Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative

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As I sat down at the computer to write this review, NPR was playing in the background, and a “StoryCorps” interview soon aired featuring a man who, as a small boy, had contracted polio during the 1945 epidemic that similarly infected tens of thousands. A little later that morning, I listened to a news story about Arizona’s stringent anti-immigration policies and their dampening effect on “border invasion,” a phrase that evokes scientific descriptions of the progression of a virus. In short, one morning’s news cycle richly confirmed both the topicality and the necessity of Priscilla Wald’s new book.

In *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Wald examines the rhetorical strategies and formal devices of “the outbreak narrative,” a genre that has captivated the popular imagination at least since the emergence of bacteriology in the 1880s and that intertwines medicine and myth as it “conspicuously turn[s] the threat of disease emergence into an apocalyptic battle between heroic scientists and the hybrids who embody the threat” (257). Epidemics may lack an inherent logic, climax, or resolution, but the stories we tell about them possess all three. The “outbreak narrative” that Wald dissects in *Contagious* is the conventional story told to explain how such contagious diseases as typhoid, cholera, polio, HIV/AIDS, and SARS are spread first locally and then globally, only to be ultimately contained. With its fascination with boundaries, the outbreak narrative taps into and medicalizes anxieties generated by the porous national borders and shifting demographics that help to define the global village.

Some readers of *Literature and Medicine* may find it odd that a literary critic has ventured into territory hitherto mapped out by epidemiologists and historians of science, among others, but Wald has long called for sustained dialogue between the humanities and sciences. In a 2002 special issue of *American Literature*, for instance, Wald and her co-editor Wai Chee Dimock insist on the importance of conceptual exchanges between the two fields in this increasingly science-driven and science-literate age. In their co-written preface, the two Americanists identify “an opportunity for creative and productive responses to the emergence of new forms of knowledge, of cross-disciplinary conversations and collaborations, all born of the necessity to address the growing entanglement of culture, technology, and science.”¹ In *Contagious*, Wald practices many of the forms of interdisciplinary dialogue she and
Dimock preached. For instance, Wald attends to science as a “language system” that already intersects with other language systems, including literature, and she explores the problems ensuing when one system is translated into the other. In particular, she sets out to chart “the contact zone” between the two disciplines: the terrain of their dynamic and mutually informative interchange. As a literary critic, she subjects the sciences to a microscopic scrutiny of the sort she and Dimock wanted “to bear down on the sciences, holding them accountable for issues not necessarily expressible through their disciplinary language and not necessarily highlighted for their practitioners.” Simultaneously, she takes literary scholars to task for remaining stuck within the confines and conventions of their narrowly-defined disciplines and specialities, especially since, as Wald herself ably demonstrates, their skills at rhetorical analysis can usefully illuminate the discursive formations and underlying assumptions of disciplines outside of their comfort zones.

Throughout Contagious, Wald provides persuasive insights into the foundational nature of the outbreak narrative, attending particularly to the influential role it continues to play in the formation of key constructs, including culture, nation, and the bureaucratic state. As Wald shows, contagion is a recurring trope in analyses of social interactions, used to convey how social change occurs and social cohesion and social control are enforced. Globalization has sharpened the perception of human interactions and human interdependence as both potentially beneficial and life-threatening: globalization can, for instance, be blamed for pandemics and simultaneously credited with facilitating their increasingly efficient containment. Wald reveals the etymological and formative links between communicable, communication, and community, demonstrating the extent to which our common humanity is premised upon our common susceptibility to disease. (Contagion, as Wald notes, literally means “to touch together” [12].) Both spatial and temporal mixing are cast as endangering in the outbreak narrative; contagion results not only from contact between hitherto separate peoples or places, although the association of a communicable disease with a particular immigrant group, for example, does work to further justify that group’s stigmatization. Just as threatening, or so the story goes, is the mixing of past and present, as when the country from which the virus emerged is associated with the past and often with the “primordial,” so that the spread of viruses from the Third World to the First World gets represented as the dangerous consequence of “putting the past in (geographical) proximity to the present” (7).
Wald’s lucid analyses of the various recurrences of the outbreak narrative are substantiated by her extensive research in primary materials and enriched by her cogent readings of literary texts including Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, the novels of Abraham Cahan, and the experimental works of William Burroughs. Wald binds the individual chapters, several of which have appeared separately, into a seamless whole through her multilayered approach: terms introduced and explained in early chapters recur in later ones, making for an ever more densely interwoven analysis as the pages turn. Following an introduction laying out her terms along with an explanation of what is at stake, the first chapter elucidates the formulaic conventions of the outbreak narrative in the late-twentieth-century United States as it is relayed in bestselling books including *The Hot Zone*, *Invasion*, and *Carriers*, along with movies based on these books and additional films. The embellishments evident in these narratives, Wald argues, began to circulate “(like microbes) until they became conventions” (33). Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities,” Wald explores the formative roles immunity and susceptibility play in the shaping of communities and in the policing of their boundaries; the language of crisis endemic to the outbreak narrative suggests the fragility of the imagined community and elicits in concerned citizens a renewed commitment to imagining consensus—a process that often entails the casting of a beleaguered, civilized “us” against a contaminated, Third World “them.” Hitherto invisible social interactions are made visible by contagion, illuminating the perilous interconnectedness even of those from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. In the outbreak narrative, viruses can become more animated and agentive than the human beings they so indifferently infect. In the end, however, dedicated detective-scientists triumph over the virus, ensuring its containment and the outbreak narrative’s requisite closure.

The second chapter explores the dynamics and legacy of Mary Mallon’s metamorphosis into “Typhoid Mary,” a transformation that simultaneously redefined her from public health menace to a compelling “symbol of epidemiological efficacy” (70). Wald is particularly concerned throughout *Contagious* with these index cases, the “patient zeros” or fabled progenitors of disease. “Typhoid Mary” and Gaétan Dugas are perhaps the two most familiar of these mythic characters, their alleged responsibility for causing an epidemic leading to their reduction to scapegoats, malign agents, and/or embodiments of the disease they carry. The threat Mary came to personify was imbued by sexual, class-based, gendered, and ethnic overtones—by a perceived
wildness that, according to the outbreak narrative, had to be tamed and contained along with the patient. A disease like typhus, spread through human waste, “lit up the inassimilability of the products of industrialization with which waste was associated, including immigrants and other residents of the tenement viewed as a national burden” (82). Mary’s story dramatized the biological undertones of social interactions and helped to advocate a form of “social being” that subordinated individual rights to public health and the social good. Responsible citizens learned that good citizenship entailed not the pursuit but the curtailment of personal liberties. This chapter also contains an illuminating discussion of the perceived threat to the home when infiltrated by servants regarded as ethnically and socioeconomically other, an incursion made possible, it was widely believed, by the maternal negligence of the ambitious, white “American Woman.” The story of “Typhoid Mary” ends successfully—from the perspective of epidemiology, at least—in Mallon’s ultimate incarceration and her eventual transformation into a “comprehensible and apprehensible, citizen” (112).

Wald next explores the virtually concurrent emergence of the discipline of sociology and the industrial city and how both influenced the outbreak narrative. Just as epidemiologists studied the spread of disease, sociologists studied the spread of culture, and the latter increasingly relied on the concept of contagion to explain culture’s spread. With their organic understanding of society, sociologists used the term contagion “to describe how an individual got caught up in the spirit and actions of a group, surrendering personal agency and even rational thought to the collective will” (131). Many of the first sociologists also studied immigrant populations, focusing especially on how strangers could—and could not—be safely assimilated or Americanized. The leisure class perceived “the other half” (so named by crusading journalist Jacob Riis) as potentially contaminating, both physically and morally. Many sociologists joined reformers in suggesting that such a threat could be defused via the gradual absorption of these immigrants into the social body, a process Wald calls “communicable Americanism.” The notion that Americanism might be contracted highlights the overlap between biological and sociological theories of contagion, a commingling that intensified in the wake of wide scale immigration and urbanization at the turn of the last century. Another key concept Wald explores in this chapter is “herd immunity,” that is, the ways in which enclaves develop a shared immunity to certain diseases and thereby potentially help to check the further spread of a given disease. Wald closes the chapter by analyzing literature for the way it, too, has carried and
transmitted culture, examining fictional representations of the ghetto for depictions of both the gradual Americanizing and the ineradicable foreignness of its inhabitants.

In Chapter 4, Wald examines the emergence of virology in the virulently anti-Communist 1950s. Wald demonstrates how scientific language about viruses was adopted during the Cold War to convey the threat of Communists, aliens, and other lurking, “sinister” foreign bodies threatening to contaminate and perhaps decimate the American way. The simultaneous appearance of virology and the onset of the Cold War lent Cold Warriors a convenient vocabulary and iconography with which to wage their increasingly aggressive war. The discovery that viruses are not parasitical—that they instead seem to appropriate the very life force of their hosts—made available images of “infiltrating” and “colonizing” that took on allegorical implications during the Cold War, lending salience to its particular horror stories. In this chapter Wald provides compelling readings of the various incarnations of “[Invasion of] The Body Snatchers”—both the original book and the two film adaptations—which together formed the basis of an exemplary “epidemiological horror story” (27). The “snatched” pod people played upon fears of the utter transformation of peoples and groups that both viruses and alleged Communist techniques like brainwashing could accomplish. The horrifying prospect of an incarnated virus along with the apocalyptic battle to save humanity from these alien invaders—the two enduring tropes of “The Body Snatchers”—continue to haunt more contemporary versions of the outbreak narrative.

Wald takes up the still-unfolding narrative of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Chapter 5. The story has the prerequisite index case, but it differs from the conventional outbreak narrative in that it refuses the obligatory containment or closure, marking its difference from more recent outbreaks of infectious diseases like SARS and avian flu. The unfinished HIV/AIDS outbreak narrative thus draws on conventions of previous narratives (wily invaders, epic battles waged within the body, and so on) but ultimately refuses to grant the obligatory happy ending. Frustration over the failure to contain the virus may have amplified the need to stigmatize its alleged perpetrator in the person of Gaetan Dugas, thereby restoring a measure of agency or intentionality to at least one aspect of the disease. Patient Zero became a necessary fiction: if he had not existed, he would have to have been invented, as indeed he was. As with the “Typhoid Mary” character, Dugas as “Patient Zero” is drained of his humanity, even as the virus itself becomes humanized, afforded a malicious, sociopathic agency. The
blame for the failure to contain this deadly disease is thus displaced, according to the outbreak narrative, from science and socio-economic inequities onto a pernicious virus understood to be incarnated by a pathologically irresponsible individual. As the only “non-Californian” in the charts of the initial spread of HIV in the United States, the ethnically ambiguous flight attendant Dugas becomes the “marginal man” described in earlier chapters, rootless and, hence, all the more liminal and potentially threatening. As Wald concludes, “AIDS is the disease of (too much) democracy; epidemiology exposes the danger of the political ideal as a desire that results in a racialized microbic hybridity” (241).

Wald deserves credit for not deploying and hence further reifying the conventions of the outbreak narrative she scrutinizes so closely. Criticizing Randy Shilts for making Dugas so unforgettable a dramatic figure in his And the Band Played On, she takes pains to avoid the same effect in her own discussions of both Dugas and Mary Mallon. One way she manages this is by emphasizing the instability of the outbreak narrative, its consistently shifting form. In short, Wald resists the seductions of “the” or “an” outbreak narrative by deconstructing its many versions to better elucidate their ideological work and to point the way to new stories and, one hopes, to better outcomes.

Ultimately, Wald is invested not only in describing the outbreak narrative but also in exposing its pernicious consequences. And ultimately, her criticism is not of scientists or of epidemiologists but of stories—in particular, stories that play up the horror, turn sufferers into mythic inhuman or sub-human creatures, encourage a too-sanguine faith in the power of science to eventually contain all threats, and, in the end, detrimentally affect global health. As her epilogue reveals, keeping the conventional outbreak narrative in circulation invariably thwarts the flow of useful, salutary information and, hence, inhibits swifter, more effective, and more compassionate means of containment and prevention. We need counternarratives that avoid unfairly stigmatizing individuals, behaviors, places, and populations and that illuminate the economic sources of epidemics; we need new stories that trade the language of susceptibility, horror, and danger for the language of human rights and social justice. Wald’s important and persuasive book makes it all the more possible for such stories now to be told.

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NOTES

2. Dimock and Wald, 706.

BIBLIOGRAPHY