In a recent interview on CNN International, SESYNC postdoc Merle Eisenberg lent his pandemic expertise to a discussion about the coronavirus. In the segment, which aired March 5, 2020, CNN journalist John Vause asked Eisenberg to address certain parallels being drawn between the current spread of the coronavirus and that of the 14th century plague. During the interview, Eisenberg, who is an environmental historian, discussed with Vause the tendency for people to compare historical pandemics to modern outbreaks of disease, as well as the limitations of such comparisons. Eisenberg co-wrote an op-ed published in the Washington Post last month explaining why we shouldn’t allow pandemics of the past dictate the narrative for pandemics in the present.

Eisenberg’s opinions stem from the research he is conducting at SESYNC. This work focuses on synthesizing environmental evidence and historical narratives to better understand the impact of the first plague pandemic (c. 541–750 CE). In December 2019, former SESYNC postdoc Lee Mordechai, Eisenberg, and their colleagues co-authored an article based on this research in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences, making the suggestion that this outbreak of the plague might not have been as impactful as previously thought.

Watch the interview below.