comparative, interdisciplinary, and postcolonial discourse analysis, especially those studies that aim to compass discontinuous events across large swathes of history and geography."¹⁷ She acknowledges that in drawing from epidemiology, she has had to contend with the troubling history of this discipline, which intersects with the oppressive systems she sets out to study, including the "flourishing subfield" of the

¹⁵ Calvin Baker, "In a Pandemic, All Some People See Is Your Color," *Atlantic*, June 2020 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/coronavirus-racism/610609/>).

¹⁶ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 168–69.

¹⁷ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 10.

epidemiology of terrorism. She writes, “At the same time as I draw from epidemiological insights and optics, therefore, I am also sharply critical of the disciplinary and discursive history of epidemiological science, its related fields of study, and their literatures.”¹⁸ To bring in yet another disease-based metaphor, these moments in her book serve as a kind of inoculation, using metaphors and systems to guard against their greater proliferation. It takes a great deal of critical awareness and insight for this strategy to work and not fall into the misleading proliferations we find in the “racism pandemic” that has spread so rapidly since the early days of COVID. Part of the power of *Epidemic Empire* comes from its impressive ability to sustain this critical self-awareness at all stages of its monumental investigation of terrorism as disease. Raza Kolb thus presents a model of at once rigorous and responsible scholarship that brings much-needed awareness to the contagion of metaphors that extend from the past to our current pandemic reality.

Author biography. Aviva Briefel is Edward Little Professor of English and Cinema Studies at Bowdoin College. She is the author of *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (2006) and *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* (2015), and coeditor of *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror* (2011). She has written extensively about Victorian literature and culture and about horror cinema.

¹⁸ Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 11.

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