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Rafael Campo. *Comfort Measures Only: New & Selected Poems, 1994-2016*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

“Illness is a problem for the human imagination only inasmuch as we might seek dispassionately scientific methods to cure it while we avoid the inevitably destructive pressures it exerts on our fragile psyches.”

—Rafael Campo, from “Introduction: Illness as Muse”

To put it simply, the work of Rafael Campo has been foundational for my own intellectual formation as a scholar of medical humanities. His poetry was some of the first I encountered in my early coursework in the field under the guidance of my former mentor in bioethics. But most of all, I remember how transformative it was for me to encounter the work of a poet-physician, a figure much more pervasive in our collective past than we tend to remember. In many ways, Campo’s desire to write across disciplinary boundaries connects him to a much longer history of enmeshment between the arts and sciences before the division of what C.P. Snow called “the two cultures.” Campo puts interdisciplinarity into practice with a vulnerability and humility that I frequently return to as a reminder of what it takes to do that work ethically and substantively. This is difficult, painful work.

Comfort Measures Only is a collation of both old and new poems produced by Campo over twenty years with thirty-one poems never before published in a collection. Such anthologizing necessarily involves retrospection but also speculation: *how has poetry intervened in the medical encounter and*

what else might it do? As Campo himself writes, what unites the poetic act with the work of medicine is “that they are not truly ends in themselves, by which we can ever hope to explicate away our suffering, but are rather part of the same process of dreaming and desiring, wishing, and wondering” (9). These are risky processes of imagining, of making something out of fragile bodies and the density of their humanness. But they are risks to be taken because, as Campo admits in a moving excerpt from “Song for My Lover,” “there’s too much to do.”

I feel more intensely than ever the overwhelming sense of responsibility and, at times, futility in revisiting works from *What the Body Told* (1997), the very first volume of Campo’s work I ever read. Campo, like many of the queer AIDS poets I’ve long admired, fleshes out the marginalized lives erased by the damnation of diagnosis and governmental neglect. In works like “Ten Patients, and Another” and “Alternative Medicine,” he animates the case histories, the patient charts and the spaces in between the lines swollen with truths untold. Poetry here is a panacea against what Paula Treichler has termed “the epidemic of signification” in which HIV, a virus, frequently becomes conflated with AIDS, a syndrome that is itself a collection of different conditions from Kaposi sarcoma to toxoplasmosis. This conflation gets reproduced in the cruel ways that people living with HIV are so often reduced to their viral loads, their opportunistic infections—the crude materiality of virality alone. The indictment of an entire generation of gay men has been costly, Campo reminds us, and particularly tragic in light of what all could have been done: “Disease is curable, where poetry / Was all we ever needed to cure AIDS, / Where victims, all of us, are innocent” (34). In memoriam, Campo revises the conventional narratives about HIV/AIDS that can only end in suffering by imagining “the gift of AIDS and blood that was your heart, / Your beating heart, your beating, beating heart” (53). It is this ambivalent history of HIV/AIDS that Campo so movingly captures in verse, particularly in “The Changing Face of AIDS” in which he meditates on the “victory” over HIV now no longer a death sentence but still a crisis. Shadowing the legacy of loss, mourning, and death was and is always that of intimacy, desire, and most of all, *life*.

Campo also challenges the presumed unidirectionality of the medical encounter: of physician *giving* care to the patient as passive, compliant recipient. Throughout the collection, we see Campo reimagining the relationship between caregiver and patient in provocatively interdependent terms. In “On Doctoring,” the speaker attends to a man complaining of knee pain, and in his examination, he notes how “Marvelous, / the body’s workmanship, how perfect is // its service to the soul it shelters, each / soft hair along the shin enshrining touch, / this way we’re made to need another’s care” (92). This dependency, so often refused or disavowed in the name of individualism, is understood as essential to the body’s form and function. To need care then is not insufficiency or weakness but a fundamental humanness built into the fleshly spaces we inhabit. Insisting otherwise is a denial of life itself: “Body bleed, body stink, / remind us that we suffer, yes, remind / us that we must, or else we never lived” (116). Campo “remorselessly” expresses a deep reverence for the body’s unruliness instead of immediately desiring to ameliorate or eliminate its undesirable qualities of leaking, oozing, or stinking. *Can we love the body in pain, appreciate its suffering, without rendering it an object of medical scrutiny?* The long process of practicing patient-centered caregiving, Campo suggests, is the only means of answering this question. How we answer this will have profound consequences for the sick and disabled, for we live in a turbulent

era defined by yet “another gaffe // the politician made, a truth belied: / Fix Medicare, cut Medicaid!
We lack / the promised cure; the snake writhes up the staff” (141).

After finishing *Comfort Measures Only*, I returned repeatedly to one poem in particular: “Without My White Coat.” In this piece, Campo confesses his attachment to his white coat as both armor and safety blanket as he grapples with imposter syndrome in the clinic: “I feel dirty, too, / a brown-skinned imposter in my white coat” (124). I resonated with Campo’s struggle with what feels like a betrayal of his patients with whom he identifies but also his awareness of how, despite his qualifications and experience, he does not quite belong in the medical establishment. Like academia, the structure of professional medicine does not seem to be made for bodies of color, queer bodies, or disabled ones. Campo recognizes the white coat as a legible symbol of medical authority, that which “holds my shape, stands for something,” but also an identity that he steps into, that he uncomfortably learns to become in the repeated act of doing medicine (125). Verse affords a space for the bodymind covered by and shaped by the white coat to emerge even as it remains in formation. The poem is a revelatory removal of the white coat, a poetic exposure, a frank admission that “I wish I could be better than I am.” This brief declarative embodies Campo’s radical humility, one that I hope to embrace in my own critical and creative practices and impart to my students.