# INTRODUCTION:

## Early and Modern Biospheres, Politics, and the Rhetorics of Plague

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> I know positively . . . that each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it.
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> — Camus, *The Plague* (229)

"The plague of the age is upon us," rasps an anonymous phone caller to the shock-jock radio talk show host, Logan Burnhardt, early in the recent film *Dead Air* (2009), just as a deadly pathogen has been unleashed by terrorists in major urban centers across the U.S. In the chaos that ensues, Burnhardt and his coworkers at station KCBP, ostensibly in Los Angeles, witness events familiar in the cinematic subgenre now often called biohorror: the infected victims suffer, approach death or actually die, and then transform into zombie-like "crazies" or "maniacs" that attack their fellow citizens with a compulsive frenzy that spreads the virus further and produces widespread public upheaval. "American Cities Under Siege," reads one television news CNN-styled headline, as the number of victims careens into the thousands.

For all its morbid bravura, however, what distinguishes *Dead Air* is not its portrayal of rabid pandemic, which borrows heavily from earlier films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), or the striking similarity of its narrative scenario to that in *Pontypool* (2008);[1] instead, it is the way *Dead Air* makes the theme of plague explicit on two registers. First, it confirms the sense that viewers of biohorror movies, especially those involving zombies, may have had for some time—that the stories they tell have revived the logic of plague devastation, as Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz argue in this issue. Only a few months after the release of *Dead Air*, in fact, Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland* (2009) reconfirmed the zombie-plague connection when, early in the

story, the character named Columbus remarks that zombies are "the plague of the twenty-first century." Second, and more broadly, *Dead Air* and successors like *Zombieland* help identify a development during the past three decades in which scientific, cultural, and political representations of biological catastrophe, especially in the U.S. and Europe, have renewed and refurbished the notion of "plague," while often doing so in oblique or implicit fashion.

In these terms, it is striking to recall Michel Foucault's comment in 1976 that "the biological risks confronting the [human] species are perhaps greater, and certainly more serious, than before the birth of microbiology" (*History* 143). Nearly thirty-five years later, that sense of biological risk appears all the more palpable, since the more recent threat of diseases such as AIDS (once called the "gay plague"), Ebola, avian influenza, mad cow disease, and most recently, the H1N1 flu has profoundly changed our perception that the phenomenon of plague has merely been a thing of the past—whether as the specific pneumonic, septicemic, or bubonic versions caused by *Yersinia pestis*, or other similarly devastating diseases ranging from cholera to yellow fever to Spanish flu. When Foucault wrote those words in *The History of Sexuality*, the possibility of nuclear destruction would probably have seemed the most critical menace to human survival, as it had in the previous decades. While that prospect continues to loom, however, the biogenetic equivalent has lately been the more predominant possibility contemplated in scientific reports, the media, and popular culture. The difference between George Romero's landmark modernization of the zombie myth in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and more recent treatments in the past decade such as Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* offers a case in point: while Romero's corpses were vitalized by an unspecified form of radiation (often identified as nuclear) and seemed able to remain "alive" indefinitely, Boyle's zombies are created by biological pathogens that take their course by ultimately destroying the zombies themselves. As part of that paradigm shift, in the past ten years the number of fictional movies and television programs devoted to the theme of deadly epidemics has grown exponentially, including *Shawn of the Dead* (2004), *Re-Genesis* (2004-08), *Pathogen* (2006), *The Plague* (2006), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Blindness* (2008), *Doomsday* (2008), *Quarantine* (2008), *The Happening* (2008), *Fringe* (2008-10), and *The Crazies* (2010), to name only a few.

At the same time that fictional plague has seized the popular imagination, the traditionally defined biological plague has itself gained new visibility. The Centers for Disease Control currently maintains a substantial "Plague" website whose content has a tangible immediacy for its users. As a


Paul Fürst, "Doctor Schnabel von Rom" (plague doctor) (ca. 1656). Hulton Archive. © 2009 Getty Images.

reflection of the fact that the World Health Organization reports one to three thousand cases every year, the CDC provides extensive information regarding epidemiology, diagnosis, and the bacterium and its flea carrier (the *Xenopsylla cheopis*), as well as a "Fact Sheet," a "Plague Case Report Form," and a brochure titled "Protect Yourself from Plague."[2] In the wake of 9/11, moreover, the plague has also gained additional menace: the CDC includes a discussion of the parameters of a possible bioterrorist attack using *Y. pestis*.[3] According to some sources, such an attack may in fact have already been planned. National Terror Alert, an independent blogsite dedicated to U.S. homeland security issues, has summarized news reports from Algeria in January 2009 that over forty al-Qaida trainees died from exposure to plague in a regional camp, apparently from some deadly mishap.[4] While those reports remain unconfirmed, the link with terrorism—something we will return to in a moment—indicates how the biological plot of plague has thickened considerably. Drawing on her own investigation of weapons laboratories operating since the Cold War, for instance, freelance journalist Wendy Orent argues that plague is still very much a threat, since more virulent, antibiotic-resistant, and readily transmissible forms than those originally created by the Soviet Union and the U.S. continue to be developed, with the potential for producing an unprecedented catastrophe.

In the context of plague's renewal as medical, cultural, and political phenomenon, the working premise of this special issue on "Rhetorics of Plague"—and of the symposium at the University at Albany in 2009 on which it is based[5]—is not that plague has come full circle, but that it has instead tracked a historical spiral that provides an opportunity for exploring the connections and differences among "early" and "modern" trajectories or patterns. The need to explore such linkages can manifest itself in the most unexpected synchronicities, such as the one experienced by CNN reporter Henry Schuster in London in July 2005 while he was reporting on the several bombs that had exploded on buses and subway trains. As he was standing outside Scotland Yard and logging his report, Schuster found himself suddenly surrounded by police, who had converged on the area not because of another bomb threat, but because human remains had been found in what turned out to be an early modern plague pit. This coincidence prompted Schuster to comment twice on what he called "the plague of terrorism" affecting Londoners that summer, a turn of phrase that took on additional rhetorical implications when he claimed that the plague was a "welcome diversion" by contrast with the "many, new uncertainties" of the present, reflected by the

numerous questions he posed with only shorthand answers. In these terms, a putatively barbaric past had been surpassed by an even more barbaric current moment, even as the invocation of plague as biological threat provided a sense of direct palpability for an otherwise bewildering urban trauma. Tellingly, the logistics of terrorist activity, including bomb placement or cell locations, thereby diverted Schuster's attention from—or masked his apparent inattention to—the complexities of terrorism's sociological, political, and theological dimensions.

In what ways does Schuster's report reflect how plague's "return" currently functions in demarcating the past from the present or discriminating among "civilized" cultures? More broadly, how do recent rhetorical deployments of plague rely on or reconfigure previous representations of it as biological catastrophe or as metaphorical debacle? These kinds of questions prompt this issue's examination of the links among plague's various manifestations—whether premodern, early modern, modern, or postmodern. They also suggest that plague's renovation should be assessed by the degree to which older models or paradigms remain operative—perhaps clandestinely—in contemporary frameworks, just as new perspectives on topics including medicine, climate, philosophy, politics, and writing provide the occasion to revisit our interpretations of past responses to plague and its intricate ramifications. This transhistorical outlook is combined with the equally encompassing aim not only to draw on diverse disciplines for such an endeavor, but also to foster new encounters among fields of expertise or academic specializations that otherwise often remain relatively insular, especially in the humanities and sciences. In this sense, we propose adding a rigorous historical dimension to the project announced by Lennard Davis and David Morris, who have recently coined the term *biocultures* with the goal of building on established cross-disciplinary fields such as bioethics, medical humanities, and medical anthropology in order to formulate new, hybridized perspectives by which to account better for the intricate entanglement of biology and other spheres in the twenty-first century.[6]

The focus of this issue on the "rhetorics" of plague highlights the ways that biological pandemic has been conceptually organized, ethically ordered, or sociopolitically oriented by the discourses that represented it during historical periods ranging from the Middles Ages to the eighteenth century, with an eye toward twenty-first-century contexts. But rather than assuming that biological "fact" comes objectively before such articulations, the contributors to this issue make their arguments in the vein of Davis and

Morris's claim that "diseases are disease entities" (417)—that in the specific terms of the plague, it has been a phenomenon mutually constituted by scientific analysis and sociocultural, theological, or political rendering. These contributors thus underscore the crossing or hybridization of discourses, such as the ways in which early views of pandemic, in the absence of a theory of germ contagion, could be linked to models of ecological or environmental dysfunction, or the manner in which disease of the natural body could allegorize the maladies of the body politic. Furthermore, in addition to accounting for the interrelated scientific, literary, or philosophical conventions invoked by such discourses, several essayists in this volume consider the implications of representing plague outside of European or Judeo-Christian contexts. While such discourses may have originated predominantly in the metropolitan centers of Europe, they were substantially transformed when applied in non-Western or colonial contexts, and furthermore, they had their counterpart in discourses that emerged from non-European sources such as North Africa, where medieval Muslim authorities, for instance, grappled with the challenge of pandemic in both Africa and Andalusia.

Since most of the essays in this issue, with the exception of that by Russell Hopley, focus on historical moments that come after the Middle Ages, it will be useful at this point to provide a brief overview of the plague's development during that crucial period before turning to survey the essays' specific arguments. In the context of this special issue, we also stress here the destabilizing and terrorizing effects of the plague's impact, as well as the diverse rhetorical responses that both countered and redeployed them.

In the Western cultural imagination, the term *plague* inevitably conjures up the horrors of the so-called Black Death of the fourteenth century, perhaps the most spectacular biological disaster in human history. As with earlier plagues, contemporaries invoked apocalyptic visions of utter annihilation, and with good reason: Europe suffered a thirty-percent mortality rate; some places, such as England and Florence, lost half of their populations in a matter of months. Along with the "scientific" explanations for the pandemic—such as earthquakes, an unfortunate alignment of planets, or contaminated air—were the more prominent metaphysical explanations: plague was caused by God's wrath or Satan's vengeance. If the epidemic was indeed a scourge of God, it was not clear exactly who was being punished. While monarchs and clergy mostly blamed the wayward masses for the onset of

plague, others pointed the finger at corrupt rulers, secular as well as ecclesiastical. Some found fault at every level of society.[7]

Whatever the pathogen[8] or exact rate of mortality, there is no denying that the pestilence afflicting Europe in the mid-fourteenth century had profound effects on the social, political, and cultural landscape.[9] The fall-off in population precipitated economic upheaval that led, among other things, to increased autonomy and better living conditions and wages for laborers, and ultimately the breakdown of an already compromised feudal system and an expanding middle class. Marriage, child-bearing, inheritance, and land-holding patterns were also necessarily affected, potentially improving conditions for women as well.[10] The Church suffered tremendous losses among both lay and monastic religious, which also had wide-ranging cultural effects. The necessary influx of younger, less-educated members of the clergy may have led to the introduction of irregular practices and heterodox beliefs, creating instability within the Church and almost certainly eroding the perception and effectiveness of ecclesiastical authority. Mass graves and the inability of priests to offer the sacrament of last rites to all, along with the grim reality that, although the nobility was not immune from plague, commoners were far more likely to succumb, must have forced a lasting crisis of faith among commoners and put into question the intercessory powers of the priest. Indeed, in parishes bereft of a priest altogether, parishioners were enjoined to confess one another in the final moments, lest they remain unshriven.

The terror must have been as caustic as the plague itself, as people had to reckon with both spiritual and physical mortality. Panicked, people abandoned family and friends in hopes of survival. Fear of God's wrath moved clergy to heighten spiritual devotion among their parishioners and to rein in wayward souls. Edward III seems even to have considered it a matter of state when, in a letter to the bishops (1349; Horrox 117–18, Johnson 894–95), he blames the evil in the hearts of his people and calls for widespread devotions among the clergy and laity to appease an angry God. That general sentiment was reiterated widely in sermons throughout Europe and England.

Desperate to cast blame elsewhere, Christian communities, especially in Germany and France, found in Jews and other fringe groups ready scapegoats, imagining an international bioterrorist movement spawned by Satan himself. While such accusations were not new by any means, the rhetoric of fear reinvigorated a latent anti-Semitism and xenophobia. In regions where justice ostensibly ruled, accusations of well-poisoning or other terrorist acts were followed by torture, confession, and execution. In other regions, where

mob mentality came to dominate, Jews were simply massacred on the basis of inflammatory rhetoric. In such circumstances, even monarchs could not guarantee the safety of their Jewish subjects, and mandates of ecclesiastical prelates were largely disregarded. The indigent were also suspected of transmitting pestilence on behalf of some foreign agent as an act of terrorism. Such fears, given credence by ecclesiastical and secular officials as well as by men of social rank, festered among the populace into a rampant xenophobia, which strengthened perceptions of cultural identity and sharpened the contours of emergent nationalities.

Fear was also manipulated to help maintain the status quo and shore up traditional hierarchies of class and gender. Out of their own anxieties about the decaying social fabric, clergy would exploit the fear of their parishioners for decades to come, threatening a return of the great mortality if they did not mend their ways. While the rhetoric of divine retribution may have stemmed from genuine piety, such sermons also served to reassert the authority of the church as well as to keep the newly empowered masses in check. Complementing national and regional legislation regulating wages and restricting consumption according to class, sermons reiterated the failings of the commoners, especially deriding them for laziness and greed, apparently demonstrated by their demands for increased wages, reasonable work load, and better living conditions. These views are recapitulated in William Langland's dream vision, *Piers Ploughman*, where commoners are explicitly chastised by the narrator for their slothfulness and greed, and cautioned against a return of the pestilence. Chaucer, Langland's contemporary, makes the same connection implicitly when his Pardoner sets his lesson on avarice in a plague-ridden village where the commoners are clearly given to licentious, riotous behavior and the worst of the lot ultimately fall prey to death—physical as well as spiritual—through their greed. By the end of the fourteenth century, therefore, these views had become commonplace in the cultural imagination. Women, too, were targeted for failing to restrain themselves, no doubt in response to changing conditions. Feminist historians have noted that the increase in female autonomy produced by the demographic and economic shift was attenuated by an intractable patriarchal ideology.[11] Katherine French shows how, though women benefited socially and economically, regulation of women's speech along with a backlash of antifeminist rhetoric in contemporary literature and sermons prevented any lasting improvement in the condition for women (10–13).

The Black Death connects readily, if metaphorically, with current anxieties about global pandemic, terrorism, political abuses and indiscretions, unchecked scientific advances, and rampant immorality. Ingmar Bergman's landmark film, *The Seventh Seal* (1957), conjures up the Black Death in the apocalyptic milieu of Cold War Europe, with its threat of nuclear catastrophe in the wake of the horrors of World War II. A more recent film, *Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (Vincent Ward, 1988), connects the fear of the Black Death to the anxiety of nuclear holocaust, AIDS, and loss of faith at the end of the twentieth century. In 2010, a new film simply called *Black Death* also poses a crisis of faith, this time one that intensifies the horrors of the plague by invoking apprehensions about witchcraft. In these cases and others, the Black Death serves as a useful metaphor in part because its terror has been imprinted indelibly on our cultural memory: the fear of a return of the plague is real. As recently as 1994 in India, where the most recent substantial outbreaks of plague have occurred, D. Banerji, writing for the *Economic and Political Weekly*, worried about a literal repeat of the medieval Black Death due to a breakdown in public health services and a surprising lack of concern on the part of health officials. Such fears are not restricted to areas where plague still poses a real medical challenge, however; as the CDC website notes, "So imprinted in our minds is the fear of plague that, even now, entering into the 21st century, a suspected plague outbreak can incite mass panic and bring much of the world's economy to a temporary standstill" ("CDC Plague Home Page").

Against this historical backdrop, the six essays in this issue track a variety of theoretical, historical, and scientific trajectories by which the "bio" in plague's biology has converged with other terms, including religion, politics, philosophy, climatology, and economics. Two essays, those by Ernest Gilman and by Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz, cover one of the longest historical arcs from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century: Gilman analyzes the relation of plague to early and postmodern constructs of human subjectivity, with an eye toward evaluating the political valences of biomedicine; Boluk and Lenz draw on a Marxist framework in order to consider how plague becomes variously capitalized from Jonson's drama to Defoe's *Journal* to the cinematic zombie as the most recent economic figure of plague. In his contribution, Russell Hopley covers an equally extensive time span by exploring the juridical response to plague in the Muslim communities of the western Mediterranean mainly from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries,

including the late introduction of medical analyses to that tradition. Drawing on the philosophical arguments of Roberto Esposito and Walter Benjamin, Graham Hammill examines how the plague's biopolitics, particularly with respect to quarantine and political reform, emerges in the writings of Thomas Dekker, George Wither, and Michael Drayton during the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I. An interest in animal studies launches Lucinda Cole's discussion of the multiple valences of "pestilence" during the seventeenth century, when the rat posed a multivalent figure of contagion formed by overlapping theological, ecological, and biological registers. And Robert Markley considers the ways that a bioclimatological perspective on British colonialism in Bombay during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries can illuminate the plethora of diseases that frequently decimated Britons' economic and political ambitions on the Asian continent.

While these essayists offer divergent accounts of plague's morphology and history, they also suggest several areas of common focus and agreement. They share, for instance, an interest in the ways that plague strains the outer limits of the human subject, both philosophically and politically; the ways that it can both conjoin and alienate religious and secular perspectives; the ways that plague fosters a kind of redistributive logic in communicative media that address it; and the ways that it can propel scientific analysis to collude with, as well as to deviate from, structures of sociopolitical control. With that in mind, for the purposes of efficiency we highlight three main areas of concurring argument among these essays that merit particular examination:

*Plague constitutes a disruption in apparently continuous temporal experience or historicity.* As Graham Hammill puts it, plague is "the other side of the miracle"; whether or not it is conceived as a form of divine agency, it unleashes a dramatic intervention in time that seems to come from outside the framework of the everyday and that produces a deviation in causality. Hence the consternation of the jurists in medieval Andalusia, who, by Hopley's account, found it difficult to reconcile an orthodox interpretation of plague's occurrence, which denied biological contagion, with an emerging scientific epidemiology. Or the unresolved double-gesture by the poet Drayton, as described by Hammill, whose allegorical locust, apparently an agent of moral retribution, both destroys and ensures the continuous prosperity of the early-seventeenth-century political status quo it attacks. This sort of plague(d) logic applies equally to historiographic representations of science's progressive "rise": as both Markley and Gilman note, plague has the ability to suspend, if not derail, our narratives of modern knowledge's

steady ascent. The flip side of that scenario is explored by Boluk and Lenz, who describe a recurrent scenario, especially regarding the zombie, in which plague's traumatic devastation becomes strangely normalized—with no apparent substantial change in prior economic or class relations.

*Plague constitutes an interruption, distension, or reordering of the discourses that respond to it*. This phenomenon can take a number of manifestations. As Hopley demonstrates, the disturbance could be terminological, in which the concept of "contagion" often became ambiguously caught among theological and biological registers with the emergence of newer medical perspectives. Even more dramatic is the use of the term *pestilence* during the seventeenth century, when, as Cole demonstrates, it could shuttle among supernatural, agricultural, climatological, and biological meanings, thereby producing an overdetermined signifying web that associated plague with rats, miasma, blight, and witchcraft. On a larger scale, plague can induce a kind of recombinant logic in various modes, genres, or media, whose reorganization can aim to redress previous gaps in explanatory power or incorporate newer forms of knowledge or perspective. Thus in medieval Andalusia, for instance, as Hopley describes things, one medical author ends up composing a hybrid text that incorporates both juristic wisdom and scientific analysis regarding the plague, in tension with the orthodox texts. Seventeenth-century poets such as Drayton, in Hammill's discussion, produced contorted versions of pastoral that responded to the plague by attempting to accommodate political diagnosis, utopian prognostics, and epic-scaled theological excursus. During the eighteenth century, Markley points out, Bombay's plague-ridden shores drastically distorted the scientific discussion of what should have been an ostensibly universal explanation for the relations among geographic location, climate, and disease across the globe. And by linking earlier generic representations of plague to twentieth- and twenty-first-century films about zombification, Boluk and Lenz track not only the differences produced by print versus cinema, but also the reshuffling and hybridization that results from the recent impingement of digital on analog media.

This discursive variability has its counterpart in plague's own remarkable semantic elasticity during the past several centuries. With etymological roots in the Latin *plagare* for "to strike" or "to wound," as well as links to the Middle Dutch *plāgen* or *plāghen* for "to torture" or "to afflict," the term *plague* has been disposed to being used in a plethora of contexts, and it has also spawned a striking array of adjectival, adverbial, and noun forms, including

*plaguey*, *plaguesome*, *plagueless*, *plagueful*, *plaguer*, and *plagueship*. When Gilman therefore draws on the recent portmanteau word *bioterror*, while also employing terms such as *biodigital* and *cyberepidemiology*, his formulations follow a plaguelike linguistic logic. Something more, however, is also at stake in plague's apparently chameleon ability to shift suddenly from very literal to metaphoric registers and back again. In the epigraph we quote from Camus's *The Plague*, when the character Jean Tarrou declares that "each of us has the plague within him," he is referring not to the pneumonic plague decimating 1940s Oran, Algeria, in the story, but to an inherent human inclination to tolerate, and even indirectly suborn, the death of countless other human beings caused by any agency. That kind of all-encompassing generalization, we learn from Dr. Bernard Rieux, another character in the story, is also related to one of plague's effects, in which the overwhelming force of its impact induces a sense of unreality or abstraction. As Rieux puts it, "an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities. Still when abstraction sets to killing you, you've got to get busy with it" (81).[12]

More recently, getting busy with plague has similarly exhibited the pattern of moving among stark biological specifics and grander sociopolitical elaborations. Henry Schuster's reporting on the 2005 bombings in London is one example. Another is the comment by then-President of Russia Vladimir Putin in the wake of the September 11 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., when he remarked that terrorism was the "plague of the twenty-first century."[13] As we have also suggested, however, linking plague to political terror is a gesture with a long history, one that began at least as early as the Middle Ages. That association, moreover, took on new, more recognizably modern overtones during the eighteenth century, when the term *terror* became the byword of political or nationalist commentary—a scenario we can sketch briefly here. In 1790, when Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he drew on the belief, as Foucault expresses it, that by the late eighteenth century, the era of "starvation and plague had come to a close," so that "death was ceasing to torment life so directly" (*History* 142). In that context, Burke not only mounted a caustic attack on the rationale and implementation of the French Revolution, but also deployed a dense array of biological metaphors—drawn from Burke's substantial expertise in eighteenth-century medical science—that aimed to give biomedical weight to his condemnation of French politics.[14] As Burke put it, the reformism in France was "such a plague, that the precautions of the most severe quarantine ought to be established against it" (185). This claim was amplified

further by numerous comparisons of the French political state to equally debilitating disease or ill health. Burke described, for instance, France's "distempered state" (116); the "confusion, like a palsy, [that] has attacked the fountain of life itself" (137); the "infectious stuff" of revolutionary rhetoric (187); and the ravages of "epidemical fanaticism" (262). Burke's diatribe came several months before what officially came to be called "The Terror," but his vivid descriptions of the horrifying developments in France, bolstered by omnipresent medical metaphors, soon came to seem prescient and authoritative to his British readers. In effect, Burke inaugurated the modern conservative gambit that intimately tied the language of deadly disease and pandemic to antirevolutionary fervor.

The notable excesses of Burke's rhetoric in the *Reflections*, its repeated biomedical flourishes and tonal effusiveness, offer a case in point that, like the biological volatility they describe, discourses about plague can undergo their own kind of exponential proliferation, producing a potential plague of rhetorics. In this respect, the plague follows the logic Paula Treichler describes applying to AIDS, in which deadly medical crisis provokes "an epidemic of signification" by forming "a nexus where multiple meanings, stories, and discourses intersect and overlap, reinforce, and subvert each other" (19).[15] What Linda Singer also calls the inevitable "proliferative surplus" (121) in the discourses and techniques aimed toward regulating the body provides a similar perspective for our stress on the plural of plague's rhetorics, rather than on the singular.[16] In this context, Kenneth Burke's concept of rhetoric as a mode both set against and entangled by conflict—whether material, social, or political—offers a helpful framework for understanding how the stakes of plague involve urgency and discord, as well as the potential for solidarity. As he puts it, rhetoric is the act of "confront[ing] the implications of division" (22), since it aims to "lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, . . . the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, . . . the Wars of Nerves, the War" (23). The advent of plague brings all the more duress to this conflictual scenario.

*Plague provokes stress and sometimes rupture in the terms by which the social or political relates to biology.* In Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950), apparently the first fictional cinematic treatment of biological plague on American soil, we find telling implications for earlier historical moments when "modern" political or governmental rule has been invoked in response to plague, including its associations with a bygone or "medieval" past. In Kazan's film, when pneumonic plague poses a threat in New Orleans, U.S.

Public Health Service officer Dr. Clinton Reed (played by Richard Widmark) finds it necessary to press city officials relentlessly to take decisive action. Midway through the story, one official responds to Reed's urging with the remark that "the problem's right here in our own community." In the film's most arresting speech, Reed responds: "Community? What community? Do you think you're living in the Middle Ages? . . . Anybody that leaves here can be in any city in the country within ten hours. I can leave here today and be in Africa tomorrow. And whatever disease I have goes right with me. . . . think [about that] when you're talking about community—we're all in a community, the same one."

Reed's speech proves decisive in spurring bureaucratic action, but it does so by also registering unresolved ambivalences regarding infection, rhetoric, and sociopolitical boundaries that are pertinent to this special issue. While Reed invokes an enlightened sense of global responsibility, his description of "the same" community reflects a post-World War II American anxiety regarding unclear civic and political categories. And while he cites the possibility of Americans infecting Africa, the film at large is more fixated on "outside" threats to American social and biological integrity, especially as represented by the original plague carrier's ambiguous ethnic identity— possibly Armenian, Czech, or Slavic—as well as that of his criminal cohorts.[17] Taken together, these provoking ethnic and national valences become rhetorically organized around an invocation of the Middle Ages, whose supposedly clear demarcations of local community are the marker of an outdated past, while they are also the locus for tangible nostalgia in response to the degradations of modernity.

Several of the essays in this issue similarly explore how plague poses an extraordinary challenge in which an apparently defunct, but deadly, past returns to the present in need of a more "modern" sociopolitical solution. In Markley's analysis of early modern Bombay, for instance, the British suffer an immense blow to their self-image as civilizing force in their repeated failure to regulate traditional native practices of fertilization or cultivation that supposedly produced infectious miasmas. For Hammill, the problem for several early-seventeenth-century English authors was how to imagine new forms of neighborly relations and national self-definition in the face of state-enforced plague quarantine. Hammill's argument, like those by Gilman and Boluk and Lenz, draws explicitly on the discussion of biopolitics by Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Esposito, among others. With that in mind, we want to highlight three areas where these essayists indicate that the recurring

significance of plague offers new perspectives on—and prospective reformulations of—current biopolitical premises.

The first area is the phenomenon of plague itself, since, as we note above and Gilman also points out, Foucault bases his analysis of the rise of biopower during the late eighteenth century on the assumption that the history of biological catastrophe had by then "come to a close." It is for this reason that Foucault claims that plague was confronted by earlier modes of power such as disciplinarity, while subsequent, and significantly less lethal, threats such as smallpox were managed by newer "measures of security" (*Security* 10). Later devastating outbreaks such as the Spanish flu in 1918 notwithstanding, Agamben and Esposito have followed suit, and in fact, Agamben's revaluing the biopolitical importance of sovereignty, contra Foucault, as well as Esposito's analysis of the logic of political immunization, have, if anything, made political power all the more daunting in its manipulation or control of biological life. For the contributors to this issue, Agamben's claim that "the 'body' . . . is always already caught in a deployment of power" (187) is a point well taken, but both his and Esposito's aim to track biopolitics to its catastrophic culmination in Nazi Germany has led them to stress the deadly mechanisms within sovereignty or governmentality itself, which result in what Esposito calls a self-induced "thanatopolitics" (110, 116–17). Acknowledging the recurrent historical impact of plague in the broadest sense would, by contrast, place such devastating genocidal events within a larger historical context, a context in which, for all its imposing calculations, the edifice of Western politics has also been periodically and profoundly shaken or disordered by the predations of biological pandemic. For Gilman, who is Agamben's and Esposito's strongest critic, this means remembering that "the root of politics . . . is sunk deep in the 'simple fact of living' in our mammalian bodies." For Boluk and Lenz, it means thinking "past the apocalypse" in order to understand how biocataclysm can unsettle an economic and political order into which it is also absorbed. In different ways, both perspectives redeploy one of Foucault's own observations that in the emergence of modern biopower during the eighteenth century, "It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them" (*History* 143).

The second area of importance regards secularization, since here a longer and more detailed historical perspective than that usually taken by biopolitical analysts indicates that the direct contribution of religion and theology to political responses to pandemic cannot be discounted. By Foucault's

account, sixteenth-century concepts of political rule that were based on the Christian model of "pastoral care" were completely abandoned in the advent of seventeenth-century thinking about biopower, particularly in the newer formulations of the "*raison d'État*" (*Security* 255–78). Agamben, by contrast, argues for a powerful link between religious and secular paradigms, particularly since he draws on Carl Schmitt's thesis that "all significant modern concepts of the state are secularized theological concepts" (36).[18] In both scenarios, wherever the exact moment of modernity may be pinpointed, biopolitics emerges as a markedly secular or secularized enterprise. For Hammill, by contrast, Drayton's poetry offers a rigorously "politico-theological version of community," in which "political prophecy" applies the Old Testament's Pentateuch to England's political scene in the gambit to influence James I's or Charles I's policies. In earlier, non-Christian contexts, Hopley's analysis also indicates that the transition from pre- to early modern approaches to plague was profoundly shaped by Muslim jurists aiming to combine theological exegesis with communal and political prescription. To these descriptions we could also add Markley's exploration of how theocentric conceptions of natural phenomena contributed to Britain's colonial ambitions in India. Taken together, these arguments suggest that the relative role that both theological and secular forces played in biopolitics' early history needs substantial revaluation.

Finally, we come to the difficult question of whether biopolitics—conceived as the mutual articulation of biology or "life" and politics—inevitably reinforces what Foucault called "biopower," the ability of political authority to consolidate and extend its normative control over biological forces. Foucault seems to have offered an ambiguous answer to this question, while in the main, Agamben has pursued what Gilman and others call a "negative" interpretation in which sovereignty can always arbitrarily choose to reduce *bios*, the life of communal or sociopolitical relations, to *zōē*, the "simple fact of living" or "bare life."[19] The responses of this issue's contributors to this problematic are varied, although they generally stress more positive trajectories. In many ways, Boluk and Lenz's account of zombification-as-plague closely resembles Agamben's description of the Roman devotee who, in prefiguring the condition of modern bare life, "exists on a threshold that belongs neither to the world of the living nor to the world of the dead: he is a living dead man" (99). Their larger argument, however, informed by Marxist warrants, highlights the ways that plague in its various forms, including the zombie, traces a history of the economic and political status quo working

against itself in revealing ways. For Hammill, a thorough understanding of early-seventeenth-century biopolitics in England requires accounting for writers such as Thomas Dekker and George Wither, who vigorously opposed national plague policy by arguing for Christian communal relations that were decidedly against the quarantine. And in accounting for plague's re-emergent power in the twenty-first century, Gilman calls for imagining a scenario in which the devastating political impact of biological pandemic is matched by "life's power of reinvigoration," which can "exceed that of any regime (so far) to exterminate it." In this claim, Gilman, like his co-contributors, may not exactly endorse Esposito's affirmation of "a politics that is no longer over life but *of* life" (11), but also like them, he underscores the other side of biopower's complete ascendancy.

## NOTES

1. Both *Dead Air* and *Pontypool* are centrally structured around the impact of a brash radio talk show host during a destructive epidemic, while the second film benefits from Tony Burgess's perceptive adaptation of the screenplay from his highly praised novel, *Pontypool Changes Everything* (1998). *Pontypool* had its world premiere in September 2008; *Dead Air* in May 2009.

2. See CDC, "CDC Plague Home Page."

3. See CDC, "Emergency Preparedness and Response."

4. See "Bio-terrorism—Al-Qaida and the Plague." The National Terror Alert website drew on a news report by Alex West in the British tabloid *The Sun* on Jan. 19, 2009; in the *Washington Times*, Eli Lake reported on the same day that "unconventional weapons" had gone awry, but quoted an anonymous U.S. intelligence official that it was unclear whether they were biological or chemical. The Algerian newspaper *Echorouk*, identified by some publications as the original source of the report about the plague mishap, reported on Jan. 25, 2009, that the story had been a rumor spread by "dissidents" from within the al-Qaida ranks in order to spread panic (see "Diseases Kill Terrorists"). The most balanced assessment of the incident, including the media's responses, seems to be that by Pita et al.

5. The conference, titled "Rhetorics of Plague: Early / Modern Trajectories of Biohazard," was held Feb. 26–27, 2009, at the University at Albany, SUNY. Further information about the conference's rationale and presentations can be found at: <http://www.albany.edu/english/plague.shtml>.

6. See Davis and Morris, "Biocultures Manifesto," as well as Morris, *Illness and Culture*, 70–77, and Davis, "From Culture to Biocultures."

7. This necessarily abbreviated characterization is based on contemporary accounts, for which we are indebted to Horrox.

8. Current scholarship has questioned whether the pathogen was in fact *Yersinia pestis* (*Y. pestis*), since medieval accounts do not fully accord with what we now know about that disease and its progression. Shrewsbury first proposed a combination of

disease vectors, rather than a single pathogen. Twigg offered the first argument against *Y. pestis* altogether, in which he suggested anthrax and offered some archaeological evidence to support that hypothesis. Scott and Duncan provide a close analysis of the mounting evidence against *Y. pestis*. Other suggestions have been typhus and Ebola. Still others posit a mutant form of *Y. pestis*. A combination of pathogens is not beyond the realm of possibility and indeed may be most likely, given the disparate evidence. Although the argument against *Y. pestis* is gaining ground, studies have not been conclusive and historians still seem to regard *Y. pestis* as the main perpetrator, if in combined, mutated forms. Symptoms described in the chronicles, especially the buboes, are consistent with plague and cannot therefore be ruled out, even if they are given less weight than traditionally. Moreover, traces of *Y. pestis* DNA found in medieval plague cemeteries in Provence support the view that plague was a factor in the Black Death, although those findings, too, have been contested. The debate may have reached its conclusion in the most recent study, conducted by an international team of anthropological, archaeological, and medical researchers (published October 7, 2010), which confirms that *Y. pestis* caused the Black Death. Moreover, the study elucidates the etiology of the Black Death and outbreaks of plague in the subsequent centuries, while providing a paradigm enabling historical reconstruction of the routes of infection; see Haensch. Theilmann and Cate provide a useful survey of the current debate in their article "A Plague of Plagues."

9. Horrox has helpfully gathered and translated relevant source documents from all over Europe in *The Black Death*. For a cogent discussion of the effects of the Black Death and its historiography, see Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death." Rubin provides a lucid, condensed overview in Chapter Two of *The Hollow Crown*, "Plague and War, 1330–1377." For longer surveys, see Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346–1353*, and Ziegler, *The Black Death*, which continues to be useful despite its original publication date of 1969. Herlihy's *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* attributes greater impact to the plague than most historians are willing to allow, but is nonetheless a provocative study that ought to prompt further debate. For more focused studies on economic and demographic shifts, see Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*; Bridbury; and Mate, "Agrarian Economy after the Black Death." Recent studies targeting other aspects of culture and society, including piety, pastoral care, and law include Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed* and *The Cult of Remembrance*, Dohar, and Palmer.

10. While some scholars have interpreted the situation as something of a "golden age" for women, Mate has shown that, at least for the region she studied, the condition of women changed, though not necessarily for the better. While women were able to break out of traditional gender roles and participate in men's labor, they often did so in addition to their traditional tasks and were still paid less than their male counterparts for the same work (*Daughters, Wives and Widows*). See also Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women" and "Confronting Continuity"; and French, *The Good Women of the Parish*.

11. See especially Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women" and "Confronting Continuity"; and Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*.

12. See Treichler (4) for a brief discussion of this quotation.

13. See, e.g., Bigg. Putin was to repeat this oft-reported comment several times after 2001, including in 2004, after a suicide bombing in the Moscow subway system.

14. For accounts of the links between Burke's familiarity with contemporaneous medical science and his aesthetics or politics, see Furniss, 24–34, 122–23; Ryan; and Sarafianos, "Contractility" and "Pain, Labor."

15. Treichler also calls this pattern a "semantic epidemic" (1). She specifically links AIDS to the history of plague—including the popular claim that AIDS originated with plague being released during the tour of the King Tut exhibit in the U.S. during 1976—in pp. 2, 4, 13, 19, 316, 320. Tomso tracks similar discursive instability regarding AIDS in order to foster "biopolitical resistance to state power" (267).

16. See also Butler's gloss on Singer's argument that "regulatory apparatuses to produce and control pleasures, bodies, and sexualities risk failure . . . precisely because hegemonic power tends to produce an *excess of value* that it cannot fully control" (7).

17. This scenario matches Kenneth Burke's description of rhetoric's intervention: "put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric" (25). A recent special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, titled *The Rhetoric of Safety*, updates many of the themes in Kazan's film in the context of twenty-first-century American concerns with border control, public health, and homeland security. See especially the essays by Houston, Squier, and Willis.

18. In his work on biopolitics translated into English, Esposito has had relatively little to say about secularization, despite his aim of correcting what he describes as an analytical impasse in Foucault's work that is related to "indecision concerning the underlying meaning of secularization" (42). Esposito's periodic remarks nonetheless suggest that he sees the advent of modern biopolitics marked by several secularizing developments, including the displacement of theological explanations for political heritage by biological descriptions of heredity (121); and the transformation of an eucharistic model for citizens' incorporation into the body politic into a secular version of that process (165). See also pp. 51, 149.

19. See Agamben 1. Regarding Agamben's "negative" biopolitics, see Campbell, viii–ix, xxi–xxiii. See also, however, Agamben's call at the end of *Homo Sacer* for imagining a more promising "form-of-life" that could bypass the destructive political dynamics constituted by bare life (188).

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