



From Inflammation to Liberation: Reading Inflamed as a Decolonial Medical Manifesto

Zhihan Li^a, *

^aWuhan Donghu University, China

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ABSTRACT

*This review critically examines *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice* by Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, positioning it as a significant contribution to decolonial medical thought. The book argues that chronic inflammation should be understood not only as a biological process but also as a somatic response to systemic injustice—including colonialism, racial capitalism, and ecological destruction. Through narrative case studies and theoretical analysis, the authors develop the concept of "political anatomy" to reveal how bodily systems reflect broader social and environmental harms. Furthermore, the book proposes "deep medicine" as a relational, reparative model of health grounded in Indigenous knowledge and collective healing. While the work offers a powerful interdisciplinary critique, it leaves open questions regarding practical application and global inclusivity. This review evaluates both the strengths and limitations of the text, highlighting its relevance to medical humanities, critical health studies, and cross-cultural approaches to care.*

1. Introduction

Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice is an ambitious interdisciplinary manifesto co-authored by UCSF physician and musician Rupa Marya and writer-political economist Raj Patel. Blending clinical knowledge, ecological critique, and political analysis, the authors pose a central question: how does modern medicine, while diagnosing individual illness, systematically obscure the colonial, historical, and structural origins of disease? By challenging the dominant biomedical view of the body as a sealed, autonomous machine, the book introduces the concept of "political anatomy", an analytical lens that reveals how bodily systems are intertwined with societal and ecological injustice. In doing so, *Inflamed* reframes health as a function of relational, systemic conditions rather than merely individual physiology.

2. Central Thesis and Content Overview

The book's central thesis is that chronic inflammation—a condition increasingly prevalent in modern societies—is not

merely a biological dysfunction but a somatic response to social injustice, environmental degradation, and colonial legacies. The authors argue that inflammation arises when the body attempts to repair damage; however, within the modern "exposome"—the totality of lifetime exposures to non-genetic stressors—chronic toxicity, economic precarity, and social violence hinder resolution, transforming healing into harm.

Conventional Western diagnostics often isolate symptoms from their historical and environmental contexts, rendering medicine ineffective when addressing systemic issues. In response, the authors propose a new paradigm: "deep medicine"—a practice of healing grounded in relational repair between people, the land, community, and more-than-human life. This vision is supported by compelling narratives, such as the case of Shelia McCarley, a woman who died from overwhelming systemic inflammation caused—according to the authors—by early-life exposure to PFAS toxins along the Tennessee River. In another evocative metaphor, they liken salmon swimming upstream to nutrient circulation in arteries, comparing river dams to vascular blockages, thereby linking ecological collapse to human disease in visceral, embodied terms.

* Corresponding author. e-mail: leezh327@163.com

3. Critical Evaluation

(1) Strengths

One of the book's most distinctive strengths lies in its fusion of narrative and theory. Marya and Patel extend biological systems—such as the immune and digestive systems—into sociohistorical landscapes, transforming them into conduits that reveal how oppression penetrates beneath the skin. For instance, they demonstrate how the loss of gut microbial diversity parallels the imposition of industrialised, colonised diets.

The book's interdisciplinary scope is striking. It integrates Michel Foucault's theory of the medical gaze, Frantz Fanon's insights on colonial trauma, and Donna Haraway's critique of immunological boundaries, constructing a powerful critique of the atomised, individualistic body. The human is repositioned not as a sovereign self, but as a "holobiont" — a multispecies ecology co-constituted by environment, microbes, and history.

(2) Limitations

Despite its visionary scope, the book is less clear on how to operationalise "deep medicine" in everyday clinical contexts. While it strongly advocates systemic changes—such as land rematriation or prison abolition—it offers few practical pathways for healthcare providers working within institutional medicine to initiate this transformative work.

Moreover, the book's rhetorical intensity, particularly in its characterisation of modern medicine as a "colonial cosmology," may alienate readers trained in conventional biomedicine. This divide between radical critique and institutional accessibility could impede its adoption within mainstream medical education.

Lastly, while the authors invoke Indigenous healing traditions as central to decolonial medicine, the narrative leans heavily towards North American experiences, particularly settler colonialism and anti-Black racism. References to non-Western medical traditions, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine or Ayurveda, are brief and somewhat instrumental, leaving the global plurality of non-colonial healing systems underexplored.

4. Conclusion and Significance

Overall, *Inflamed* is a highly provocative and generative contribution to the medical humanities. It rejects biological reductionism as an adequate explanation for health and instead insists on situating suffering within histories of extraction,

exclusion, and erasure. For medical education, the book emphasises the urgency of cultivating epistemic humility and listening skills, encouraging future clinicians to consider their patients' social "exposome" alongside their genomic profile. At the level of health policy, it calls for dismantling the social and ecological structures that produce illness, rather than relying solely on pharmaceutical interventions.

In line with GRHAS's mission to foster critical global dialogues across the arts, humanities, and social sciences, this book offers both a lexicon and a methodology for rethinking the concept of healing. As the authors remind us, "there can be no individual health in a world where communities are chronically unwell"—a statement that highlights not only the moral but also the medical necessity of decolonisation.

Author Contribution

The author independently selected and critically reviewed the book *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. All stages of the writing process, including thematic framing, content synthesis, critical evaluation, and final editing—were carried out solely by the author.

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Competing Interest declaration

The author declares that, to the best of their knowledge, there are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as potential competing interests with respect to the content of this manuscript.

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