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## Journal of Transnational American Studies

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3ct850gc>

### Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 13(1)

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### Publication Date

2022

### DOI

10.5070/T813158581

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# Viruses, Vaccines, and the Erotics of Risk in Latinx HIV Stories and Covid-19

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what love persists  
in a time without touch

— Joshua Bennett, “Dad Poem” (2020)

These plagues, the great levelers, might end  
up inadvertently tying the world together.

— Julia Álvarez, *Saving the World* (2006)

Several months into the Covid-19 pandemic, after all of the dramatic changes started to become familiar, I needed poetry. I needed a new angle for understanding intimacy and isolation. *Together in a Sudden Strangeness* (edited by Alice Quinn) arrived at the end of Summer, 2020, with many of my favorite poets inside, all of them struggling with our altered social being.<sup>1</sup> I start this paper with the final two lines of Joshua Bennett’s “Dad Poem” because of its lovely ambivalence. The poem is about one of the many social losses that came with the pandemic: the inability of a father to accompany his partner for a pregnancy ultrasound. The phrase “a time without touch” highlights the remoteness between father and fetus in the specific context of the poem and also resonates with the larger experience of the pandemic: not touching. Given that much of Bennett’s poetry revolves around the violence of Black history, being *not* touched could be a welcome reprieve, but the poem does not promise relief. In a poem that is otherwise punctuated with regular commas and periods, there is no punctuation mark at the end. With no period, no question mark, no conclusion to the pregnancy or the pandemic, the meaning of the phrase “what love persists” is ambiguous. It could be a statement of wonder at the persistence of love, despite social

distance. But “what love persists” could also be a question, reminding us that the shape and the acts of love have changed (like Zoom sex and embracing loved ones through shower curtains). We don’t yet know what will survive the pandemic. This uncertainty is particularly worrisome as 2020’s contagion, following history, is aligned with racism and xenophobia.

How long will it be before we can touch each other without flinching? How long will it be before we can touch each other without lynching? My rhyming questions are linked by the dominant US news stories of 2020: the legal mandates to keep people apart from each other during the pandemic and a surge of police violence against Black bodies (culminating in 2020 with the shootings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, and too many others).<sup>2</sup> Of course, this violence is not new news, but the racial disparities in the circulation, treatment, and mortality of Covid-19, resonating with a long history of medical experimentation against Black bodies, made the racist violence of 2020 more cruel. A summer of racial protest following and feeding visual images of police brutality raised the curve surrounding African American death to form its own pandemic.

My second epigraph, from Dominican American poet/novelist Julia Álvarez, focuses on the double edge of pandemics: their microbes link people from across the world and create shared global experience, but this linkage is wrought through sickness, suffering, and death.<sup>3</sup> I would argue, contra Álvarez, that plagues are not exactly levelers. While potential contagion spans the globe, the lines of mortality are pretty predictable under the Covid-19 pandemic: those who are poor, not white, and/or uninsured tend to die more frequently, while those who are white, rich, and world leaders get the best medical care. The lateral lines, however, have been rearranged. Labor has shifted from direct service to distance and delivery, as many people stay home and do their shopping, learning, and communicating online. Sociality spans the globe now, as more than 300 million people in the world use “Zoom” for long distance communication as well as for sharing a cup of coffee with a friend down the street.

Álvarez also has a Covid-19 poem in *Together in a Sudden Strangeness*. In “How Will This Pandemic Affect Poetry?” she wonders:

Will poems be our preferred form of travel?  
 Will we undertake odysseys searching for Ithacas inside us?  
 Will poetry go viral?  
 Will its dis/ease infect us?  
 Will it help build up antibodies against indifference?  
 Will poems be the only safe places where we can gather  
 together ... ?<sup>4</sup>

These lines imply that poetry itself has infectious powers, spreading ideas like contagion. At the same time, poetry can be a safe place to travel or gather without touch, to experience internal odysseys or to build up antibodies. Safety and risk mingle

promiscuously here in ways that might not be logical under ordinary conditions. But in times of “sudden strangeness,” confusion and uncertainty stretch conventional logic.

I come to this essay as a strong advocate for both solidarity and touch. My work has revolved around the recognition of shared ecosystems to create more ethical ways of belonging in our world. In my 2019 book *Shared Selves: Latinx Memoir and Ethical Alternatives to Humanism*, as well as my earlier book, *Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature* (2009), I embrace permeability as an alternative to humanist individualism. While individualism is self-defensive, competitive, and defined by boundaries, permeability focuses on what we share, like physical surfaces and toxic atmospheres. This commitment is derived from my earliest encounters with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands La Frontera* (1987), which emphasizes fluidity, crossing, and *mestizaje* in the US/Mexico borderlands (plural) as opposed to the xenophobic logic of border walls and racial purity. The border, as Anzaldúa first describes it, is

... the edge where earth touches ocean  
 where the two overlap  
 a gentle coming together  
 at other times and places a violent clash<sup>5</sup>

When *Shared Selves* was first published, following Donald Trump’s “America First” policies, the United States was designing more forbidding border walls and splitting up immigrant families from Mexico and Central America to be incarcerated in dehumanizing facilities with cages and foil “blankets” – a “violent clash” impeding any “gentle coming together.” Though not explicitly (or, at least, not initially) associated with Covid-19 infection, Latinx populations were (incorrectly) deemed a threat to the economic health of the United States. The continued imprisonment of Brown and Black bodies became more harrowing during the pandemic as viruses spread most rapidly in shared living facilities (including immigration detention centers, prisons, and institutions for the elderly). It did not take long before “super-spreader events” were linked to automobile factories and meat-processing plants, with the bodies of (again, often Black and Brown) workers who did not have a choice to work from home. In this climate, defending permeability is an ethical act of resistance (to xenophobia, racism, and fear of contact) but also a micro-biotic scene of risk. Should individual survival force us to reconsider our love of touch?

### **Intimacy and Infection**

As microbes demand our attention with increasing fury, we need to rethink our bodies’ orientations to the world around us: new ways of organizing bodies in space and new ways of experiencing both safety and intimacy. Being too close, walking alongside a friend, have become hostile acts. The recommended six feet between us have become a sign of solidarity and care: I am with you because I am on the other side of the parkway. But how can we be solid if we are oriented against each other? Isolation itself

has become contagious as we share repulsion and fear around the world. “Pandemic” has altered our environment, charged the air around us with new kinds of imagined and potential meaning. To adapt to this new ecology, we need to attend to both the molecular levels of our interactions and the transnational ramifications of viral infection as it circulates around the world. Airplanes are scenes of potential violence in which not just our coughs and sneezes but breath itself might spread death across the globe. And this violence is unequally distributed – in the mortal impacts of the virus as well as the unequal limits imposed on the movement of certain goods and people. Travel becomes a political act, taking advantage of wealth and leisure or, in the absence of choice, an exercise in fear and difficulty. While Trump kept calling Covid-19 “the China virus,” he reinforced anti-immigration and anti-trade policies with the excuse of keeping the disease at bay even after it was already ravaging cities across the US.<sup>6</sup> Wealthy countries found ways to import and hoard “personal protective equipment” (now known intimately as PPE). Meanwhile, US news media made spectacles of marginalized communities defying social distancing, publishing photographs of Latinx homes crowded with extended family, elaborate Jewish Orthodox weddings, and house parties in Black neighborhoods with dancing teenagers packed together to escape the desolation of quarantine. Fear assumed certain places and colors.

One of the more interesting aspects of this pandemic is the particular ways in which the material and the immaterial blur. The novel coronavirus has shifted the meanings of everyday things. Physical objects like facemasks assume new and often contradictory meanings: vulnerability to illness, fear, care for others, solidarity, and political affiliation. Stacy Alaimo’s account of the trans-corporeal self resonates here: “As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so.”<sup>7</sup> This “swirling landscape of uncertainty,” like the pandemic, makes our togetherness in the world suddenly strange, our homes made unhomey by taking on all of life’s activities, including confinement. Since so many of these experiences are utterly new (what social worker and podcaster Brené Brown has called FFTs: “fucking first times”), we are indeed “together in a sudden strangeness.” Alaimo’s example of swirling uncertainty, in *Exposed* (2016), is the ocean: a fluid space where disparate things (international trade, plastic bottles, squids, oil, and environmental activism) interface in strange new ways. But Alaimo adds an important caution: as we examine shifting global phenomena (like Covid-19 and its material and immaterial counterparts), it is important that we do not lose sight of the particular victims that carry the damage. We need knowledges that focus on “how human practices threaten particular creatures, habitats, and ecologies.”<sup>8</sup> We are not equal in this. Beliefs and messages circulate through vehicles of power, those with the authority (and the media outlets) to define the terms of our changing existence.

In *Shared Selves*, I turn to inclusive life-stories, narratives in which ecosystems, strangers, plants, websites, and metaphysical visions commingle, in order to highlight lifeforms that lie outside the epistemologies of Western Humanist rationalism and individualism. Focusing on Latinx writers presented opportunities for analyzing identities and kinships that cross boundaries. Judith Ortiz Cofer and Irene Vilar write about bodies and minds that oscillate, stretch, and self-destruct in movement between Puerto Rico and the US mainland. Aurora Levins Morales writes about needing to share her health and material survival with an online community of supporters. Gloria Anzaldúa writes about dreams, trances, life, death, rebirth, and interspecies mingling, stretching the ontological possibilities of human being. And John Rechy writes about queer world-making and communal ontologies. Yet each of these sharings comes with definite risk for actual individuals, something I might have glossed over when I wrote *Shared Selves*. Now, living in a pandemic, I cannot ignore the losses.

In my discussion of Rechy, I invoke Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), which focuses on "asystematic" contacts, like public sex and loitering, among gay men in Times Square.<sup>9</sup> Delany argues that these contacts (which often cross race and class lines) are essential to establishing a sense of sociality, cosmopolitanism, and human exchange (as opposed to the supposed safety and isolation of monogamy). Claiming movie theaters, parks, and tunnels as places for sex between men gives these spaces alternative meaning. Theater seats and fallen leaves become beds, reconfiguring the relationship between bodies and spaces defined by the dominant culture. What do we have to learn from this creative space-making? How have we learned to come together under quarantine? Through distance? Through defiance?

Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977) is an autobiographical "prose documentary" that explores the ritualistic aspects of public sex between men, a frequent theme in his extensive body of work. Most of the narrative focalizes on the semi-autobiographical character Jim with a detailed account of three days spent "sex-hunting" in Los Angeles: seeking paid sex in the "hustling" zones, cruising for lovers in parks, and accumulating large numbers of anonymous sexual encounters. At the edge of a beach, Jim finds: "Clustered throughout under the crumbling boards in the water-decayed cavern, other outlaw torsos shine darkly in the mottled light. The sound of sucking, of sliding flesh. Sighs. Sounds of orgasm float through the darkness. Two more outlines have materialized about Jim – he feels more mouths. His mind explodes with outlaw images: men and men and men, forbidden contacts, free, time crushed, intimate forbidden strangers."<sup>10</sup> In this long passage, it is not clear whose flesh is where, who is sighing, or who is orgasming. "Strangers" become intimate and immanent in the transcorporeal confusion; the individual gets lost in undifferentiated corporeality. This promiscuity is described as "forbidden" (twice in this passage), while it "crushes" the outlines between bodies as well as freeing the participants from the conventional passing of time.

Rechy's choice to describe this community as "outlaw" highlights its transgressions, like "criminal" trespassing or public "indecentcy." This subversive orientation likely enhances pleasure with the sense of breaking free from constraint. Rechy himself rejected normative terms like "gay" and "queer" and embraced the term "outlaw" because it "suggests defiance, an acceptance of being 'outside the law.' It carries an implication that the law itself may be wrong, therefore to be questioned, overturned."<sup>11</sup> Are our laws and boundaries worth sustaining? The panic surrounding epidemics drives humans to seal off their bodies from other humans as well as from potential nonhuman transmitters (mosquitoes, bacteria, etc.), but the outlaw logic of Rechy's and Delany's queer underworlds defies these self-defensive measures. Joining the outlaw community is a stance against the policing of borders (homophobic, xenophobic, germophobic). Promiscuity generates community and defies the proprietary boundaries that govern sanctioned heterosexual couplings. Rechy writes: "At its best, the gay experience is liberating, adventurous, righteously daring, revolutionary, and beautiful in its sexual abundance .... Stunning in its choreography, giving in its promiscuity, the hunt can turn brutal and raw."<sup>12</sup> Though this passage (written before the advent of HIV in the United States) acknowledges the rawness and danger in promiscuity, these risks are tied to affirmation, pride, and beauty. Rechy reminds us that much of this affirmation comes from being a "minority," from claiming gay (or, I would say, queer) identity in defiance of the admonitions of "the straight world," which attempts "deliberately to transform him into a 'sick, criminal sinner.'"<sup>13</sup>

Though there is plenty of defiance in the wake of Covid-19, being a bearer of the illness generally lacks this sense of pride. In the wake of the current pandemic, I have had to reconsider arguments like the following paragraph I wrote in *Shared Selves*:

Embracing promiscuous sex is even more revolutionary after AIDS than it was when Rechy wrote about promiscuity as a political gesture in *City of Night* or *The Sexual Outlaw*. Tim Dean's argument in *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009) is particularly helpful here. Dean is perhaps best known for analyzing the affirmative ethics of the practice of "barebacking" (anal sex without a condom), but his larger argument about the resignification of epidemic amongst gay communities is significant:

The AIDS epidemic has given gay men new opportunities for kinship, because sharing viruses has come to be understood as a mechanism of alliance, a way of forming consanguinity with strangers and friends. Through HIV, gay men have discovered that they can "breed" without women. (Dean 6)

The intimacy, consanguinity, and lifelong commitment of sharing of sero-status (positive or negative) undermine the logic of contagion .... Rather than associating gay sex with death, barebackers reconfigure the potential transmission of unprotected sex as generative, life-giving. This counter-intuitive association is, according to Dean, related to a larger critique of state-mandated health policies. To the extent that conventional medicine institutes universalizing norms of health and views gay sex through primarily proscriptive lenses, “outlaws” may engage in barebacking in an effort to resist “health” as an instrument of “normalizing” power (66). In this light, sickness (HIV infection, in particular) is an act of defiance and builds solidarity amongst outlaws.<sup>14</sup>

I still sympathize with Dean’s position in this passage, and I still see the value—in the case of HIV—of embracing illness as a political or intellectual stance. But context is important. Choosing HIV is (or, at least, was) kin to choosing an unjustly criminalized identity. Covid lacks the “righteous daring” Rechy embraced.

Since AIDS is an auto-immune disease, it works by breaking down the body’s defense systems; it amplifies corporeal vulnerability. It is transmitted by intimacy (wanted or unwanted), requiring the sharing of fluids from one body’s interior to another. Unrealistic fears of transmission by proximity (and the social stigmas surrounding the association of AIDS with gay sexuality and drug use) lead to job loss and exile (as happens in Álvarez’s *Saving the World*, when the fictional inhabitants of a small town in the Dominican Republic worry that they will contract HIV from a nearby AIDS clinic). Fear and stigma do not require the transmission of bodily fluids. Pandemic panic circulates through media transmissions, Facebook posts, daily death tolls on national news. Anxiety itself assumes a material heft.

As Rafael Campo, another gay Latino author, writes in his memoir/essay collection *The Poetry of Healing* (1997):

In the face of the AIDS crisis ... physical expressions of love have become revolutionary indeed, as revolutionary and as physical for me as the act of writing poetry. Some might call them unpatriotic, even traitorous and punishable by death. Like the “illegal aliens” who penetrate the forbidden border of this country desperate for the chance at a better life, and who remain the objects (in California especially) of one of the most venomous campaigns ever conceived to protect American national integrity – and, incidentally, to prevent their access to public education, health care, and other costly services – I can see that I too have been transformed into an otherworldly being.<sup>15</sup>

Campo's work crosses a number of (often intersecting) "fortified and prohibited" borders: poetry and medicine, "the imaginary line that divides the United States from Mexico," the water between the United States and Haiti, a "too suggestively" enjambed line break, and the "portal of an eroticized anus of a lesbian or a gay man."<sup>16</sup> Love, in this context, is radical, touch potentially seditious, and border-crossers are blamed for consuming more than their share (if they even get a share) of the pursuit of happiness. As the son of Cuban parents, Campo knows about exile, alienation, and resentment against immigrants. He knows about sex tourism and HIV infection in the Caribbean. And as a physician, he cannot deny the reality of HIV/AIDS and the horrible deaths caused by it. Crossing all of these lines makes Campo "otherworldly," which is a fascinating adjective in this context. What new worlds does Campo create or envision? Without denying *real* risk, infection, and death, Campo turns to the healing powers of poetry. He encourages his AIDS patients to write their own stories, giving value to their sexual experiences and their demonized lives; his patients with respiratory problems recite iambic pentameter out loud to regulate their breath. For Campo, the artifice of poetry gives new meaning and new context to illness.

Campo writes that he's particularly attracted to formal poetry because it presents "the fundamental beating contents of the body at peace." He compares a sonnet he wrote to a "tiny coffin for the AIDS virus," "a condom made of words," an "unrelenting, unforgiving love poem for a virus spread relentlessly by acts of desire for love."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Campo is referring to the poem "Safe Sex," from his collection *What the Body Told* (1996). This sonnet ends with the following lines:

We fell in love  
When love was not protection in itself,  
Misled by poetry, I'd always felt  
The pleasures of the tongue were very safe ....

Astonishment without restraint sang out –  
Protected in your arms, I died of doubt.<sup>18</sup>

The lack of restraint, the commitment to love in the face of potential infection, reflects an affirmative response to HIV, saying "yes" instead of "no." Does the speaker doubt that his lover's arms were protection, or does he doubt that death could touch him when he is in his lover's arms? This sonnet traces a promiscuous intimacy of conflicting feelings of safety and risk. It also presents a "swirling landscape of uncertainty" (to recall Alaimo). At the same time, Campo contains all of these doubts within a formal aesthetic structure and a controlled response to crisis. His professional and aesthetic distance enable him to set aside a place, an "otherworld," for promiscuous touch – within a poem, within doctor-patient relationships, or within other places deemed "safe."

Our newest pandemic does not require intimate transmission. Covid germs travel from body to body (supposedly up to six feet through the air) and were rumored to linger on tables, groceries, and cups. Kissing and kinship have always been risky, but suddenly so, too, is grocery shopping (which is much less sexy than the activities Campo and Rechy embrace). It is important to note the role of choice in our exposure to and enjoyment of risk, and Ulrich Beck's notion of "enforced cosmopolitanism" is helpful here. In ecological crises and pandemics alike, "global risks activate and connect actors across borders who otherwise don't want to have anything to do with one another."<sup>19</sup> Cashiers in grocery stores (at least initially) did not choose to be on the frontline of the pandemic; neither did workers in meatpacking plants or automobile factories. Going into these professions is often a coerced choice, determined by economic need, physical location, and lack of opportunities for education or training. Yet workers in these professions are linked (physically and/or economically) to the entire populace of food-consuming and car-driving people. The people who scan and bag groceries have a choice between leaving their jobs or exposing themselves to viruses. These are not freely chosen risks; they are tied directly to economic survival.

The risks that both Rechy and Dean wrote about in the context of HIV link gay men based on the shared potential for exposure as well as shared intimacies. Reading Rechy through Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy* highlights the distinct pleasures of choosing risk. In Rechy's novels, characters exert agency by choosing locations, partners, and conditions of risk. This is not to say that these choices are not also coerced or tracked based on financial need and personal experience, but part of the pleasure of sexual promiscuity is, for many people, tied to embracing risk or feeling freedom from constraint. The risks that link us also make us allies, forming global movements and virtual networks – networks that might not exist if crisis hadn't made them. (I think here, too, of the link between the violence of the Stonewall riots and the rise of gay community building and pride.) These networks have the power to re-frame the story of risk, making kinship, making quilts, claiming pride, saying "yes." Is there such a parallel embrace in the context of Covid-19?

Total quarantine is undesirable – not to mention unrealistic – for most people, so then, in 2020, came the masks, every time we leave our homes, covered faces everywhere, on television, even on public statues in my city. The news was full of alarming stories about shortages of PPE. We were covering not just our private parts, but our public parts. My first response was alarm. Neighbors crossed the street to avoid each other, or walked down the middle of the street, some even with tape measures to ensure the recommended six feet of social distancing. And their masks made it impossible to determine if these people were glowering, grimacing, gasping, or smiling. The fear engendered by other humans and the compulsion to keep them at a distance wore echoes of centuries of deep racism and xenophobia. Yet, in the context of a pandemic, those six feet of distance (and the face masks that hide emotions, fog up our vision, and lie grimed in gutters throughout the world) are also the stuff of international solidarity. That space, and our difficulty breathing and seeing

in public, are constant reminders of our potential to spread infection, our obligations to each other to follow the rules of health, and, more insidiously, our fear of each other. All of these at once – solidarity, care, faith, fear, and anxiety – established a new “imagined community” of global citizens reconfiguring their lives and thinking creatively about safety. But this Covid community is short on the joy and orgasm that cast hope over HIV stories.

Quarantine is all or nothing; just running to a friend’s house to borrow some sugar means potential exposure. In her post-Covid book *Pandemonium: Proliferation of Borders of Capital and the Pandemic Swerve* (2020), Angela Mitropoulos provides a description of quarantine that resembles the isolation of immigrants in detention centers:

Conceptually, quarantine involves two key features: first, the segregating of population on the basis of a hypothesis about their exposure and, second, their detainment, usually for a specified period of time, so as to insert a division between exposed and susceptible populations. ... [Q]uarantine is not based on evidenced infections but enacts a geographic or spatial congregation based on presumed conditions. That is, because “exposure” is effectively an inference, rather than knowledge based on either testing or the clinical identification of symptoms, its use of proxies as a means of identifying exposure—such as geography or passports—is amenable to the identification of disease with a group of persons, and therefore the racialization of disease.<sup>20</sup>

Since being a carrier of an infection like HIV or Covid is likely invisible, “proxies” must be used to identify who is “safe.” Race, sexuality, nationality all become markers of risk, often incorrect markers. Homes become borders, places deemed safe because they are occupied by a family unit, at the same time that the people housed together put each other at risk of physical and psychological harm caused by depression and domestic abuse. There is no escape from risk.

The new photographic genre of “pandemic portraits” – pictures of families framed by their front doors, sometimes smiling defiantly, as if their lives were “normal,” sometimes sad or stern in the face of enemy intruders – presents a chilling sense of the family as a unit of containment as well as an intense value that must be defended. The logic of quarantine supports the logic of border walls, including the desired protection of a conservative vision of American middle-class identity (people who live in nuclear units preserved by houses). Where are the portraits of people quarantined alone, people who live in over-crowded spaces, people who must live with caregivers or caretakers, or people who have no homes? As an alternative to the fetishization of family and property, I’m intrigued by the term “pod” as we’ve come to

use it during this pandemic to describe chosen groups with whom we're willing to risk sharing germs. I love the image of fluid groupings of dolphins traversing the oceans in pods, free from the limits of front doors.

A good example of the link between contagion and the constitution of communities is found in Nayan Shah's analysis of the smallpox outbreak in nineteenth-century San Francisco. Shah emphasizes how emerging ideas of public health led to increased measurement and regulation of populations, particularly those populations that were deemed "alien" like Chinese bachelors in Chinatown: "measuring and maintaining health entailed a new way of thinking about persons and their lives in the environment and in society."<sup>21</sup> The "vitality, strength, and prosperity" of the populace depended on the vitality, strength, and prosperity of all of its inhabitants. To the extent that they recognize shared environment, concepts like public sanitation and public health become a way of weaving immigrants into US social citizenship.

At the same time, Chinese immigrants were weaving their own forms of citizenship based on Chinese-American social networks, activism, and their own medical treatments. Since the nineteenth century, Chinese homeopathic and herbal remedies have circulated alongside, and against the tides of, dominant medical practices, in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> These other ways of defining health, family, and community represent an important alternative to the vision of "health" associated with the hegemonic middle-class white family. Multiple kinds of kinship and community are reproduced within and alongside each other, forming multiple, overlapping realms of public health. Beck describes "cosmopolitan moments" like this as ambivalent: global risks inspire "paralyzing terror" and create "new room for action" at the same time.<sup>23</sup> While this cosmopolitan sharing lacks the pleasure and intimacy of the HIV narratives I've looked at, maybe Covid-19 has helped to grow our sense of global inhabitation. Perhaps increased attention to ideas that accompany pandemics, like "public" and "global," can be viewed as progress for individualist American consumers.

### **Vaccines to Save the World**

And then came the needles. While writing this essay, the news has become full of them: world leaders, nurses, and hospital administrators with their sleeves up and a needle entering their collective arms. This is another new pandemic photographic genre, one that creates a kind of patriotism around inoculation, a standard form that good citizens should follow. One of the more noteworthy aspects of this turn in Covid-19 history is the difficulty of persuading a populace addicted to prophylaxis that injecting a foreign substance into their bodies is now a good idea. Since the world's response to Covid-19 is so wrought up in politics, choosing to be vaccinated is a political gesture. Right wing conspiracy theories, like QAnon, suggest that the vaccine is part of a satanic plot to install micro-cameras into the interiors of our bodies.<sup>24</sup> There were concerns that people of color in the US would be more reticent to accept the injection

because of justified suspicion of the medical industry and its history of using Black and Brown bodies as guinea pigs. But now (Summer 2021) it's white Republicans resisting the seemingly coerced solidarity of vaccination, often specifically citing fears that the vaccinations were rushed to the market without proper vetting at the federal level. In this strange new logic, the "right" is suspicious of pharmaceutical corporations and calling for oversight. Who is saving whom from what? Who is profiting the most from vaccines, rich multinational companies like Pfizer or the vaccinated "left"?

As someone with a history of ingesting unregulated substances, someone who still embraces permeability, and someone who really wants to be able to travel again and hug her family on the West Coast, I will gladly accept a vaccine, no matter how risky. But I approach this penetration with the same suspicion and skepticism that I approach everything. Julia Álvarez, who is best known for her 1991 coming-of-age-as-an-immigrant novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, has written an often-overlooked novel that speaks to these concerns in a multi-faceted and nuanced manner. We should take another look. *Saving the World* (2006 in Spanish; 2007 in English) revolves around two parallel plots, following a nineteenth-century Spanish nurse, Isabel Sendales y Gómez, and a contemporary Dominican American writer, Alma Huebner, who is writing Isabel's story of crossing oceans to save the world. What links these plots are viruses and vaccines. Based on her position as rector of an orphanage in Galicia, Isabel is asked to join the historical royal commission of Francisco Balmis, along with a score of her young charges, to deliver the smallpox vaccine to New Spain in the early 1800s. In interspersed chapters, the fictional Alma rushes to her homeland in the 1990s to try to save her husband who is trying to save the world with a "Green Center" funded by a pharmaceutical company testing experimental AIDS drugs in the Dominican Republic. Carmen Birkle, in her analysis of *Saving the World*, emphasizes that both smallpox and AIDS are "equally entangled in a web of (post)colonial forces."<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, few people are actually saved in these plots.

What does saving look like, and who determines what is safe? Francisco Balmis and the fictional Richard Huebner might be said to suffer from "white savior complexes," imposing their version of health upon colonial "others." Both are passionate, headstrong men who have thrown themselves without sufficient care into efforts to bring their discoveries to the developing world; predictably, the loyal women beside them try (unsuccessfully) to keep them out of trouble. Don Francisco is represented as being driven by ego, and he goes into a rage whenever he feels he's not receiving sufficient respect and attention from others. Isabel writes in her journal about his desire to become immortal: "Romance, reputation, glory, our director has attained them all already. Wedded love. Surgeon of the royal court. But still he strives for more than the world can give him."<sup>26</sup> Saving the world would be a gift for Don Francisco, to himself and from himself. As he discovers in his travels through the Caribbean, Central America, and the Philippines, the vaccine is a gift that much of the world does not want to receive. Retracing the routes of Spanish colonialism with a syringe of cowpox fluid draws ire from natives and creoles across New Spain.

In 1803, Álvarez's Isabel (a fictionalized version of an "Isabel" who, according to historical records, accompanied the Royal Philanthropic Expedition of the Vaccine) assumes a huge risk in dragging twenty-two orphan boys across the ocean, with Spain's smallpox vaccine, to the still Newish World. Isabel, herself described as "disfigured" by the virus that killed everyone else in her family, is the only woman on the ship, responsible for caring for seasick boys and at constant risk of assault from lecherous shipmates. The boys, though, assume the most risk, since they are the "live carriers" of the vaccine, carrying on their arms vesicles "engorged" by the virus. Twenty-two were required to keep the vaccine "alive" throughout the journey, and they are injected two by two as they cross the ocean. Isabel describes the process of transferring the vaccine from boy to boy: "First: the skin is pierced with a lancet. The difficulty here is keeping the boys distracted. How they howl as if they are being murdered! Then the cowpox fluid is harvested from the vesicles of the last carrier and laid upon the pierced skin. In three days, the skin begins to show signs of inflammation. Remember Tintín's and Bello's 'boils'? These continue to grow and fill with fluid until the whole area becomes quite painful."<sup>27</sup> This process is painful, clearly in physical terms but also surely in psychological terms. These boys watch their own skin and their comrades' breached by lancets and then carry beneath their skin a dangerous virus that must be passed between them in order to preserve it. The "vesicles" form a part of the boys' bodies that they do not own, a grotesque bovine passenger living on their arms, and they must guard this pocket of flesh in order to keep the vaccine inside it alive for the health of New Spain. If they scratch or pierce the vesicle, the disease will spread indiscriminately (as happens on the first trans-Atlantic voyage of the commission, killing several passengers). Isabel refers to "the skin" and "the vesicles" as if they were separate from the human boys. Indeed, the vaccine is the property of the royal expedition, not of the orphan boys whose bodies are carrying the risks they did not choose to take. No wonder they "howl" like animals: unlike the consenting men Rechy and Dean discuss, these boys have no control over the boundaries and contents of their own bodies.

The story we usually hear about smallpox in the "New World" is about the genocide of Native Americans, negligent and intentional transmission of a deadly disease used as a weapon of conquest. Both of the main plots in *Saving the World* flip this script to focus on the efforts of the metropole to *heal* the colonies. In her analysis of the novel, Birkle remarks that "the smallpox virus, having no borders, binds the world population together in its suffering" during the time of the Balmis expedition. Birkle argues that it is up to Isabel and Don Francisco to disrupt this "negative form of collective memory" (the virus) with the vaccine, which would presumably create a more positive linkage.<sup>28</sup> While this point resonates with the intertwined circulation of microbes and ideas, Birkle's latter point poses an unrealistic progress narrative, in my view: assuming that healing is the endpoint of illness and that it is up to the Spanish crown to do this work, taking on the world with its inoculating weapons. Critical (or

negative) memory serves an important function by remembering inequities and calling for change. Let's not rush to a hasty or imperialist vision of healing.

While the royal expedition brings the smallpox vaccine to New Spain in 1803, the fictional humanitarian organization "Help International" (H. I.) brings new "green" agricultural practices, accompanying a Texas-based clinic experimenting with new AIDS drugs, to the Dominican Republic in the 1990s. Alma's husband Richard, who works for H. I., is less fiery than Balmis: he expects that Alma will want to follow him to her homeland and help him establish the *centro verde*, but when Alma resists the implication that her life as a writer and professor in Vermont matters less than her husband's vision of saving the world, Richard concedes to going on his own. Perhaps Alma could have saved Richard if she went with him to act as a cultural translator able to perceive the anxiety of the locals, who understandably feel the presence of the AIDS clinic in their small town to be a threat. (Indeed, Alma ultimately has some close and sympathetic conversations with the young rebels about their fears of the new clinic.) Of course, HIV came to the Dominican Republic with sex tourism before the fictional pharmaceutical company established an AIDS clinic there, but the locals blame the clinic for this "foreign influence" and worry that they will contract the virus by its proximity to their homes. As a conciliatory gesture, the pharmaceutical company brings in H. I. (and Richard) to establish the *centro verde*: another positive narrative to balance the negative risk. But environmentalism can also be seen as a foreign influence in this context. What value is a "green" center on a tropical island? Why should the locals prioritize organic agriculture over more immediate profits?

Throughout the novel, illnesses and medicines circulate in deviant and unexpected ways. Alma suffers from severe depression and, at the beginning of the novel, inexplicably buries her prescriptions in her back yard and watches them through the window rather than swallowing them.<sup>29</sup> Another aspect of Alma's story revolves around her friendship with Helen, an older neighbor who is dying of cancer, and Helen's mentally ill son and daughter-in-law, Mickey and Hannah McMullen. Just a few pages after we see Alma's grave for her anti-depressants, she receives a "prank" phone call from an anonymous woman (who turns out to be Hannah) falsely claiming to have infected Alma's husband with HIV. Towards the end of the novel, after Richard is taken hostage and dies in the Dominican Republic, Alma learns that she might have been infected by a monkey pox serum in Vermont, also the work of Mickey and Hannah, who obtained the virus illegally. Though the novel tempts us to view Mickey and Hannah as pathological, and insinuates in the end that Mickey was attempting to end Helen's life with the monkey pox injection, we also see Mickey's intense love for his mother and his desire to ease her mortal suffering. Even Hannah starts to look like a social justice warrior when she explains that her HIV prank was an attempt to infect Vermont with an "AIDS of conscience that will wake up this country as to how the rest of the world is dying for lack of a little of the too much we have here."<sup>30</sup>

At the end of the novel, Alma plans to return to the scene of the massacre in the Dominican Republic and "infect them with our questions."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in her final

words, Isabel realizes: “I, too, was a carrier, along with my boys, carrying this story, which would surely die, unless it took hold in a future life.”<sup>32</sup> Smallpox, cow pox, monkey pox, HIV, even toxic relationships all recede to the background. Metaphorical infections take over; conscience, questions, and stories circulate like viruses inside a body, rearranging the molecules that form our minds and hearts. But what about the poor orphans who bore the corporeal risk of carrying the vaccine to an unforeseen world across the ocean? Surely the “story” Isabel carries is more innocuous. And what about the young men who were killed defending their small Dominican town from U.S. cultural domination? Alma lost her husband, but those young men lost everything, including their town’s un-infected way of life. Not all infections are equal.

### Think Bigger

Chicana poet Cherríe Moraga released a poem in the Summer of 2020, via social media, to express her outrage at the racism underlying the epidemiological and ideological circulation of the Covid-19 pandemic. In “The Last Straw,” she writes:

Covid does the work of genocide.  
It is intentional.  
It is not democratic because  
the United States of America is not democratic.<sup>33</sup>

The distribution of illness and death in 2020 followed the deep-set routes of American racism and international colonialism, with illness flowing to marginalized or “minority” populations while the white and the powerful continued to hoard wealth and health for themselves. Inequality is the real enemy, not viruses. Unlimited inoculation might save the world, but first we’d need unlimited honesty and unlimited care to nurture a population that trusts its leaders so much that it will roll up its sleeves to take in needles and viruses for the love of the world. In the context of deep divisions in politics and disparities in wealth, it is difficult to trust those in power to make transparent decisions or to make decisions that benefit the poorest and most vulnerable among us. And in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic’s inward-facing focus (isolation and preservation of self and family), care for others sometimes goes against the grain.

In *Saving the World*, one of the doctors from the royal commission tells Isabel, as she plans to return to the work of mass vaccination after Don Francisco’s death, that she is living in a dream world. Her response: “No, Don Ángel, I am living in this very real, distressing world, and I am having desperately to dream in order to go on living.”<sup>34</sup> The implication of this claim is that our world itself is sick, and it is only in dreams that we can envision large-scale health and healing. What we are lacking, Álvarez implies, is the will to make others’ health a priority.

We are also apparently lacking the ability to build from the multiple kinds of knowledge that are already in the world around us. One of the problems with controlling the Covid-19 pandemic (in the US, at least) has been the enforcement of a

single, prescriptive and proscriptive, method for ending the virus: first, “stay at home,” and then, “get vaccinated.” This proposition goes against the realities and traditions of many people (like those who do not have the option to stay home or who have no access to vaccines). Vaccines, too, are distributed unevenly in the world and limited by the view that the dominant medical industry is designed for people with privilege. In the US, we are bombarded with images of binary opposition that are increasingly racialized: maskless white supremacists toting guns in the streets and touting their personal freedoms against a neoliberal, multicultural middle-class compliantly making fortunes for Amazon (not to mention Pfizer and Moderna) while staying at home and buying facemasks and hand sanitizer online. But our world is not binary, and freedom comes in different shades rather than absolutes (having or not having). Left out of the binary equation are those who have no choice, those who are being gunned down, detained, or coerced into unsafe work. We need to imagine multiple ways of being safe, enough to include everyone. We have become stuck on the hegemonic narratives blasted on our TVs and computers, missing much of the everyday creativity in the world around us. Building from Shah’s analysis of smallpox in Chinatown, or Delany’s analysis of gay men in Times Square, what are the different ways in which communities are already adapting to shared phenomena? What do we have to learn about survival (or even pleasure and thriving) from the various counter-publics and cosmopolitan subcultures around us? There must be more than one kind of love to persist.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The title of this collection is borrowed from Pablo Neruda’s poem “Keeping Quiet.”
- <sup>2</sup> The presence of a noose hanging from a wooden frame at the white-supremist/pro-Trump assault on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, along with other instances of racist insurrection in 2020, keep the threat of lynching alive even today.
- <sup>3</sup> Priscilla Wald’s vision in *Contagious*, written in the context of the 2003 SARS outbreak, similarly outlines ways in which contagion (or potential contagion) creates new networks and new communities. She views the idea of contagion as not just an epidemiological formation but a social configuration that incorporates our “shrinking world”: “Communicable disease compels attention—for scientists and the lay public alike—not only because of the devastation it can cause but also because the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas. The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community.” Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Julia Álvarez, “How Will This Pandemic Affect Poetry?,” in *Together in a Sudden Strangeness*, ed. Alice Quinn (New York: Knopf, 2020), 3.

- <sup>5</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, Aunt Lute: 1987), 1.
- <sup>6</sup> The demonization of Chinese people and culture as the “source” of the pandemic in 2020 is reminiscent of anti-Chinese sentiment during the nineteenth-century smallpox outbreak in San Francisco, which I take up later in this paper with Nayan Shah’s book *Contagious Divides* (2001).
- <sup>7</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 112.
- <sup>8</sup> Alaimo, *Exposed*, 126.
- <sup>9</sup> Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 194, 199.
- <sup>10</sup> Rechy, *Sexual Outlaw*, 26-27.
- <sup>11</sup> Rechy, “Interview: John Rechy,” interview by Debra Castillo. *Diacritics* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 113. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465368>.
- <sup>12</sup> Rechy, *Sexual Outlaw*, 242.
- <sup>13</sup> Rechy, *Sexual Outlaw*, 242.
- <sup>14</sup> Suzanne Bost, *Shared Selves: Latinx Memoir and Ethical Alternatives to Humanism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 66–67.
- <sup>15</sup> Rafael Campo, *The Poetry of Healing: A Doctor’s Education in Empathy, Identity, and Desire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 192.
- <sup>16</sup> Campo, *Poetry*, 192–93.
- <sup>17</sup> Campo, *Poetry*, 166.
- <sup>18</sup> Campo, “Safe Sex,” in *What the Body Told* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 58.
- <sup>19</sup> Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 61.
- <sup>20</sup> Angela Mitropoulos, *Pandemonium: The Proliferating Borders of Capital and the Pandemic Swerve* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 34.
- <sup>21</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Shah, *Contagious*, 10.
- <sup>23</sup> Beck, *World*, 57.

- <sup>24</sup> Caitlin Dickson, “QAnon Believers Spread False Claims about Covid-19 Vaccine Touted by Trump,” *Yahoo! News*, December 15, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/q-anon-believers-spread-false-claims-about-covid-vaccine-touted-by-trump-161151862.html>.
- <sup>25</sup> Carmen Birkle, “Saving the Circum-Atlantic World: Transnational (American) Memories in Julia Álvarez’s Disease Narrative,” in *Transnational American Memories*, ed. Udo Hebel (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2009), 60.
- <sup>26</sup> Julia Álvarez, *Saving the World* (Chapel Hill: Shannon Ravenel, 2007), 165.
- <sup>27</sup> Álvarez, *Saving*, 98.
- <sup>28</sup> Birkle, “Saving,” 75.
- <sup>29</sup> Álvarez, *Saving*, 2.
- <sup>30</sup> Álvarez, *Saving*, 183.
- <sup>31</sup> Álvarez, *Saving*, 359.
- <sup>32</sup> Álvarez, *Saving*, 353.
- <sup>33</sup> Cherríe Moraga, “The Last Straw,” November 21, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFjBIAYIBac&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR16YsyCuuKITKoW2P8oYSrcRPFkm3Dhv5ZfKoBlz2IV\\_182Naobxue2Bgo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFjBIAYIBac&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR16YsyCuuKITKoW2P8oYSrcRPFkm3Dhv5ZfKoBlz2IV_182Naobxue2Bgo).
- <sup>34</sup> Álvarez, *Saving*, 349.

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