

On Contagion

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While preparing this issue of *e-misférica* on contagion, we received the first reports of the "mysterious virus" later identified as the H1N1 Influenza A. The unfolding of the so-called "swine flu" provided a near perfect enactment of the range of social, cultural, aesthetic, and political registers through which contagion travels. Epidemiologists studied the virus in labs, Mexico's public sphere evaporated, images of decorated surgical masks proliferated, officials across the globe debated whether their borders should be closed to Mexico and its citizens, tourism came to a halt, and the "Cumbia de la Influenza" was composed in Mexico and uploaded to YouTube. With Mexico newly isolated on the international scene, the wry lyrics suggest "estaremos muertos cuando llegue Indiana Jones" (we'll all be dead by the time Indiana Jones arrives). "Contagion is more than epidemiological fact," writes Priscilla Wald in her recent book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008, reviewed in this issue): the early weeks of the flu outbreak demonstrated again that disease is never just epidemiological fact. Those biological facts are always shaped in relation to far reaching social, political, economic and cultural formations.

The virus itself traveled on every pathway open for human transit; tracking its travel revealed the complex flows of people moving across Mexico's border as well as the immense network of travel that connects Mexico to almost every point on the planet. Here as elsewhere, contagion is a figure for transgression: illuminating and immediately transgressing real and imagined boundaries of nation, state, community, body, and even species. Tracking H1N1, like other pandemics, suggests alternate mappings that transgress the fixity of national boundaries and patterns of movement that provide other ways of understanding territories and communities through human contact. With established interests in the cultural geographies of the Americas, we at *e-misférica* have been particularly interested in how the virus-and all of the practices of surveillance, containment, fear, and commentary through which it has emerged-has rendered the hemisphere as a space of affective and political traffic. In "Viral Fears," the special dossier on the H1N1 influenza outbreak prepared for this issue, scholars and artists from throughout the Americas offer readings of the multiple mappings of contagion and containment that the influenza outbreak has brought to the fore.



Fig. 1: Cartoon by Steve Breen, San Diego Union-Tribune, 30 April 2009.

One of the early cartoons (fig. 1) about H1N1 captures the fantasies of immunity (or what Pricilla Wald calls "imagined immunities") that contagion provokes: here a 2,000-mile "sneeze guard" will protect the US from the Mexican flu. The irony of the image is not that the sneeze guard cannot possibly work or even that exaggerated fears of the flu could produce such an exaggerated response. The irony, rather, is that long before the emergence of H1N1, the *mexicanos* crossing the border were already cast as a virulent pathogen threatening the integrity of the U.S. national body, violating its borders and moving illegitimately in the country's midst. Ironically, the sneeze guard is as ineffective at holding back microbes as the wall that has been built along the border is at preventing migrants from crossing, precisely because the wall does not address the economic and social ills that drive people across the border in the first place. Existing discourses about Mexico and Mexican immigrants have shaped the imaginary of the disease, just as the disease exacerbated and expanded existing racist attitudes toward *mexicanos*. The national origin of the virus, whether real or perceived, does in fact shape how the illness is understood, managed, and contained in both popular and institutional contexts.



Fig. 2: Scan of a page from *El Diario*, 16 June 2009.

Another map of the Americas emerged through the coverage of the flu in *El Diario*, a New York newspaper directed at Latino readers (fig. 2). On one page, it provides separate updates on the virus in Chile, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Far from the fantasy of difference and immunity in the cartoon above, here we find a map drawn through deep affective ties to countries of origin, and to the families or friends living there. At one and the same time, the paper speaks to readers as a cohesive group—all Spanish-speaking Latinos in New York—and renders the national differences among them.

Both images underscore the ways that tracking the disease casts different light on the existing social or political conditions in which the disease emerges and that may at the same time enable its spread. Wald notes that "[a]s epidemiologists trace the routes of the microbes, they catalog the spaces and interactions of global modernity." Paul Farmer's pathbreaking work on AIDS in Haiti, in turn, has taught us to look for structural relations of power that link the political and the epidemiological. Writing about Haiti in *Pathologies of Power*, Farmer states, "[t]he distribution of AIDS is strikingly localized and nonrandom; so is that of human rights abuses. Both HIV transmission and human rights abuses are social processes, and are embedded, most often, in the inegalitarian social structures I [call] 'structural violence.'"

This issue draws on the particular relevance that the inter-discipline of performance studies lends to cultural studies of contagion, by engaging the expressivity of the body in its many forms, and through its extensive scholarship on the modes through which the "biological" and "social" come to be produced and distinguished. In her stunning book, *Infectious Rhythm* (whose ten-year anniversary is, in part, the inspiration for the issue), Barbara Browning explores the deep relation between kinesthetic and epidemiological transmission, setting an important model for performance research on contagion. What do we mean, she asks, when we say that a rhythm is infectious? Tracking a range of associations made between the AIDS pandemic and African diasporic practices, Browning illuminates the precise conjuncture where infection pulses simultaneously on a biological, racial, and cultural register: How does rhythm affect bodies? Whose bodies desire or fear such infection? And most importantly, why do metaphors of infection appear precisely at "moments of anxiety over diasporic flows, whether migrational or cultural"? (6). Following Browning's model, our call invited work on the enactment of cultural, aesthetic, and political formations of the social body when altered, threatened, or transformed by the presence of an/other.

The essays and activist presentations published here explore enactments of contagion in various discursive formations across the Americas. Several authors study how threats, fears,

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and fantasies of contamination are central to the formation and function of social identities. For Rocio Santiesteban, contagion marks the site of abjection to which poor Andean migrants are relegated through their televisual representation. Focusing on the case of a widely-distributed TV talk show by Laura Bozzo, Santiesteban illustrates how the media mobilizes physical sensations of disgust (what she calls the "factor asco" or "disgust factor") to construct the "tele-pobre" as a contaminated and contaminating subject in Peru's social landscape. The "tele-pobre," she argues, does crucial work in the context of neoliberal discourses by marking entire populations as expendable and undeserving of any form of empathy. May Farnsworth's study of two feminist playwrights in turn-of-the-century Argentina reveals them to be astute analysts of how the discourse of contagion is deployed to keep women "safe" from the "contaminating" world of power. Farnsworth shows how their work richly appropriated the prevailing rhetoric of hygiene in order to depict patriarchal culture itself as a dangerous virus that threatens the health and well being of women.

Several contributions see in contagion opportunities for imagining alternative social bodies or practicing alternative forms of community. Sam Anderson's reflections on the historic 1980 Times Square Show find contagion at the heart of the show's own archival logic: a vast experiment in the productive contagion between aesthetic objects themselves, one designed to capture the affect of both the art and Times Square and to resist the closed ideology of urban renewal that would soon displace the artists and the Times Square they lived. Debra Levine analyzes the dynamics of affinity—a kind of elective contagion—in the context of AIDS activism in the late 1980s, focusing on the ACT UP affinity group "The Marys" and their staging of political funerals. For Levine, these funerals were carefully staged so that the dead body could speak the political, and not just epidemiological, conditions of its death.

Diane Nelson, in turn, models ways to think with contagion as well as write about it. She provides a remarkable account of a Ponzi scheme in Guatemala that collapsed in 2007, impoverishing thousands of already-poor Mayans in the Zacualpa, Quiché area of the central highlands. For Nelson, contagion is both the engine that drove the Ponzi scheme ("the desire to make money without suffering was contagious") and the lens through which she reads it, paying close attention to the pathways of rumor, gossip, hearsay as central to mercantile and affective circulation in post-War Guatemala.

For the activists featured in our multimedia presentations, contagion emerges as the primary method for activism and intervention in the public sphere. In order to bring critical attention to Chiquita Banana's direct role in past and present human rights violations in Colombia, El Colectivo makes a viral call to action—interpellating readers to print the included stickers and to place them on Chiquita bananas wherever they are sold. El Colectivo invites both a contamination of the corporation's logo and product as well as the viral dissemination of their call to action across broad networks. Victor Hugo Robles' work as "El Che de los Gays" also relies on this double movement of contamination and contagious dissemination. Through his "irruptions and interruptions," El Che de los Gays interjects his intersectional political demands

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into the public sphere and enlists the media coverage of these events as tool for the dissemination of his message. Using podcasts, sound installations and other digital media, the work of the Particle Group, in turn, deploys digital tools to make visible the yet unmapped dangers of the molecular manipulations driving nanotechnologies, particularly as these nanoparticles begin to move through already vulnerable bodies and communities.

Taken together, the rich contributions that comprise this issue of *e-misférica* reveal the enormous productivity of the discourses and practices that contagion sets in motion. And while there is little doubt that these serve as key devices in the production and reproduction of biopolitical power at multiple sites and scales, the work herein also points us towards the multiple ways in which contagion, as both metaphor and strategy, enables the possibility for new methodologies, modes of sociality and political praxis.