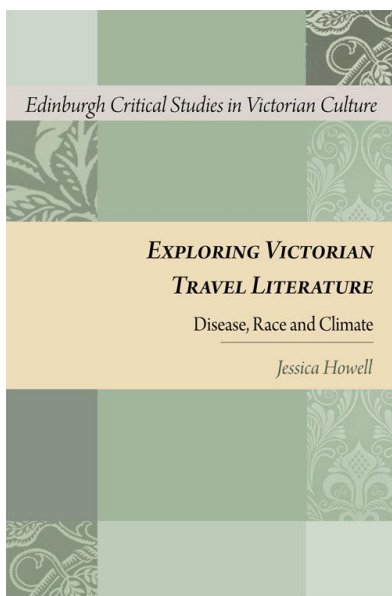


## BOOK REVIEW

*Exploring Victorian Travel Literature: Disease, Race and Climate*, by Jessica Howell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). 208 pp. Hardback, £70.

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The growing consequences of global climate change have recently made climate studies relevant for the humanities as well as the sciences. This burgeoning field focuses primarily on the history of climate and its influence on cultural development. In *Exploring Victorian Travel Literature: Disease, Race and Climate*, Jessica Howell opens up new avenues of enquiry into climate studies and Victorian literature by juxtaposing narratives of illness and pathology, or pathographies, onto tropical climate history and colonial topography in the Victorian British Empire. The result is a thorough investigation of several lesser-known travel writers, including Mary Seacole, Richard Burton, Africanus Horton, and Mary Kingsley, and a new and insightful reading of disease, atmosphere, and colonial ambivalence in the more-widely read work of canonical novelist Joseph Conrad. This dynamic combination of travel writers, from diverse backgrounds and with diverging perspectives, offers a multivalent contextualisation of how foreign soil, atmosphere, race, and gender informed Victorian identity and health. This groundwork on medical, social, and environmental observations in the British Empire subsequently opens up Victorian discourse to the material environmental concerns of climate and pathology, and how they impact upon self-perception and colonial attitudes in fiction.

Howell uses these narratives of travel and illness to negotiate how mud, fog, and flora operate as mediators of narrative authority in Victorian fiction. Her analysis of these writers' representations of foreign environments and their perceptions of the spread of diseases pinpoints the connections between

physical dirt, the less-tangible vapours of exotic lands, and the interior perceptions or attitudes that inform English health and identity in Victorian writing. ‘The torrid heat, the miasma exhaled from the soil, the noisome vapours enveloping every path’, to use the words of Henry Morton Stanley, are pervasive throughout Howell’s study (p. 1). Her identification of the materiality of atmosphere, which is typically figured in Victorian literature as aesthetic and abstract, is profound. She renders soil, air, and the vapours of decomposition part of the atmosphere and climate of British colonies, and thereby a physical presence and possible threat to the bodily integrity of colonial travellers. Since the role of climate and miasmas in causing illness was, in the nineteenth century, ‘illdefined and uncontrollable’, the influence of the atmosphere offers each writer the freedom to manipulate environmental illness imagery to ‘support different, even contradictory conclusions regarding disease causation and resistance’ (p. 15).<sup>1</sup> Howell’s attention to the earth, atmosphere, and climate through her discussion of narrative and miasma theory allows readers to see the material connections between environmental concerns, biomedical threats, and cultural corruption, making this an innovative and important work of Victorian literary criticism that relates to contemporary environmental concerns.

Within Howell’s selection of travel narratives, Richard Burton’s prolific work on the occupation of Africa offers the stereotypical explorer’s perception of the ‘qualitative and quantitative value’ of the African landscape, as well as the racialised and pathologised dispositions of foreign earth and atmosphere. However, Howell expands this popular reading by highlighting Burton’s own illness as a source of narrative authority, along with his propensity for topographical contrast, as a way of imagining British potential and limiting ‘dangers to the white body’ (p. 55). Burton’s incorporation of his illness into his writing authenticates his authority to ‘map the healthfulness of the land’ and glorifies the “white man’s burden” of tropical disease... in the service of the empire’ (p. 56). According to Howell, Burton’s pro-imperial work suggests that African climates could be conquered through greater knowledge of its landscape, which Burton divides into the lower and ‘unhealthful jungle, swamps and marshes’, and the elevated and healthy ‘headlands’ and ‘capes’ (p. 55). Furthermore, Burton depicts the tropics in terms of ‘excess’, full of ‘rot and decomposition’, which must be cultivated, controlled, and contained (p.66). This includes the unhealthy soils and marshes that offer concealment for

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<sup>1</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of miasmas proposed that infectious diseases spread through fumes, filth, decomposition, and improper ventilation. See Nadja Durbach, *Body Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853 – 1907* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 152.

runaway slaves and thereby belie the imperial project (pp. 68-69). As a result, Howell's study of Burton significantly identifies an underlying connection between Burton's body, his narrative, and the African landscape that privileges division and control in order to achieve better health and prosperity for white British bodies.

While Howell highlights Burton's use of natural and topographical phenomena to justify colonialism, she traces the complexities of diverging perspectives on race as a means to resist or understand tropical environments and diseases in Jamaican Creole author Mary Seacole and Sierra Leonean James Africanus Beale Horton. According to Howell, these writers question white superiority by attributing their own prevailing health to their racial identity. For instance, in Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), Seacole exploits contemporary beliefs that 'mixed-race subjects are not only "natural" but in fact "fitter" to survive myriad environments', promoting the heightened disease-resistance and hardiness of her body as she offers to serve as surrogate mother and nurse to young white British subjects on foreign soil (p. 32). Seacole establishes her narrative authority by identifying with her mixed-race background: 'I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins' (quoted in Howell, p. 30). Howell suggests that by employing her mixed-racial identity as protection against foreign climates and soil, Seacole is taking an anti-colonial stance by implying that 'the Jamaican climate "refuses" to adopt whites' or allow them to inhabit its land without a great sacrifice (p. 45). As a result, this mixed-race narrator looks with an anti-imperial gaze on the frailty of male British bodies incompatible with foreign climates, atmospheres, and landscapes.

Howell's analysis of the work of black West African doctor and writer Africanus Horton, *Physical and Medical Climate* (1867), similarly both complicates and advocates the agency of colonized and coloured bodies by affirming native knowledge of the natural world. She claims that Horton validates 'the African eye' by portraying Africa as impenetrable to colonial forces, but knowable to black African subjects (p. 107). Horton intentionally privileges the details of his perceived environment and the indigenous uses of its flora over the events and concerns of his life. As a result, Horton's technique of citing native knowledge alongside his own observations within his medical writing demonstrates his unique authority within West African medicine and politics (p. 91). Yet, Howell observes the complexity of Horton's claims since his association of African natives with flora unintentionally contributes to eco-colonialism, which privileges colonial forces as 'outsiders who tame the tropical environment' and dominate indigenous people (p. 103). Ultimately, however,

Horton's recognition of the 'unique and irreplaceable familiarity' of the African natives with their environment acknowledges a bond that supersedes colonial force (p. 86). As a result, Horton's authoritative favouring of observed landscapes subordinates colonial Linnaean botanical cataloguing of nature to the native Africans' knowledge and authority over their environment.

Howell's chapter on Mary Kingsley offers some of the book's most valuable contributions to the intersections of gender, race, and environmental illness. Howell identifies Kingsley's work *Travels in West Africa* (1897) as a model of feminine health and hardiness, in contrast to the pathologised representations of women that dominate Victorian discourse. This model portrays a female constitution that 'transcends childbearing and domesticity [...] refuses to adopt wholesale either contemporary ideas of masculine vigour or feminist visions of the "New Woman"' by portraying 'woman's climatic invulnerability' (p. 122). Howell points to examples of Kingsley's depiction of her own comfort and pleasure, wherein she even claims to belong to the swamps, rather than disavowing them like her predecessors. Instead, Kingsley conflates African natives with miasmatic places such as "his own [...] swampy valley": the places of miasma and disease are where he is most comfortable' (p. 120). Howell clarifies that Kingsley makes these claims not to abuse Africans, but to reassert the danger of the African swamps, dirt, and miasmas for most white subjects. Kingsley expresses her own harmony with the atmosphere, miasmas, and swamps by misappropriating lines from Wordsworth on Toussaint that support her stance of "non-intervention" on colonialism, claiming that "the air and all nature will fight for you" and rejecting climatic or pathological threats to her own body (p. 110). By drawing this link between the atmosphere and Kingsley's body and authorship, Howell makes a strong claim about the role of narrative in establishing cultural associations between climate and illness, particularly as it pertains to the Victorian female body and mind.

In her final chapter, Howell bridges the genres of fiction and non-fiction by examining the impact of foreign atmospheres on psychological and physiological health across Joseph Conrad's writing. She asserts that the external environments in Conrad's fiction, namely in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), influence the characters' 'internal balance and therefore their health' (p. 138). Howell specifically looks at the influence of the sun and mists, which cause various forms of emotional and physical illness. For instance in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow associates his lack of joy with the environment: 'The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine' (p. 139). Additionally, Howell suggests that Conrad's use of atmosphere, such as the 'clammy fog', not only 'immerse[s] readers in the

characters' experience of both sensing and making sense of the world', but also fabricates the experience of becoming ill (p. 140). Of the five authors in this study, only Conrad produces a narrator who is 'defined by his susceptibility [...] and who is unable to mitigate this vulnerability by controlling his circumstances', which Howell links to Conrad's reflections on his own experiences with foreign soil and diseases (p. 141). In his personal writing, Conrad's depiction of his environment changes from "charming" and 'beautiful' to 'heavy' based on his health (p. 145). Howell claims that Conrad's responses to his changing health, and his corresponding representations of the African climate in his fiction, indicate his ambivalence towards colonial occupation. Howell subsequently uses Conrad's personal reflections on climate and health, along with his characters' anxiety over the integrity of their minds and bodies, to negotiate the cultural discourse of narrative authority and to articulate the prevalence of British ambivalence towards imperial expansion.

Howell's mediation of foreign soil and climate allows her to trace narrative authority through illness travel narratives that rely on racial identity and bodily integrity. Her accumulative work on pathographies reveals the British ambivalence towards imperial expansion and the ways in which environmental rhetoric informed Victorian beliefs about identity and health. Furthermore, by addressing environmental issues within illness and travel narratives, Howell implicates climate's engagement with elements of atmosphere, landscape, and culture throughout colonial rhetoric and thereby asserts the significance of climate studies as an urgent and tangible field for both Victorian literary criticism and studies of the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

## Bibliography

Durbach, Nadja, *Body Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853 – 1907* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).