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The René Wellek Prize (best book in comparative literature)

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- Jing Tsu (Yale): 2024-2027
- Anna Bernard (King's College London): 2025-2028

Monograph Honorable Mention: Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Deviant Matter: Ferment, Intoxicants, Jelly, Rot* (NYU Press, 2024)

Kyla Wazana Tompkins' wonderfully erudite and original book *Deviant Matter: Fermentation, Intoxication, Jelly, Rot* shows us what comparative and cross-disciplinary literary criticism is capable of. Tompkins brings together a wide range of primary materials that span the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, among them early US Department of Agriculture periodicals and reports; patent-remedy pamphlets and cartoons; fiction by Alcott, Delany, Melville, and Baldwin; and contemporary performance and visual art. Her readings invite us to consider the 'microbiopolitics' (10) of population management – demonstrated especially by the USDA materials – alongside the 'counterdisciplinary energy' of the marginalized and dispossessed communities that the state has sought to contain (28). 'Deviant matter' is the name she gives to the products of the biochemical processes and formations that are named in the book's title. By exploring encounters across time, institutions, and cultural forms with these 'lively substances' that appear to 'have a will of their own', Tompkins seeks new ways of producing scientific and cultural history 'at the scale of the sensory [...] everyday' (4).

Deviant Matter stands out for its perceptive and persuasive close readings, its centering of questions of race and class, and its ability to bring its eclectic and provocative corpus to life. The book has an astonishing theoretical breadth and depth, but it never feels beholden to other thinkers: its insights are derived above all from the primary texts. Its arguments are at the same time carefully historicized. This is apparent above all in the chapter on the USDA archives, which seeks to understand the nineteenth-century emergence of modern strategies of governmentality in relation to a multi-scalar project of taxonomization, from the microbe to the population. Yet it can also be seen in the subsequent chapters on the four 'deviant' forms of matter Tompkins examines. Here she draws connections between nineteenth-century theories of fermentation, metabolism, and decomposition and contemporaneous debates about infrastructure, food, and waste management, grounding her more speculative discussions of 'the sensory life of matter' in archival evidence of what she trenchantly describes as 'the historical shaping of the senses' (209). The book is further distinguished by its exceptional generosity with the work of other scholars, both canonical and not, and by Tompkins' skill in making complex ideas engaging and accessible. The personal anecdote about a failed jelly sculpture that opens the book is worth the cover price alone.

While *Deviant Matter's* archive comes from the United States, its methods and insights have a much broader relevance, especially for scholars of comparative literature. Tompkins mobilizes what she calls 'strange juxtapositions' (28) of texts in order to draw out connections that exceed and undermine disciplinary and methodological boundaries. The book is thus 'in part an argument for interdisciplinarity method as a form of rigor that tests its own theories thoroughly' (29). It's also a remarkable contribution to literary history, the history of science, and material history, and to our understanding of the relationship between sensory experience and collective resistance.