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This is indeed a “strange book” (p. 1). The author, Mel Y. Chen, an associate professor of women’s and gender studies at the University of California, Berkeley, acknowledges this at the outset. Taking an impressively expansive, interdisciplinary approach, Chen situates the book within critical ethnic and race studies, disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, and queer theory, but the work also has clear historical, historiographical, and autobiographical impulses. The resulting narratives span the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries to analyze “the affective nexus between race and disability” within their processes of becoming (p. 1). Toxicity and intoxication mark the point at which this nexus “vibrates” (p. 3). In tracking these vibrations across an introduction, three chapters, and an “afterwards,” Chen forcefully critiques extractive academic knowledge making and knowledge sharing which privilege single-authored monographs that offer condensed arguments. Instead of such an argument, then, Chen tells us what this book is about: “how things take shape, and how they don’t” (p. 17).

Entangled theories of disability and race gave shape to slowness, one of the book’s key concepts, starting with John Langdon Down’s investigations of “mongoloid idiocy,” now known as Down Syndrome. Down drew from Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s racialized hierarchies and taxonomies to distinguish between “idiot,” “imbecile,” and “moron” and to attribute such distinctions to “atavistic eruptions of earlier racial (Mongoloid) characteristics in the otherwise European descended child” (pp. 23-24). Down’s dosing of his child patients with opium worked to rule out intoxication as the cause of their “slowness.” This practice underscored and reinforced the similarity, but not sameness, between “idiocy” and intoxication. As Chen observes, “Opium, racial specificity, and intellectual delay formed a kind of interiority-exteriority, a (slow) constitution, in the bodies of Down’s
patients” (p. 60). The ready availability of the “Mongol” figure within Down’s developmental vocabulary hinted at Orientalist imagery of the “stagnated Mongol” within Victorian Britain’s civilizational logic that had become yoked to moralizing discourses about opium use and “addiction” in China and in London’s Chinatown (p. 39). Here, Chen’s thoughtful analysis of opium’s psychiatric and moral dimensions might have been further enriched by conversation with the body of scholarship on the contemporaneous “lunatic asylums” in British India and the Caribbean colonies. James H. Mills’s work on the entanglement of cannabis consumption with the asylum system and moral subject formation in post-rebellion India, Madness, Cannabis, and Colonialism: The “Native-Only” Lunatic Asylums of British India, 1857-1900 (2000), might have been an especially fruitful point of departure.

The racialized and temporalized logic of Down’s medical practice illuminates the deeper ties between, and emphasis on, development and speed within the racialized colonial order, capitalist modernity, the neoliberal self-imagination, and academic labor. Although Chen similarly engages with the concept of speed at several levels, a meditation on the term’s use as a catch-all for amphetamines might have been an especially appropriate addition to their critique of the demands for rapidity fundamental to modern, neoliberal capitalism and American academia.[1] Nonetheless, Chen’s close reading of depictions of zombies in American popular culture since the 1990s, and especially after the Great Recession, offers compelling support for this critique. Translucently fashioned in the mold of racialized disability through tropes of eternal laboring, distinctive bodily movements, and infrastructural abandonment, zombies underscore disability’s near-monopoly on nonproductivity and anti-productivity under capitalism. This interpretation of zombies is rather evocative of, and might have been placed into fruitful conversation with, anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll’s concept of the “machine zone,” the trance-like state intentionally fostered by the rhythms and technologies of casino gambling that disconnects users from reality and the self.[2] Dialogue with David Courtwright’s related concept of “limbic capitalism,” the quintessentially American incarnation of capitalism in which corporations aim to provide entertainment, pleasure, and addiction rather than goods and services, might also have added to this discussion the possibility of capitalism itself as conducive to forms of nonproductivity and anti-productivity.[3]

In contrast to capitalism’s insistence on speed, and at the heart of Chen’s “biopolitical traversals,” is the “slow time” that spurs the evolutionary logic positing the “racialized, disabled Mongol figure” as “a figure of vehement rejection” (pp. 60, 61). Chen thus locates in the scenes of resistance for Down’s patients a biopolitical agitation that resonates with the archive of the Aboriginals Protection and Restrictions of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897 in Queensland. The act was implemented against the backdrop of increasingly interdependent commercial and labor relationships between Queensland’s Chinese, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander communities that threatened both white traders’ grip on the opium business and the colonial government’s desire to control the bodies of racialized subjects. Thus, in Chen’s hands, a suspiciously paternalistic act that was ostensibly about curtailing opium addiction becomes “devastating” and “a radical form of abuse” that enabled the reimagining not only of proper drug use but also of family structures, gender relations, labor divisions, policing, sexual relationships, the management of space and mobility, and the “very terms of governance” (p. 108). The Black Opium (2006) installation in the Queensland State Library by the Badtjala artist Fiona Foley encapsulates this narrative with its “transtemporal reminding” that both rejects unidirectional, Western readings of historical agency, legacy, and time and encapsulates “slow agitation, slowness and agitation together” (pp. 111, 136). This agitation implicates a process of unlearning that Chen refers to as “in-
toxicated method,” or an intentional categorical blurring that serves not as a starting point or an excuse for false equivalencies but as “forms of opening ... modes of being with, of concatenation and assembly, and sometimes collectivity” (p. 139). The chemical governance on display both in Down’s practice in England and in Queensland’s implementation and enforcement of the act itself resonates with the simultaneous experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in intersectional thinking after the murder of George Floyd, and the wildfires in California. This period, during which time was once more elusive, made clear the strength of privatized biotech and the colonial-inspired divide between nature and culture and private and public at its core. Against the biopolitics of these divisions—the same biopolitics that disavows disabled and racialized differences—Chen locates liberatory possibilities in feminist thought and queer theory situated spatially and temporally “on the edge” in which “there’s no telling where and when the next shoe will fall, or what the new form of precarity will be” (p. 155).

Although Chen does not position this book primarily as a work of history, many of their key interventions contribute to, and invite engagement from, histories and historians across subfields and methodologies. Chen’s archival work sheds new light on the diverse uses of opium in nineteenth-century England and on opium laws throughout the empire. Indeed, the book’s focus on opium’s historical trajectory in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia adds a new dimension to a story most often located in the “traditional” sites of empire in Asia. More broadly, pairing disability with race to historicize, problematize, and theorize “intoxication” fits in with, and pushes beyond, recent drug histories that have scrutinized how and why intoxication is called into being and sustained. Chen thus puts forth disability, both on its own terms and in its intersections with race, as having potential analytical purchase for future histories of alcohol and drugs, intoxication, toxicity, and related topics. But equally interesting and instructive is the book’s location of the historical record within the state archive and also beyond and against it. Chen’s detailing of the “framing encounters” preceding their archival visits illuminates the significance of interpersonal interactions to the ostensibly detached research and writing processes. In the same way, Chen’s anecdotes from their upbringing, engagement with works of art and pop culture, and examples from their teaching productively blur the lines between forms of knowledge making and knowledge sharing—and knowledge making and knowledge sharing themselves. Chen thus puts into practice their critiques of the academic monograph and academic labor and, by so doing, models how to enact their “intoxicated” method.

This book would certainly produce lively and unique discussions in methodologically and theoretically oriented graduate seminars in a number of departments and disciplines. Many of its individual sections would also provide compelling and manageable reading material for students in advanced undergraduate courses on a similarly wide range of topics. In any case, specialist audiences across the humanities, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary fields would benefit from engaging and thinking with this strange, but eminently brilliant and enjoyable, book.

Notes


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