



Turbulent Water: Epidemic as Imperial Strategy

LAURIE LAMBERT

REVIEW



ABSTRACT

This essay is a review of Anjuli Raza Kolb's recent book *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago, 2020): <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/E/bo63099943.html>. It also serves as a discussion of cholera, yellow fever, imperialism, and the Caribbean, especially Haiti.

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“Blue Plague,” the second chapter of Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb’s *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror 1817–2020*, begins with two epigraphs.¹ The first is from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s *Causes of the Indian Revolt* (1859). Khan writes, “Universal rebellion must arise from universal grounds for discontent or from streams deriving from many different sources, but finally merging into one, wide-spreading turbulent water” (Raza Kolb 55). Khan was a supporter of the British East India Company during the Indian Mutiny, however, his pamphlet on the causes of the revolt provides a sound critique of colonial rule in India. The second epigraph is from an address of the General Assembly at UN Headquarters by then UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. Referencing the 2010 cholera epidemic which caused the deaths of over 8,500 Haitians and the infection of over 700,000 more, Secretary Ban said:

The United Nations deeply regrets the loss of life and suffering caused by the cholera outbreak in Haiti. On behalf of the United Nations, I want to say very clearly: we apologise to the Haitian people. We simply did not do enough with regard to the cholera outbreak and its spread in Haiti. We are profoundly sorry for our role (55).

I was struck by the pairing of these epigraphs because of Khan’s turn to the metaphor of streams of water to describe the spread of rebellion in India and because of the fact that Ban was referencing a cholera epidemic that started at a UN facility in Haiti and spread throughout the nation via streams that flowed into the Artibonite River. In the first epigraph violent waters serve as a metaphor for the spread of anti-colonial revolt, while in the second epigraph, an apology is offered for neo-colonial violence that infected a nation through their waterways.

Raza Kolb’s pairing of these epigraphs on anti-colonial and neo-colonial violence reminds readers of the long *durée* of colonialism and that violence tends to be intrinsic to both colonial oppression and the resistance to that oppression. The presence of the UN in Haiti as an imperialist interest together with the organization’s responsibility for the spread of cholera in 2010 can be read as an echo of the 1817 spread of cholera initiated by British East India Company troops stationed in the Sundarbans where they “spread the infection far beyond its normal endemic region in their tasks of conquest” (56). Epidemics and imperialism are as central to the formation of the political economy of the Americas as they are to the political economy of South Asia.

Critical to the success of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803) was an epidemic of yellow fever among the British and French armed forces.² In considering Raza Kolb’s juxtaposition of these epigraphs I also thought of how Khan’s words could serve as a description of the Haitian Revolution over half a century earlier, where enslaved Africans led a revolt against slavery, eventually winning not only their emancipation but also independence from French colonial rule. Many of the troops England and France sent into the war traveled to the Caribbean directly from Europe where they had no previous exposure to yellow fever. Having no immunity to the disease put these troops at a great disadvantage as compared to the enslaved Africans, many of whom had developed immunity to the disease which scientists believe spread to the Americas from West Africa. While we know there were yellow fever epidemics in the Caribbean in the 1790s and early 1800s, historians and scientists disagree on the exact number of casualties caused by these waves of disease. This is in part because of the difficulty in parsing cause of death when the symptoms of yellow fever resembled those of other fevers that also afflicted European troops. Historian David Geggus has surmised that the number of yellow fever deaths listed in the primary sources might be over-estimated because of this opacity around symptoms and diagnosis. Nevertheless, one estimate puts the number of yellow fever deaths in St. Domingue between 29,000–55,000 for fourteen months alone from 1802–1803, the final months of the war.³ Even if the numbers at the lower end of the estimate are examined, it remains clear that yellow fever deaths among the

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

2 John S. Marr and John T. Cathey, “The 1802 Saint-Domingue yellow fever epidemic and the Louisiana Purchase,” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 19.1 (2013): 77–82; David Geggus, “Yellow Fever in the 1790s: The British Army in Occupied Saint Domingue,” *Medical History* 23.1 (1979): 38–58.

3 Marr and Cathey, 78.

British and French military were significant. For the duration of the revolution, St. Domingue did not have enough hospitals or medical personnel to treat the disease. The immunity of many African-descendant and African-born revolutionaries, coupled with the susceptibility of the European military became one of the pivotal factors for the success of the revolutionaries.

Since their declaration of independence on January 1, 1804, however, Haitians have been made to pay the price for their freedom and for being the only successful slave revolt in the Caribbean. Early post-independence in Haiti is often thought of as a period of isolation, with France and the United States refusing to grant recognition to the newly formed nation. Historian Nathalie Pierre has discussed how this isolation was chiefly diplomatic and social. She argues that Haiti's government actually conducted brisk business with British agents, trading commodities such as coffee at a discount in the expectation that this economic activity could be used to help leverage diplomatic recognition.⁴ In other words, postcolonial Haiti felt immense pressure to sell itself short economically in order for its independence to be recognized on the world stage. This pressure, which included the 1825 "agreement" between Haiti and France for Haiti to pay France "indemnity" in exchange for recognition, embroiled the Caribbean nation in deep financial debt, contributing to the Haitian government's inability to properly fund education and other essential social services.⁵ In the meantime France continued to fatten its coffers, while stifling any chance of strong infrastructure development in its former colony. Fast-forward to the earthquake of January 12, 2010, and lack of infrastructure is what contributed to the staggering loss of life and the dire conditions that led to the Haitian government allowing the UN and foreign-run NGOs to take charge of certain essential social services, a move tantamount to a loss of sovereignty.⁶ In this way, the social and political fallout immediately following the earthquake of 2010 could be read as an aftershock to the U.S. occupation and foreign interference of the preceding century. As Pierre explains, the American and Haitian revolutions are central to the story of how British and French colonialism lose worldwide dominance, and how American imperialism comes to the fore as a global force.⁷ Epidemics are part of this history because, as Raza Kolb illustrates, (the threat of) disease and contagion have always been part of how colonial, and now neocolonial, powers have justified their incursions, including invasions and the policing of borders.

This epidemiological metaphor did not begin with the 1857 Indian Mutiny, but rather was continuously invoked by those who saw the Haitian Revolution and eventually the Haitian nation as threatening to slave regimes in the Caribbean and across the Americas. Examining the political discourse among Spanish officials in Cuba, historian Ada Ferrer finds the repeated use of metaphors of contagion to describe insurgents in St. Domingue and their possible influence on the enslaved population in Cuba.⁸ The use of these metaphors helps to demonstrate how colonial officials in Cuba were concerned with guarding their wealth and also their inability to imagine the humanity of those engaged in rebellion on St. Domingue. One of the officials Ferrer quotes is certain that the

4 Nathalie Pierre, "Liberal Trade in the Postcolonial Americas: Haitian Leaders and British Agents 1806–1813," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 21.1 (2015): 68–99.

5 For a summary of how this "agreement" for Haiti to pay France the sum of 150,000,000 francs (later reduced to 90,000,000 francs) was signed by Haitian Jean-Pierre Boyer under threat of French military attack see Marlene Daut, "When Haiti Paid France for Freedom: The Greatest Heist in History," *The Africa Report*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/32162/when-haiti-paid-france-for-freedom-the-greatest-heist-in-history/>. For a discussion of how the 1825 agreement affected the Haitian government's ability to build infrastructure, see Anthony Phillips, "Haiti, France and the Independence Debt of 1825," *Canada Haiti Action Network* 24 (2008), http://canada-haiti.ca/sites/default/files/Haiti,%20France%20and%20the%20Independence%20Debt%20of%201825_0.pdf. See also Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Appuzo, and Selam Gabrekidan, "The Ransom. The Root of Haiti's Misery: Reparations to Enslavers," *The New York Times*, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

6 The first United States occupation of Haiti occurred between 1915–1934. Anthropologist Jemima Pierre argues that Haiti has undergone another "de facto occupation" beginning in 2004 and "funded by the United States and the United Nations but organized through a multi-national coalition that has included Canada, Brazil, France, Chile, and the Organization of the American States (OAS)." See Jemima Pierre, "Haiti: An Archive of Occupation, 2004—," *Transforming Anthropology* 28.1 (2020): 2–23.

7 Pierre, "Liberal Trade in the Postcolonial Americas," 70.

8 Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See also Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2004).

violence of the insurgents is proof of their innate incivility. He explains, “the malevolent inclinations of the descendants of Ethiopia are well-known and troubling, notwithstanding the care with which we try to teach them in these dominions” (Ferrer 6). In *Avengers of the New World*, historian Laurent Dubois, tells of similar fears of enslavers in St. Domingue, including Madame de Rouvray, who considers moving to Havana with the slaves she and her husband held. It was de Rouvray’s hope to “preserve them from contagion,” she wrote to her daughter, describing the possibility of her own slaves joining the uprising and raising arms against her (115).

In using the metaphor of contagion to describe how slave insurgency might radiate out from the uprising in St. Domingue, planters and colonial officials achieved several things: First, they downplayed the intelligence of the insurgents because, as Ferrer explains, if the uprising is simply following “the natural progression of a physical disease,” then there is no need to consider strategy on the part of enslaved Africans (Ferrer 47). Second, by painting violence as innate to the character of enslaved Africans, officials ignore the violence of the enslavers, inherent in the slave trade and plantation system (Ferrer 46). Third, the idea of anti-slavery insurgency spreading like disease, helped European officials imagine a common enemy in the enslaved: “If the slaves who threatened French life and property could, by extension, also threaten Spanish or British territory, then the Europeans’ interests were truly one and their enemy a common and formidable one,” Ferrer writes (47). Indeed the success of the Haitian Revolution served to hasten the weakening of Britain and France as colonial powers in the Caribbean.

This shifting of power between the British and French, and the United States, is also part of the story that Raza Kolb weaves together in *Epidemic Empire* and so it makes sense that she would reference Haiti, pointing to the shared discourses on colonialism between the Caribbean, the Middle East, and South Asia. In what follows, I will outline some of the book’s most salient points for me as a scholar of the Caribbean, before using Raza Kolb’s work to think through the UN’s abuse of Haitians.

Epidemic Empire investigates “the particular relationship between a conception of epidemic and a conception of terrorism,” looking specifically at the representation of Muslims and Islam in popular literature (11). Raza Kolb’s research shows how certain rhetorical moves found throughout popular literature in the West, from the nineteenth century to the present, tie Muslims to disease. She also exposes how the tropes and figures of speech that seek to describe terrorism as an epidemic or illness have deep roots in the history of colonial and Orientalist representations of Islam, beginning with nineteenth-century Mutiny literature. In mapping this history, Raza Kolb also analyzes how the histories of epidemiology and empire are inextricably tied, as epidemics of cholera and the plague, for example, spread across the world as a result of or in conjunction with colonial expansion. At the same time, she explains, scientific inquiry into these diseases and their spread relied on racist ideas of environmental, social, and biological realities in the Global South.

Raza Kolb describes how the epidemic figuration of Muslims has served the projects of European colonialism and American imperialism by metaphorizing violence in particular contexts, defining certain instances of violence as inherent to Muslims, and therefore justifying Western “responses to those forms of violence as compulsory and unassailable” (17). She writes:

This happens both in the projection of adversity and in the response to it, which is consequently made to look like an obligation beyond good and evil, above politics, namely to protect the health of the imagined social body whose anatomy is isomorphic with the very globe. In this scheme, terrorists become subhuman—microbial, cancerous, viral—while their enemies retain status as a collective human body, projecting and protecting a baseline image of health and integrity” (18).

Through this formulation Raza Kolb makes evident the long history of white supremacist efforts to dehumanize Muslims. She uses the term “disease poetics,” to trace this epistemic, rhetorical, and figural violence, while thinking through the real and material ways in which disease poetics leads to other forms of violence, specifically war. At the center of this text then, is the urgency of confronting the humanity of Muslims and questions of how we intervene in these racist, received representations. Raza Kolb’s response to such a question is razor-sharp close reading

and historical contextualization. She scrutinizes a range of colonial, anti-colonial, and postcolonial texts including Indian mutiny literature, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Albert Camus's *The Plague*, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Frantz Fanon's "Algeria Unveiled" (1959), Djamilia Boupacha's *Djamilia Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl* (1962), Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and *Joseph Anton* (2012), and *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004). She disrupts the primacy of white subjectivity in these representations by deconstructing the inscriptions of Islam as disease. *Epidemic Empire* joins an important conversation that includes work by Ronak K. Kapadia (2019), Anjali Nath (2019), Jasbir K. Puar (2007), and Junaid Rana (2011).⁹

Toward the end of her introduction Raza Kolb describes the sense in which colonialism itself functions like an epidemic in that it never goes away, and instead continues to bring harm to the Global South. She writes: "the imaginary of epidemic compounds the pervasive sense of apocalypse that has hovered over narratives of very recent global history, which as a consequence seems to unfold in a series of ever-escalating crises" (22). I found this concept of the "series of ever-escalating crises," most convincing. I wanted to initiate a conversation with Raza Kolb about how the work of *Epidemic Empire* might help us better understand the postcolonial Caribbean, specifically Haiti, which she mentions in the text. Representations of Haiti in the West have tended to paint it as a nation that is perpetually in crisis and as a site of chronic instability, without acknowledging the ways in which North-Atlantic powers such as the United States, France, England, and Canada, have played an active role in creating and sustaining the conditions of exploitation and instability for their own benefit. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse on 7 July 2021, followed by the earthquake of August 14 2021, are recent examples of political and natural disasters in Haiti where the fall-out is amplified by the interference of foreign powers. As with many of its neighbors in the Caribbean, contemporary Haiti has frequently been subject to what Raza Kolb identifies as the "ransoming of sovereign politics against foreign aid" (32). Too often, foreign nations (usually led by the United States and UN), occupy the nation and extract Haitian resources without even bothering to offer the window dressing of aid.

The subtext of Raza Kolb's excavation in *Epidemic Empire* is the predicament of the postcolonial nation in South Asia and the Middle East, and struggles to make good on the promises of decolonization in the midst of ongoing neocolonial oppression. Similar issues are resonant in the contemporary Caribbean. In the scripts of the racist, imperialist Western imagination, Muslims are inherently violent and prone to terrorism, and Haitians are endlessly impoverished, unable to govern themselves, and destined to chronic instability and political violence. The complicity and responsibility of former colonizing powers for the past and ongoing impoverishment of Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean is made invisible by the politics of "flag independence."

Raza Kolb's framing of Muslims as disease must also be connected with the stigmatization of Haitians as "diseased," not least in the early 1980s when the American Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified "Haitians, homosexuals, heroin users, and hemophiliacs" (thereafter called the "4-H" group) as at elevated risk for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) infection.¹⁰ This racist and discriminatory designation was not based on any sound scientific research. Instead, it was part of the culture of fear and ignorance that developed in the rhetoric and public-messaging around HIV/AIDS as scientists and healthcare professionals struggled to understand the new disease. In 1990, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) excluded all Haitians from blood donations, again justifying this move with unscientific, racist beliefs that Haitians were more likely than other groups to spread HIV/AIDS.¹¹

9 Anjali Nath, "Camera as weapon: ways of seeing in Kashmir," *Studies in Documentary Film*, 13:3 (2019): 268–282; Ronak K. Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

10 Georges E. Fouron, "Race, Blood, Disease and Citizenship: The Making of the Haitian-Americans and Haitian Immigrants into 'the Others' during the 1980s–1990s AIDS Crisis," in eds. Ulla Berg and Robyn Rodriguez, *Transnational Citizenship Across the Americas*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 57–71.

11 Bruce Lambert, "Now, No Haitians Can Donate Blood," *The New York Times*, 14 March 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/14/us/now-no-haitians-can-donate-blood.html#:~:text=The%20F.D.A.,at%20high%20risk%20of%20AIDS.>

The move was met by widespread anger and protest from Haitian Americans, and the effects of this stigma continue to be felt today.¹²

It is possible to link these racist scripts about Haiti to the reluctance of the UN to acknowledge its role in spreading cholera in Haiti. Western governments and media have trained their constituents and audiences to think that these diseases and disasters just “happen” in Haiti, outside of any reasonable framework of causality beyond, of course, what we are trained to accept as the blameworthiness of Haitians themselves. It took an immense amount of pressure, in the form of investigations, as well as activism and agitation on the part of Haitians, for the UN to admit their role in the introduction of cholera in Haiti in 2010. Initially, when asked about the source of the spread of cholera, UN officials repeatedly denied having any knowledge of the source or culpability in the epidemic in Haiti. They did this for several years, even after records were leaked showing that the UN had conducted their own internal investigation on the source of cholera and the scientists involved in this investigation proved that the cholera strain present in Haiti was a virtual 100% match of the strain found in Nepal where the UN soldiers who went to Haiti in 2010 had been stationed immediately beforehand.¹³ After finally admitting their fault, UN officials have continued to declare “legal immunity,” denying the efforts of Haitians to bring the organization to justice.¹⁴ Thus far this claim has been backed by American courts, leaving Haitians with no accountability.¹⁵

If Raza Kolb’s argument about Islam in the Western imagination can be mapped onto postcolonial Haiti, then this violence and abuse against Haitians by the UN must be tied to the rhetoric that Haiti is “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.” It is a line repeated ad nauseum in Western media reports on the nation. How do we think this perpetual framing of Haiti and Haitians as the “poorest” and the “worst” in relation to the framing of Muslims as disease? Literary critic Nadège T. Clitandre reminds us that these racist representations of Haiti have many historical precedents including the “history of enslavement, involuntary migration and displacement; the history of colonialism, foreign intervention, forced isolation, and economic exploitation.”¹⁶ Indeed, we live with the afterlives of colonialism, with its languages and metaphors. The challenge is to continually disrupt this language and these images so that they may never settle comfortably on our tongues or in our minds.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Laurie R. Lambert is an interdisciplinary scholar, working at the intersection of literature and history in Caribbean and African Diaspora Studies. She is an associate professor of African and African American Studies at Fordham University. Her first book, *Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution* (University of Virginia Press, 2020), examines the gendered implications of political trauma in literature on Grenada.

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¹² Edwidge Danticat, “Trump Reopens An Old Wound for Haitians,” *The New Yorker*, 29 December 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trump-reopens-an-old-wound-for-haitians>.

¹³ Jessica Le Masurier, “Haiti: Injustice in the Time of Cholera,” *France 24*, 14 October 2014.

¹⁴ Ed Pilkington, “Haitians Launch New Lawsuit Against UN Over Thousands of Cholera Deaths,” *The Guardian*, 11 March 2014.

¹⁵ David Ingram, “U.S. Judge Rules Haitians Cannot Sue U.N. for Cholera Epidemic,” *Reuters*, 10 January 2015.

¹⁶ Nadège T. Clitandre, “Haitian Exceptionalism in the Caribbean and the Project of Rebuilding Haiti,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 17.2 (2011): 146–153.

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