



Introduction to the Project

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Introduction to the Project

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Why Contagion Now?

The problem of contagion—in which diseases are communicated among people and populations—extends across all times, places, and cultures. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the protean nature of contagion and its effects: illness, suffering, and death; strategies to address and reduce its impacts; and innovations in prevention and treatment. While focused on our current dilemma, the pandemic has also generated a wide recognition of the nature of contagion and the fundamental interactions between biology and society. As historians have long recognized, contagion and the disease it causes offer a unique chance to observe societies facing essential questions of science and medicine, culture and society, economy and governance.

Episodes of mass contagion, such as epidemics and pandemics, are typically marked by deep social disruption and crucial challenges to the status quo. As a result, the study of contagion presents the potential to explore and understand the history of changing social norms and explanatory frameworks surrounding illness. It illuminates diverse material conditions of life and deep demographic shifts. The design and implementation of social responses to outbreaks of disease reveal the priorities and biases of governments and societies. The processes of stigmatization, othering, blame, and determinations of risk and responsibility are profoundly embedded in the historical experience of contagion.

Living in this age of COVID-19 has made us deeply aware of the complexity of contagion and epidemics. It has challenged us to explore and explain essential aspects of these events. Further, contagion is a powerful reminder of historically specific constraints on human agency and autonomy. The documents and essays in this collection reflect the ubiquity of contagion and at the same time the importance of

context and contingency. Our authors demonstrate approaches to the historical understanding of contagion that encourage us to understand the past on its own terms, while still allowing the past to inform the present.

The History of Contagion in Harvard Library's Collections



Clockwise from left: Widener Library, ca. 1914, Harvard University Archives, W368186_1; Houghton Library, 2019, Mitch Nakaue; Countway Library, 2021, Jessica Murphy.

With support from the Arcadia Fund, Harvard launched the Open Collections Program with several online exhibitions, including “Contagion: Historical Views of Diseases and Epidemics,” which went live in 2008.[1] At the time, some of the most pressing conversations about contagions centered on the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic and the 2003 outbreak of a new respiratory disease known as SARS. The motivation for the project, however, was less directly to contextualize these diseases and more generally to harness the potential of digital scanning technologies to put rare and archival collections at Harvard into the hands of anyone with internet access. Indeed, the “Contagion” exhibition was one of several digital exhibits hosted by the Open Collections Program.

As historians, we recognize that we are living through a transformative moment in

the history of contagious disease. We are also acutely aware that historical documents do not speak for themselves. Amid this pandemic, we have returned to the materials scanned and digitized for the “Contagion” exhibition and have asked experts to contribute short, explanatory commentaries to accompany a select number of them. Our work as a scholarly community is to build on the initial, fundamental step of democratizing access to the holdings of Harvard’s libraries by providing the context essential to understand these artifacts from contagions past.

The commentaries we have assembled with *Harvard Library Bulletin* highlight specific objects in Harvard’s collections that we chose, together with our authors, to shed light on particular historical episodes, methodological approaches, and interpretive questions. The selection of texts and objects reflect our present understanding of essential themes for understanding the history of contagion. They do not constitute a collection of canonical texts. In this way, the project differs from many primary source readers assembled for students. Instead, we have invited scholars to select items that they can use as a window into the past contexts of contagion and to showcase various methodologies with which we can understand those contexts.

We offer the following collection of commentaries as a resource that pairs digital facsimiles of rare and archival artifacts from Harvard’s libraries and museums with careful, peer-reviewed analysis by experts in these fields. All primary source texts in languages other than English include translated passages. Authors explain the source they chose, situate it in its historical context, and draw on the interpretive methodologies that their disciplines offer. At its launch in July 2021, the authors of these commentaries use items in Harvard’s collections to open discussion on how the history of contagion is deeply intertwined with the histories of science, medicine, public health, religion, art, anthropology, race, gender, orientalism, natural history, and imperial and colonial projects around the globe.

At its core, *The History of Contagion in Harvard’s Libraries* is rooted in the collections of the libraries and museums at Harvard University. But collections are not neutral—they have their own histories. Authors of commentaries have explained their chosen text or object with attention, where possible, to how the item they focus on came to exist as part of Harvard’s collections. We must recognize that these objects had histories before they arrived at Harvard and that their use and interpretation today is shaped by their position in these collections.

On Presence and Absence

The collection of commentaries featured here reflects current trends and themes in the history of medicine. It is worth noting, however, that the subjects and themes

addressed in these commentaries diverge significantly from the content of the digital collection writ large. That is to say, that while our orientation as scholars today acknowledges the global, gendered, and racialized aspects of the history of disease, the collections at Harvard University were founded with a different set of assumptions about what materials were important to save. One of the contributions of our project is to highlight how the collection items of a past era may be probed in new ways, with diverse questions, and with attention to absence as well as presence. We will briefly outline here the range of content currently covered by the commentaries and highlight some areas that we hope can be an impetus for future research.

Where one starts and ends a story matters profoundly—periodization dictates not only what is included in our histories and what is left out, but also shifts our perspective on moments of climax and resolution. The libraries and museums at Harvard University have collected artifacts, books, and documents from thousands of years of human history. The earliest object included in the *Contagion* commentaries is a [Lamashtu amulet](#) from the second millennium BCE, during the Old or Middle Babylonian period in what is today Iraq. This inclusion from the holdings of the [Museum of the Ancient Near East](#) reminds us that disease has long been subject to human interpretation and the history of disease must be sought in objects and poetry as well as in writing that we traditionally recognize as medical.

From ancient Mesopotamia, the commentaries then jump to 15th-century Europe. This chronological leap reflects the fact that the vast majority of the digitized texts in the *Contagion* collection are scans of printed books from Europe. Many of these essays focus on the history of plague in early modern Europe.[2] Another set of commentaries engage with how doctors,[3] artists, and legal courts[4] understood the symptoms and effects of syphilis. But neither plague nor syphilis were contagions limited to Europe, and our histories must similarly reflect the global realities of these diseases. Commentaries on early modern Chinese treatments for syphilis[5] and on plague outbreaks in the Middle East, China, and India highlight the persistent challenge of these diseases and the many ways that societies across the globe have responded to them.[6]

Our focus on societal responses to contagious disease also opens up the important topic of public health. Essays in this collection address local, national, and international responses to the spread of contagious disease in locations from Mexico to Italy, and India to New Orleans.[7] The arsenal of public health measures was vast. The commentaries here engage with quarantines,[8] trade bans, emergency hospitals, vaccination campaigns, and coordinated local and international health measures to reveal the ways these now all-too-familiar approaches to managing contagion

contained multiple meanings in past contexts. We are also now vitally aware of how public health measures enacted by the state exist in tandem and in tension with local traditions. Many of these essays reveal the ways that religion has long been an important way of making sense of disease and even combatting it. While some of these commentaries reveal the ways that communities saw religious and medical health as mutually reinforcing, others present scenes of conflict, where states attempted to restrict religious pilgrimages and practices to halt the spread of disease. [9]

Several of the commentaries in this collection focus on documents that reveal how individuals and communities cared for each other during outbreaks of disease. Some of these tales of care take the form of treatments and therapeutics.[10] Others highlight the human labor of caring for the ill through cooking and “old wives’ medicine.”[11] Care for the sick has long broken down along lines of class and gender, and our authors’ commentaries also reveal how disease and the exigencies of care expose racial and colonial violence.[12]

All of the texts and objects featured in these commentaries date from before 1925. This is because one of the goals of this project is to pair scholarly analysis with fully digitized primary sources, and the international copyright cutoff year is currently 1925. This end date means that there are several conspicuous absences from the collection. At the forefront of our minds are new diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and SARS-CoV-2, which have had devastating impacts on the world during our own lifetimes. The period following 1925 was also defined by ongoing imperial pursuits and global warfare, followed by independence and decolonization in dozens of countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Australia, the South Pacific and the Caribbean. The lack of postcolonial sources in this collection is important to highlight, since sources from colonial rule often present the voice of the colonizer, not the communities indigenous to these regions. These critical missing voices present a pressing reminder to not replicate these absences as we document and archive the current pandemic. The history of contagion reminds us to pay careful attention to the essential inequalities and inequities generated by new and old contagions that we will inevitably face in the future.

The Future of Contagion at Harvard Library Bulletin

It has been our pleasure to have the opportunity to work with our colleagues at *Harvard Library Bulletin* to publish these articles about materials from Harvard’s collections.[13] We are delighted that our authors’ commentaries will be open access and freely available alongside the digital facsimiles of the primary sources. We hope

this pairing of sources and commentaries will be used to augment existing materials at the secondary and postsecondary level for courses in history, social studies, literature, public health, and in our own discipline of the history of science and medicine. You can find articles of interest from this collection by following the links in our introduction, [browsing or using the keyword search in the *HLB* interface](#), or exploring the mosaic of articles highlighted on the *Contagion* project landing page.

Writing history is an ongoing process. We would like to conclude this introduction with an invitation to readers and scholars: Please consider filling some of the absences in this collection by [contributing commentaries of your own for publication with this project in *Harvard Library Bulletin*](#). We intend for this set of resources to grow and continue to take shape in response to the changes in our fields of study and in the world around us.

We have felt the history of contagion daily in our present lives over the past 18 months. We look forward to someday reflecting on this pandemic from the safety of a less contagious time. In the meantime, we offer these commentaries on contagions past as insights for navigating an uncertain future.

Notes

[1] Harvard's Open Collections Program was launched in 2002 and decommissioned in 2018. These digitized materials are now maintained by Harvard Library as [CURIOSity Digital Collections](#).

[2] See Ori Ben-Shalom, "Geographies of Plague: Public Health Relations and Epidemiological Divides in the Mediterranean"; Erik A. Heinrichs, "Spiritual Solutions for Plague in a Late Medieval German Broadside"; Hannah Marcus, "Memories of Plague in Early Modern Italy"; Craig Martin, "Ghirolamo Manfredi's Plague Treatise: Individualized Cures and Prevention for the Masses and Elites"; and Alisha Rankin, "Plague, Poison, and Print: An Artisan's Viewpoint."

[3] See Alejandro Octavio Nodarse, "The Syphilitic Image: On 'The Metamorphosis of Syphilis' in Marco Aurelio Severino's *De recondita abscessuum natura*."

[4] See Olivia Weisser, "Concepts of Contagion in Gideon Harvey's *Great Venus Unmasked*."

[5] See He Bian, "*Tufuling*/ China Root: a Novel Cure for Syphilis and Mercurial Poisoning as Presented in Li Shizhen's *Systematic Materia Medica*."

[6] For plague outbreaks in the Middle East, see Edna Bonhomme, "Quarantine on the

Line” and Nathaniel Moses, “Networks of Information and Infection: Documenting the Plague in 18th-Century Aleppo”; for outbreaks in China, see Sarah Xia Yu, “Masks and Geopolitics in Richard Pearson Strong’s photos of the Manchurian Plague Epidemic, 1910–1911”; and for outbreaks in India, see Kiran Kumbhar, “The Minutes of the Indian Plague Commission.”

[7] For responses in Mexico, see Paul Ramírez, “Ruminant Vaccines: A Guide to Surviving Smallpox during a National Emergency” and Gabriela Soto Laveaga, “Health and Hygiene in Post-Revolutionary Mexico”; for responses in Italy, see Ben-Shalom, “Geographies of Plague,” Marcus, “Memories of Plague,” and Martin, “Girolamo Manfredi’s Plague Treatise”; for India, see Kumbhar, “The Minutes of the Indian Plague Commission” and J’Nese Williams, “Public Health, Authority, and the Colonial State: Cholera in India”; for New Orleans, see Kathryn Olivarius, “Death, Data, and Denial in Antebellum New Orleans.”

[8] For quarantines, see David A. Barnes, “Beating the Dead Horse of Contagionism: Enlightened Democracy vs. Medical ‘Superstition’ in the Early American Republic” and Bonhomme, “Quarantine on the Line”; for trade bans, see Ben-Shalom, “Geographies of Plague”; for emergency hospitals, see Spencer Weinreich, “John Howard’s Contagious Institutions”; and for vaccination campaigns, see Ramírez, “Ruminant Vaccines.”

[9] For example, see Heinrichs, “A Spiritual Solution”; Marcus, “Memories of Plague”; Ramírez, “Ruminant Vaccines”; Conevery Bolton Valencius, “John Winthrop’s *Lecture on Earthquakes* (1755) and ‘Pestilential Distempers’ Caused by Environmental Disruption”; John Z. Wee, “The Lamashtu Amulet: A Portrait of the Caregiver as a Demoneſs”; and Williams, “Public Health, Authority, and the Colonial State.”

[10] See Laura Elizabeth Clerx, “A Return to our Roots: Countering Epidemic Disease with Plant-Derived Medicine.”

[11] See Lisa Haushofer, “Sickroom Cookery and Disease.”

[12] See Bonhomme, “Quarantine on the Line”; Vanessa Northington Gamble, “‘Justice to Our Colour Demands It’: Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s Narrative of African Americans in Philadelphia’s 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic”; Emily Harrison, “The Usefulness of Saving Babies: A Reflection on Materials From a 1916 Campaign to Prevent Indigenous Infant Death”; David S. Jones, “Tuberculosis and the Problem of Race in American Anthropology”; and Meghan K. Roberts, “The Health of Enslaved Workers in Dazille’s *Observations*.”

[13] In particular, we would like to thank all our authors and peer reviewers, and the following individuals: Thomas Hyry, Kelly McCay, Jessica Murphy, and Scott Podolsky. A special thanks goes to Mitch Nakaue for her enthusiasm and expertise, and for

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