

**The Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies International (CN-CSI) presents:
Contagion and Contamination in the Nineteenth Century**

Thursday 1 May, 9.50am – 5.00pm (Central European Time)



‘Monster Soup commonly called Thames Water’, William Heath, 1828, *BranchCollective.org*

The [Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies International \(CN-CSI\)](#) is pleased to announce a free and online one-day interdisciplinary workshop exploring the relationship between contagion and contamination in nineteenth-century culture across the globe. The workshop will feature several emerging and established scholars as they interrogate a range of artistic renderings, literary representations, and historical case studies concerning contagious diseases, infection, and pollution in order to explore how ecological and epidemiological concerns of the present were first galvanised by the nineteenth-century anxieties of our recent past.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Hungarian physician and social critic Max Nordau warned that society had become ravaged by a severe epidemic: an infectious pandemic of cultural and moral decline. In his infamous social critique *Degeneration* (1892), Nordau declared: ‘We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria, and it is natural that we should ask anxiously on all sides: “What is to come next?”’. Fears of this ‘severe mental epidemic’ were entwined with anxieties popularised by criminologists like Cesare Lombroso who speculated on the dormancy of an individual’s criminal disposition.

Anxieties around moral contagion were further exacerbated by the popular press, political fiction, and satirical art which amplified the ever-expanding threat of social degeneracy.

Nineteenth-century cultural fears accompanied the pervasive, mediated, and very real pathogenic threats to the bodies of late nineteenth-century individuals who faced epidemics of influenza, cholera, smallpox, the bubonic plague, scarlet fever, and venereal diseases on a global scale. On the other hand, the century also saw the transformation of medical responses to disease detection, prevention, and management. This included the cholera and sanitation investigations of John Snow in the 1850s, the pasteurisation and vaccination breakthroughs of Louis Pasteur, and the advent of antiseptic surgery through the work of Joseph Lister. As such, the nineteenth century was a time of invisible threat, seismic change, and vibrant discourse concerning diseases both real and imagined.

See programme and registration link below. Please note all times are Central European Time (CET).

Registration Link: https://bham-ac-uk.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_kbhzkbDmR9qjXI8klg2GIw

Contagion and Contamination in the Nineteenth Century

Thursday 1st May, 2025, Programme

Please note all times are in Central European Time (CET).

9:50-10:00 (CET): WELCOME ADDRESS

10:00-10:45 (CET): SESSION 1

Chair: Dr Madeline Potter, University of Edinburgh

Speaker: Dr Melissa Dickson, University of Queensland

Title: ‘The Nineteenth Century up-to-date with a Vengeance’: Spreading Vampirism and Russian Influenza across Bram Stoker’s Britain

The global influenza outbreak often referred to as the ‘Russian Flu’ began in the city of Petropavovsk in 1889 before sweeping with remarkable rapidity across Europe, the British Isles, and the United States. It is often cited as the first modern pandemic, moving as it did via major roads, rivers, and, notably, railway lines, many of which had not existed during the last major pandemic in the 1840s. As people were now more mobile, so too were their diseases.

Commentators of the period noted that those who worked in crowded offices, and those who travelled together on modern public transport systems were most likely to contract the new strain of influenza. Press reports began to fuel public suspicion that the mail system was operating as a vector of transmission, as claims spread that railway employees and postal workers were often the first infected in their communities. Modern Britain, it seemed, was peculiarly vulnerable to infection, via the very technologies and the infrastructure by which it so often marked itself as modern.

This paper focuses on the palpable uneasiness that emerges in the British popular and medical press in response to the arrival of the Russian Flu in the United Kingdom. That response, I suggest, was driven in part by an anxiety that the weakness of the modern British subject and the vulnerabilities of its communication and transport networks had been exposed. I trace fears of invasion and contagion from overseas across British periodical culture, as well as within the Gothic mode of fiction, which played and preyed upon similar anxieties. Taking Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) as my main fictional case study, I demonstrate the ways in which vampirism is imagined as a form of infection, which enters England by exploiting the very networks and technologies of empire that were used to assert its dominance: the communication, transportation and shipping routes that allow Jonathan Harker to visit Transylvania, also provide the very means by which a foreign body can enter and attack the heart of the British Empire. Re-contextualising the spread of vampirism throughout the population of Britain as a form of pandemic, I argue that Stoker’s novel served as a vehicle for anxieties about foreign invasion on a microbial scale.

11:00-11:45 (CET): SESSION 2

Chair: Professor Claudia Capancioni, Bishop Grosseteste University

Speaker: Timothy Mills, University of Portsmouth

Title: Implausible Deniability: Exploring the intersection of science, politics and public health in the British imperial response to contagion, contamination and the germ theory in late nineteenth-century India

As imperialism and globalisation exploded in the late nineteenth century, extractive commercial ventures and aggressive geopolitics meant that India became the perfect microbial petri dish for highly influential disease ecologies and the evolution of catastrophic pathogenic events. Despite the enormous scientific advances that characterised 'The Wonderful Century', British doctors and officials refused to accept the growing body of thought that tropical diseases were spread by germs and not through humoral imbalances or miasma.

The study of contagion and contamination in nineteenth-century Imperial India reveals arguments over the origins, causation and transmission of disease, yielding stories of nationalism, denialism, fatalism, blame, hygiene theatrics, bigotry, political opportunism, and commercial profiteering. Similar themes have emerged through the recent AIDS crisis and the way COVID-19 was understood, interpreted and treated. I will consider how and why the legacy of this resistance is still seen today through the way medicine was used to create racial and social disparity at this critical time in World history.

This paper will consider why such a highly developed international powerhouse as the British Empire refused to accept proven laboratory findings and highly persuasive public health policies proffered by modern science and widely discussed at International Sanitary Conferences.

11:45-13:00 (CET): LUNCH BREAK

13:00-13:45 (CET): SESSION 3

Chair: Dr Emily Vincent, University of Birmingham and Durham University

Speaker: Dr Amanda Sciampacone, The Open University

Title: Constructing Cholera's Landscape: Nineteenth-Century Medical Climatology and the Colonial Picturesque

My paper will explore how epidemic cholera came to be racialised as an Indian disease seemingly born of an Indian environment. More than most illnesses of the period, cholera inspired deep fears

in British society because of its apparent origins, the mysterious nature of its spread, and the symptoms it produced on the European body. Although cholera was known in Britain prior to the nineteenth century, British medics claimed that the epidemic form of the disease had emerged in 1817 in the town of Jessore in what they described as the putrid jungles of the Ganges Delta. Due to its apparent origin in India, British medics used the terms ‘Asiatic cholera’ and ‘Indian cholera’ to describe the new disease. With cholera’s arrival, British medics were confronted with a disease of which they had little knowledge. In attempting to identify its cause, they turned to an exploration of the environmental conditions in which it appeared to spread. Images were used to give visual form to these investigations. As I will argue, illustrations of cholera’s and India’s environment revealed how the disease took shape in the British imagination as an Indian entity; however, with subsequent outbreaks of cholera in Britain in 1848-49, 1853-54, and 1866, these images also implied an uncomfortable affinity between the climates of the metropole and the subcontinent.

14:00-14:45 (CET): SESSION 4

Chair: Dr Emma Merkling, University of Manchester and Durham University

Speaker: Dr Mark Frost, University of Portsmouth

Title: ‘No clearer or diviner waters’: Contamination, Abjection, and Ecocrisis in the Victorian Imagination

This paper will explore the mutual insinuations of water and the human body from ecocritical perspectives to suggest that as Victorians confronted environmental and sanitary crises, the hitherto-concealed extent of human involvement in environmental networks, and a new understanding of humans as aqueous symbiotic organisms, began to emerge. Examining literary works, lectures, and journalism by Charles Kingsley, Henry Mayhew, John Ruskin, and others, I trace figures of fluid circulation that disclose shifting attitudes to the always cultural relationship between humanity and environment. After mid-century, nascent ecological thinking was implicated in related crises of identity that were particularly felt at the vulnerable thresholds of human bodies and of water, revealing them as interconnected, blurring, and complicit ecological agents within dangerously-open environmental networks. Gradually-developing knowledge of microscopic organisms, and, as the century progressed, their role in disease transmission, threatened the purity, sovereignty, and closed status of the human body, while effecting a similar crisis in water’s associations with purity and healing. This paper will draw attention to the practical and symbolic connections between human bodies and watercourses during the period – by the passage of river water into drinking supplies and thence into the human body, and by the passage of human waste and pollution into rivers; but also in the way that both human and watery bodies are revealed as open, vulnerable circulatory systems composed of multiple agents and ingredients. In tracing how and why water and humanity became inextricably-connected agents-in-crisis within newly-understood ecological networks, I will outline the ways that watery bodies are open to the entry of multiple sources of contamination; and that it becomes impossible to demarcate boundaries between water and its pollution. Demonstrating that the indetermination of boundaries inherent in acts of water pollution was particularly troubling to Victorian commentators makes it possible to then show that these anxieties also haunted discourse about

human bodies by revealing that human bodies, like rivers, are vulnerable, open networks, neither pure nor singular, but symbiotic and multiple.

15:00-15:45 (CET): SESSION 5

Chair: Professor Kirsten E. Shepherd, University of Oxford

Speaker: Professor Priscilla Wald, Duke University

Title: A Germ's-Eye View: Getting Up Close and Personal with Our Microbes

In a 2000 article in *Science*, the Nobel Prize-winning microbiologist Joshua Lederberg predicted an upswing in pandemics in the coming century that “likely [would] unfold as episodes of a suspense thriller that could be titled *Our Wits Versus Their Genes*.” More surprising was his nomination of “the most sophisticated” and among “the most important” changes we could make: to replace the twentieth-century metaphor of war to describe humans’ relationship to our microbes with “a more ecologically informed metaphor, which includes the germs’-eye view of infection.” This talk comes out of Lederberg’s provocation.

In 1805 Alexander von Humboldt’s *Essay on the Geography of Plants* introduced the concept of the interdependence of life forms. The idea gathered force in the succeeding decades, emerging as a central insight of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* before it was christened “ecology” (*Oecologia*) in 1866 by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel. The concept drew out an idea that had long been lying dormant in the theory of contagion. This talk will track the evolving understanding of interdependence through the rise of germ theory, the concept of the healthy human carrier, and the beginning of the public health movement. I am interested specifically, however, in how, why, and when medical science adopted the metaphor of “microbial warfare” to describe humanity’s relationship to our microbes and what we might gain in following Lederberg’s suggestion.

16:00-16:45 (CET): SESSION 6

Chair: Joanna Norman, Victoria and Albert Museum

Speaker: Dr Katherine Ott, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Title: The Lingering Nineteenth-Century, a Museum Exhibition, and a Curator

This talk is a discussion of an exhibition that examines the nineteenth-century origins of four values in current healthcare practices in the U.S. The exhibition, scheduled to open in early April 2025 at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, is entitled *First Do No Harm/Lo primero es no hacer daño*. The content was conceived as a way to use history to make the COVID pandemic more comprehensible. Consequently, the team selected issues that COVID dramatically and seemingly suddenly exacerbated. The two main take-away ideas of the exhibition

are that the processes of health and medicine are a paradox of wonderful, miraculous things along with harm and inequality and secondly, to understand health, it is necessary to use a One Health approach that considers humans, non-humans, and ecology. The lead curator for the exhibition will talk about the intricacies of presenting the legacy of scapegoating (during a Chinatown epidemic), colonialism (the rationale for high morbidity and mortality among Indigenous people), racism (embedded with Plantation doctors), and misogyny (the limited way in which women's health was understood) to museum audiences in our complicated times.

16:45-17:00 (CET): CLOSING REMARKS

Speaker: Dr Emily Vincent, University of Birmingham and Durham University