

• Book Reviews •

An Epidemic of Rumors: How Stories Shape Our Perception of Disease. By Jon D. Lee. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2014. pp. xi + 219, acknowledgments, appendix, references, index).

Jon D. Lee's *An Epidemic of Rumors: How Stories Shape Our Perception of Disease* is the latest contribution to the growing field of folklore and public health/medicine. Previous scholarship in this field, such as Diane Goldstein's *Once Upon A Virus*, has pointed towards ways in which folklore studies can be used in conjunction with public health policies to work toward a better understanding of vernacular perceptions of disease and health practices. While Goldstein's work focuses on HIV/AIDS, Lee's work focuses primarily on the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic of 2003, pointing out parallels between the vernacular narrative responses to SARS and other viral epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and H1N1. Lee draws upon a myriad of sources to gather these narratives, including mass media, medical journals, and personal interviews, arguing that these disease narratives are recycled from earlier epidemics in response to new, novel virus scares and that this knowledge can be used in the future to help prevent the racialized and panic-driven rumors and attitudes often brought on by these viral outbreaks.

Lee opens his book with a lengthy, in-depth history of the SARS epidemic from its inception through the following year when it effectively disappeared. He follows this with a comparison of etiological narratives of HIV/AIDS and SARS in chapter two. Although SARS was a quite short-lived epidemic, it was able to generate "a number of etiological narratives, all of which bear striking resemblances to those narratives found in other diseases" (63). SARS shares with HIV/AIDS, and other diseases, etiological narratives and rumors of a broad spectrum, including animal origin theories, experiment-gone-wrong theories, and conspiracy theories in which the disease is a malicious attack on specific groups of people by the government.

Chapters three and four concern the roles of public spaces and SARS, narratives surrounding the ways that public space was perceived during the SARS crisis, and the kinds of actions that were permissible in public spaces during that time. Lee shows that large numbers of SARS narratives revolve around the fear, often socialized, of being in public spaces. Many members of the general public associated SARS with China, and so not only avoided public spaces generally, but especially Asian restaurants and Chinatowns, even in cities where there had been no recorded cases of SARS. Lee quotes from interviews with Canadians of Asian descent who recall being forced to alter their public behavior or experienced racial jokes or insults that suggested they were ill with SARS because of their Asian descent.

Chapter five focuses on the “mediation of stigma” (104) in SARS, revolving especially around the narratives told to facilitate this process, by members of the stigmatized group (in this case, people of Asian descent), which often takes the form of jokes or other uses of humor. Chapter six examines the use of folk medicine in combating SARS and argues that, due to the short-lived nature of the disease, folk medicine was largely preventative and not curative, in contrast to that of HIV/AIDS and other illnesses. Many of the people Lee interviewed recalled seeking out folk preventatives for SARS and combining them with the official, Western medicine strategies for avoiding the disease.

Chapter seven switches gears and focuses primarily on narratives from the H1N1 outbreak in 2009 and compares them to the SARS narratives discussed in the rest of the work. Just as the SARS narratives had much in common with HIV/AIDS narratives, so H1N1 narratives also appear to be recycled from the same stock of disease narratives, including the use of humor.

Finally, in chapter eight Lee examines in more depth the ways that these narratives are recycled from disease to disease. He discusses the role the media plays in this recycling and the negative effects that it has, often resulting in racial slurs and fears. Lee proposes a way to allow the media to continue reporting on disease without the negative effects and scaremongering they have often had in the

past. Lee suggests that in order to prevent the transmission of false rumors regarding viral diseases, media sources need not recount the rumor and then dispel it (which Lee, citing several studies, argues perpetuates the rumor instead of eradicating it), but rather to “rely on repeating accurate, positive information” (179).

Overall, the book covers an important topic that is also a growing area of interest for many folklorists as we continue to look for ways to apply our work outside our discipline. It is presented in an interesting, readable manner. An important contribution is the appendix, which is a sort of disease tale-type index and shows particular disease narratives and their associations with specific diseases. The book is also accessible to the general public, as Lee avoids using folklore jargon and provides footnotes to explain the esoteric terms that he does use. One point of criticism is that the book could use a discussion of his methodology on gathering these narratives. As it stands, the reader will piece together information regarding this, but the fieldwork methods are never directly addressed and it is somewhat unclear who his informants are and how he chose them.

Jon D. Lee's *An Epidemic of Rumors: How Stories Shape Our Perception of Disease* is an excellent addition to the literature surrounding folklore, medicine, and public health. The importance of studying the intersection of narrative and disease is evidenced by the recent Ebola epidemic, to which many of Lee's concepts could be usefully applied. Lee's recommendations for ways to prevent the spread of false and often harmful disease rumors are well considered, but as Lee points out, they will be a tough sell to the media who earn their living based on consumers buying their work. Sensationalized articles and reports are going to continue to sell. *An Epidemic of Rumors* is recommended reading for any scholar interested in narrative, public health, folk medicine, or media studies, as well as public health workers and officials.

JOSHUA CHRYSLER
Western Kentucky University