

Anthropology Book Forum

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Contagious Narratives: Pandemics, Vaccines, and Zombies

ANDREA KITTA *Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*. 2019. Louisville, CO: Utah State University Press, pp 202 ISBN: 978-1-60732-926-8

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I was initially drawn to Andrea Kitta's book, *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*, because of my own research on families who choose not to vaccinate and the metaphors they use to describe bodily contamination through vaccines. A folklorist by training, Kitta argues that stories are our way of processing information, giving structure to our experiences and creating meaning from the world around us. Investigating narratives, she writes, offers insight into lay understandings of health and wellness, as stories in the form of popular rumors and legends easily find their way into private health-related beliefs and medical decision-making processes. Such "vernacular explanatory models" (vii) have very real consequences for individual's health behaviors, and Kitta explains that health professionals often lack knowledge of the complex sociocultural influences that drive those behaviors, especially where contagion and contamination are concerned.

Initially, I held a sliver of skepticism on how Kitta could blend ideas of biomedical contagion and contamination with narratives of zombie and vampire legends in one book. My skepticism was relieved immediately as Kitta reminded readers that the analysis of contagion and contamination are heavily slanted toward notions of biomedical health, adding that biomedical concepts of contagion and contamination have roots in social conditions, culture, and folklore narratives. She continues that for health professionals to adequately address issues in public disease management, such as successful responses to pandemics, they must have knowledge of contamination and contagion themes, rumors, and legends. Kitta delineates how these permeate

personal and community narratives, including how they influence people's beliefs and thoughts on viruses, bacteria, and germs. Kitta provides substantial evidence of society's collective beliefs and thoughts on contagion and contamination, which are exhibited through pop culture movies or books centering on zombie apocalypses or vampire relationships. From this foundation, Kitta successfully intertwines concepts and examples of both biomedical-based contagion and contamination in the same book as discussions of the contagious aspects of zombies and vampires, including contamination through deadly kisses, for instance.

The introduction covers a brief history of medical and scientific discourses surrounding "contagion" and "contamination," including the linguistic and metaphorical history of the terms as well. Kitta sees contagion and contamination narratives as a way for society to make sense of social interactions. Additionally, these narratives can address the complex issues around people's perceptions of contamination and contagion. She notes the importance of the outbreak and carrier narratives which represent "a crucial part of how we understand and process information about disease and spread" (5). During a pandemic outbreak, these narratives often include expressions of anxiety and fear, leading to an "outsider" labeling of the outbreak virus, often connected to foreigners bringing disease to North America. Here, Kitta suggests that folklorists and academics should use their positions of privilege to call out disease narratives that create division and blame.

Chapter Two flows seamlessly from the introduction as Kitta looks at disease narratives and stigmatization, both of which have deep colonial themes. She addresses the Western hemisphere's preoccupation with establishing the origin of disease, including an obsession with finding "patient zero," who often becomes a scapegoat in the blame-game of disease spread. She includes a comparative chart on current and historic patient zeros, which includes disease association, where they were from, their "dangerous" activity (how they contracted the disease), and their "otherness" (36-37). For example, the "dangerous activity" of the child from the Republic of Guinea infected with Ebola was that he played near bats, and his "otherness" was his residence in a rural area. She ends this chapter by discussing the Disneyland measles outbreak of 2015, arguing that the speculation surrounding patient zero's medical history (vaccinated or not?) and country of origin (American or "outsider") leads to distinct contagion narratives

depending on the presumed answers. Unsurprisingly, a vaccinated U.S. citizen makes for a more sympathetic patient zero in public narratives than an unvaccinated outsider.

Chapters Three and Four delve into the popular cultural phenomena of Slender Man, zombies, and vampires. These chapters make deep narrative and symbolic connections between violence against marginalized individuals and stories, legends, and folklore about monsters and hybrids. In Chapter Three, Kitta discusses the internet phenomenon of Slender Man, a tall, thin, and faceless “stalker” known to encourage self-harm, suicide, and revenge bullying. Slender Man is not a part of any traditional folklore, and first appeared in online forums. Chapter Four links monsters like zombies and vampires back to contagious disease narratives, but with elements of pop culture, deviancy, paternalistic power dynamics, and social expectations. Kitta stresses that contamination narratives are not only physical in nature, but also moral. Infection spread often includes ideologies of fear, hate, and anger which emerge prominently in times of stress, whether that stress comes from a global pandemic or social media bullying among teenagers. Specifically, Kitta connects the metaphors used in discussing monsters, such as vampires and zombies, to institutionalized medicine and fears about pandemics and how our perceptions and fears of a vampire bite as a supernatural and moral contagion connects to real viruses.

Chapter Five circles back to medical and vaccine contagion and contamination discourses about the Human Papilloma Vaccine (HPV). Here, Kitta notes how pro-vaccine discourse consists of underlying paternalistic rhetoric, including the use of polarization and shaming. Chapter Six, the title of which is also the title of the book, details numerous kissing motifs and the many aspects of a deadly kiss, including a kiss with poisoned lipstick and the legend of “The Peanut Butter Kiss,” which is a kiss between two people, one of whom has just eaten peanut butter, causing an allergic reaction in the other participant, tragically resulting in death. She also describes unintentional contamination when mothers kiss babies, passing on the herpes virus, sometimes with deadly results. Each narrative example in this chapter is connected through the idea of risky behavior or risky people, and that risk, like taboo, is highly charged both morally and politically.

Kitta’s conclusion is a thorough synopsis of the entire book, encapsulating the most important points of each chapter and section. Additionally, exhorting researchers and academics

to use research “to amplify the voices of the marginalized,” using their “privilege to push other voices to the forefront” (137). Lastly, a teaching companion at the end of the book includes a list of additional books and articles for those using *The Kiss of Death* in the classroom. Ultimately, *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore* is a quick and accessible read, weaving the worlds of health, medicine, and monsters into narratives, stories, and folklore. *Kiss of Death* speaks to how contamination and contagion topics create connection for some, while sowing division and blame for others.

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