



Salvador Herrera // After the outbreak of racialized violence against Asian communities across the world, President Donald Trump, his staff, and supporters maintained that calling the COVID-19 disease “the Chinese virus” is harmless and has nothing to do with race.[1] Their willful ignorance attributes the phrase to the supposed source of the virus. However, the infinite permeability and interconnectedness of the world confounds the search for the origins of disease in the biological sciences, let alone the attribution of a non-human virus to racialized hosts.[2] Trump’s dangerous terminology has mutated into a range of epithets, including “Wuhan” and the “Kung Flu,” the latter term inciting a thunderous roar of applause from audience members at a youth rally in Phoenix, AZ.[3] Through the vehicle of humor, “Kung Flu” masks its own racism under the guise that it refers to the virus and not a group of people. These phrases are directive utterances: their deployment emboldens White supremacists and subtly directs them to brutalize Asian populations across the globe. The danger of the “Chinese” virus as a directive utterance is that it allows political leaders like Trump to disavow their racism, while simultaneously signaling to their followers that the source of their problems is a racialized population.

“But what about the Spanish flu? It came from Spain. Nobody thinks *that’s* racist,” chimes the overnight epidemiologist on Twitter. This common knowledge is false. Studies show that the A (H1N1) virus responsible for the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic “probably started in British Army camps in mainland Europe” two years before the first major outbreak; other sources point to “US Army training camps during the spring of 1918,” and even New York City.[4] Given the volatile dynamics of virus transmission and a lack of clear origin, there was no reason to name the disease the “Spanish” flu other than the fact that Spain was among the first European countries to report

cases of infection.[5] The naming of the virus had no localizable referent with regards to national origin, and neither does SARS-CoV-2 one hundred years later in 2020.

Of course, in our post-truth age, it is not a viable political strategy to debate anyone on the facts.[6] For the remainder of this article, I would like to teleport us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to very briefly examine the institutionalized pathologization of migrant bodies (Chinese, Japanese, and Latinx groups in particular) before following the narrative chronicles of Julio G. Arce. Arce was a Spanish newspaper editor who published a short story called “The Spanish Plague” on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1918, under the penname “Jorge Ulica” as part of a series called *la Crónicas diabólicas*. [7] In the style of Mexican costumbrismo—an aesthetic strategy drawing on realism to relay customs and “chronicles of everyday life”—Arce’s narrative rejects the assertion that “Spanish” bodies harbor disease by triangulating himself between other racialized groups. Running parallel to this narrative process, however, is his vexed relationship with members of his own “*raza*,” a relationship that betrays his need to control and differentiate people through storytelling.[8]

Arce belongs to the early-20<sup>th</sup> century tradition of “Spanish language presses” in the American Southwest which, according to Chicanx studies scholar Marissa K. López, allowed writers “to maintain their Mexican identity” while “privileging...their ideal *mexicanidad* over and against the degraded state of poor, revolutionary Mexico.”[9] Arce is hardly an exception. To stake out his own ambivalent claims to belonging, Arce depends on the specter of Yellow Peril and classist theories of disease in his humorous portrayals of “everyday life.” Here, a comparative race approach of the kind formulated by scholars Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson will allow me to unpack some of the complexities of race and disease as biological metaphors in Arce’s Spanish press story from 1918.[10]

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public health was a new discourse emerging nationwide with unique local manifestations in the form of institutional structures. In the context of Los Angeles County, historian Natalia Molina describes “public health as a site of racialization” that allowed health care workers and government officials to order Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican migrants into social hierarchies.[11] Chinese migrants of the period, particularly laborers, were constructed as culturally deficient disease carriers “who threatened to pollute the body politic.”[12] The modernizing mission of public health was a dualism premised on protecting the biopolitical fitness and economic prosperity of American citizens in the metropolis. This dualism was defined against and came at the expense of the livelihood and dignity of racialized populations.[13]

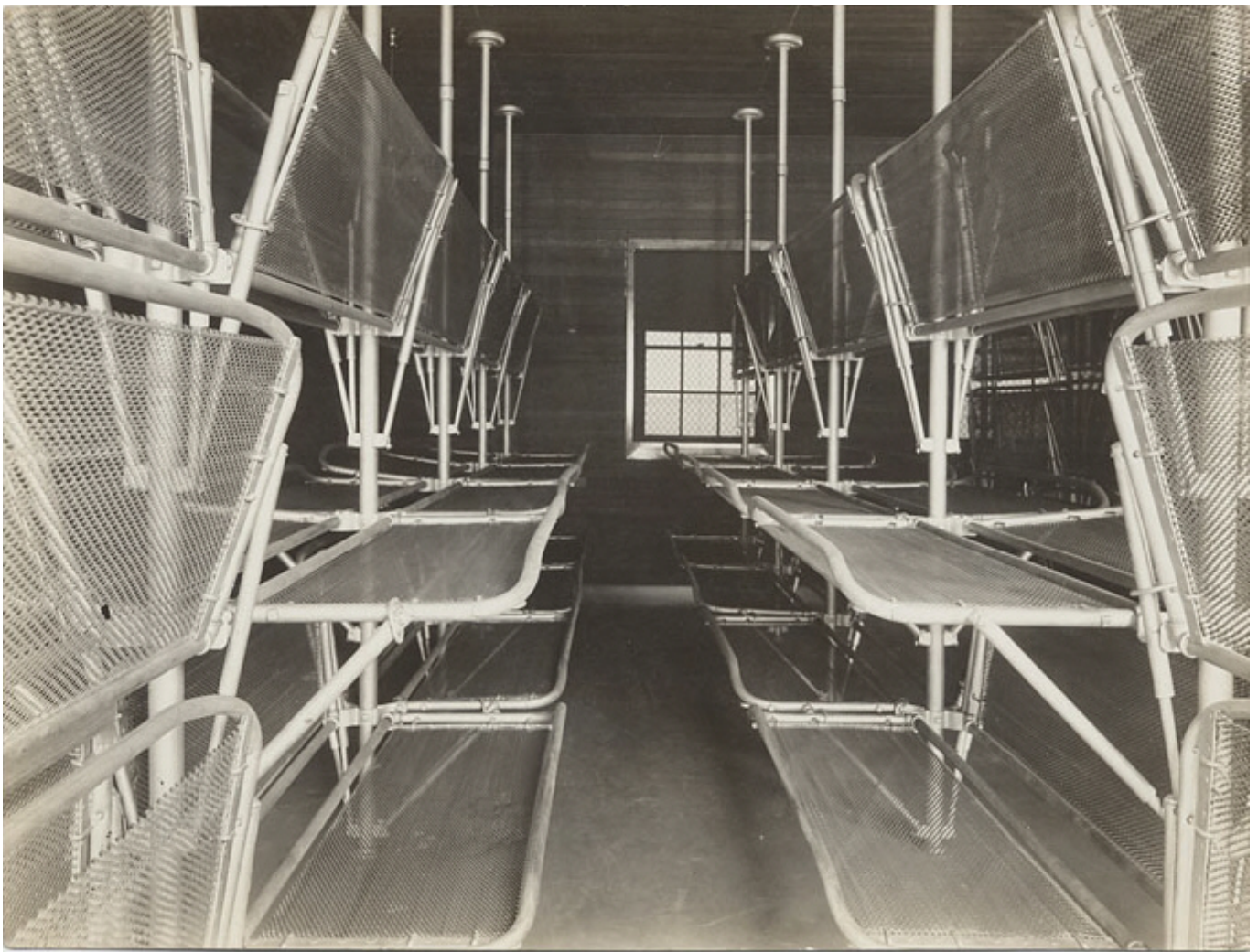
The “medicalized nativism” of Yellow Peril soon extended to all Asian groups such as Japanese farmers due to White racial anxieties over their status as economic competitors.[14] Japanese women faced particularly racist and sexist hostility. The fact that they labored in agricultural fields on par with men, and therefore transgressed White American gender norms, marked them as a threat to the dominant patriarchal culture. Racialized perceptions of their hyperfertility drove fears that Japanese migrants would not only multiply and “dilute” the racial makeup of the United States, but that their offspring would have access to US citizenship and property rights.[15] By contrast, Mexicans in Los Angeles County were perceived as cheap, “docile” farmhands and

transient employees who could be reformed and “civilized” if necessary. This characterization later made Mexican laborers vulnerable to the atrocities of racialized medical procedures and cleansing regiments.[16] If Asians were alien threats in the racial hierarchy of California, Mexicans constituted a “lack” as not-White, as neither Asian nor Black and therefore malleable.[17] The Yellow Peril discourse broke ground for the comparable racialization of Mexicans; the typhoid epidemic of 1916 marked the beginning of their alienization and pathologization in an already existing hierarchy of race ordered by the discourse of public health.[18]

Asian migrants also faced brutal pathologization further north in San Francisco. American studies scholar Gary Y. Okihiro details a history of immigration detention in this “hub of anti-Japanese, anti-Asian agitation.”[19] For example, in 1882, hundreds of Chinese migrants were kept “in a [processing] facility called the ‘shed,’ a two-story warehouse at Pier 40 on the waterfront.”[20] Conditions were so cramped and unsanitary that officials appealed for an upgraded facility in 1904 on Angel Island—Ellis Island’s evil twin on the West Coast.[21] Here, all racialized groups of migrants entering the region were interrogated by immigration officers and inspected by health officials. Okihiro writes:

*From 1910 to 1940, over a million people entered or departed the United States through the port of San Francisco, and about half of them passed through Angel Island Immigration Station. Although designed primarily for the Chinese (some 100,000 of them), during those years Angel Island’s detention cells also held 85,000 Japanese, 8,000 South Asians, 1,000 Koreans, and 1,000 Filipinos. The island in addition held 8,000 Russians and Jews and 400 Mexicans, along with Asians from Formosa, Indonesia, and Singapore; Pacific Islanders from Borneo, Fiji, Samoa, and Tahiti; and Central Americans from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[22]*

As with Los Angeles, the initial pathologization of Chinese migrants was expanded to include an undiscerning pan-Asian threat under the discourse of Yellow Peril in San Francisco. The tying of biological concepts of race to disease in the Angel Island detention center formed such an expansive framework that Latinx people and other migrants were similarly racialized and pathologized in the same space.



**Fig. 1.** North, Hart Hyatt. *U.S. Immigration Station, Angel Island, San Francisco Bay. Dormitory*: From *Photographs from the Hart Hyatt North papers: Angel Island, 1890-1943, San Francisco, CA*. "Angel Island Immigration Station Dormitory," *Wikimedia Commons*, 2006, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angel\\_Island\\_Immigration\\_Station\\_Dormitory\\_b.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angel_Island_Immigration_Station_Dormitory_b.jpg).

Julio G. Arce, an expatriate from Mexico to San Francisco in 1915 as a result of his counter-revolutionary writings, would have entered this cultural climate of California in which migrant bodies were already quarantined, a space in which he could narrate his "ideal *mexicanidad*." [23] Literary scholars Nicolás Kanellos and Helvetia Martell confirm that Arce's "México de afuera" attitude shines through across his *crónicas* as a disdain for working-class Mexicans despite his status "as a self-elected conscience for the Mexican immigrant community." [24] In the introduction to "The Spanish Plague," Jorge Ulica describes "the bad *influence*" of "Spanish" as "more evil than influenza itself," a "curse" on the people descended "from our mother country," a curse on those who were forced to speak the language during colonialism, and a curse on those who are racialized for it today:

*Well, all of us were in a way already in quarantine, even before they let some influenza or another in. You can tell because scarcely had someone 'de la raza' sneezed, even though he had actually taken snuff, then everyone around would cover their noses and mouths with handkerchiefs soaked in pesticides or disinfectant to impede a blast of bacillus, spiraea, or another micrococcus, or other such great serpent then out you go and the next thing you knew you were stuck in some bed somewhere. [25]*

Organizing around the term "*raza*" here, Arce constructs a maximalist sentence whose "sneeze" cannot be contained by "pesticides or disinfectant" even though "Spanish" people "were...already in quarantine." Ulica's initial narrative ambivalence morphs into a serpentine comedy that preys on

the fears of xenophobic rhetoric to construct a racial community, a community loosely bound by the shared struggle of being a “Spanish” pathology.

This sense of commonality is complicated, though. Arce was a “pharmacology student” in Mexico who had to flee the country because of his conservative political views. He deploys his vast medical vocabulary (“bacillus, spiraea, or another micrococcus”) in this narrative to set himself apart in terms of class as one of the educated elites in California.[26] Following Black studies scholar Alexander G. Weheliye, ideas of “Spanish” people and the Spanish language as “biological[ly] or cultural[ly]” deficient are really “a set of sociopolitical processes.” Race is not a virus. “Race” in this context is the product of a “racializing assemblage” constructed by discourses of pathology and origins; it is an apparatus whose linguistic signs demarcate our differential access to categories of the human.[27] In the narration above, Ulica uses scientific terms to showcase his vast medical vocabulary and disrupt the association of disease with the vague category of “Spanish” people, but this comes at the expense of working-class Mexicans who he racializes later in the story.

Ulica’s introductory narration shows how, when read as a sign of pathology itself, the Spanish language masks the racialized slippage between the “Spanish” illness and “Spanish” people. This slippage correlates with the racialized perceptions of Latinx and Asian groups. Public health discourses and political rhetoric of over one hundred years have pathologized their bodies and migration patterns with viral epithets under the guise of demarcating the origins of disease. Arce hijacks this slippage to critique those in the United States who pathologize him, which also allows contemporary readers to further unpack the settler-colonial functions of the “curse” that is language. However, Ulica the narrator falls short of extending that critique to include the full scope of his own “*raza*,” as well as the pathologization of Asian migrants in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the introduction, the first half of Arce’s narrative takes place in a “15-cent restaurant.” At the restaurant, a Japanese waitress is surprised to hear that Jorge Ulica speaks Spanish. “Yes, pretty, ‘Musmé,’ Spanish,” he confirms. “Musmé” refers to Pierre Loti’s novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), which is known for popularizing the trope of the Western traveler entering into a “temporary Japanese ‘marriage’ with a local girl.”[28] Loti’s novel was so widely read that Vincent van Gogh painted a portrait of the same name (French *mousmé*) meant to represent “a young Provençale girl” who the Dutch artist believed most closely resembled a Japanese woman.[29]

This Orientalizing, fetishizing, and sexualizing term is hardly a compliment, as scholar Yoko Kawaguchi makes clear regarding Loti’s literary representation: “Docile, unassuming, faithful and trusting, a *musume*, in the end, was really no better than a leech, sucking her lover dry of affection, patience, and cash.”[30] Similarly, after the waitstaff at the restaurant quarantine Ulica and another “Spanish” person when he returns for dinner later that night, Ulica tells the reader that his plate and utensils are dunked “in a pot of boiling water to demicrobe them.” The staff sterilize everything he touches, all except for the money he pays “the little Japanese woman.”[31] The crude joke is that she, and by extension feminized Asian groups as a whole, will always take dirty money. While the Asian characters in Arce’s representation pathologize their Spanish-speaking patrons, Ulica racializes them in turn through the patronizing stereotype of the deceiving, lecherous

*mousmé*. Ulica's offhand remark is an epithet meant to mark the specter of Yellow Peril across the globe: from France to San Francisco.

In the second half of Arce's narrative, Jorge Ulica takes a boat across the Bay to visit one of his "Spanish" friends in Oakland. She is married to a White man named Mr. Thompson, who insists that Ulica sleeps outside because he might be a carrier of the "Spanish" flu. "But, paisana," Ulica protests, "you're 'Spanish,' too and so..." She quickly interjects, "Ah, but I'm not 'Spanish' anymore, not since I married an American." While it is plausible that this friend of Ulica's aspires to whiteness and has decided to "marry up" and become "an American," Arce has a penchant for hollowing out his female characters. In other diabolical chronicles, Ulica the narrator warns "Mexican men not to bring their wives to the United States" to prevent them from becoming empowered and emasculating them.[32] In "The Spanish Plague," Arce portrays his "Spanish" compatriot as a traitor to her race. This triangulation is a masculinist, possessive, and patriarchal perspective; it is rooted in the "monstrous double" of "Guadalupe-Malintzin" identified by Chicana feminist Norma Alarcón in the figurative history of Spanish colonialism and political configurations of Chicano nationalism. [33] Ulica evokes the ethno-nationalism of "la raza" as a means of control: a metric by which he can measure his friend's devotion to her own "kind."

Outraged, Ulica manages to convince his friend to let him sleep indoors, albeit in the servant's quarters sharing a bed with the son of their cook named Librada who "has a bit of a cough." [34] Given that he ties notions of class to uncleanness and disease, Ulica is both offended and horrified. He assumes that he will contract the "Spanish" flu if he sleeps in their quarters. Upon leaving the next morning, Ulica's "fellow countrywoman [has] the nerve to ask [him] how [he] had slept." [35] "Terrible, atrocious, paisana," he responds. "Well, Mr. Thompson was afraid you were a carrier." Ulica the narrator breaks off from the main dialogue and offers the reader his internal monologue: "Ah, paisana, I didn't bring it, but I'm certainly leaving with it! Fool! And she disappeared like a soul carried off by the devil." What makes this story a "diabolic chronicle" is not only the racialization that Ulica faces due to his "Spanish" tongue and the comical situations he encounters as a result. What makes them diabolical is that in the process of being racialized, he demonizes everyone around him.

"The Spanish Plague" reveals the limits of (ethno-)national belonging as premised on patriarchal leadership, classist notions of respectability, and a sense of belonging through our shared suffering. Arce's persona Ulica thoroughly critiques the racialization of Mexicans via discourses of pathology, but he ends up deflecting his resentment for those processes onto other oppressed groups. His story includes subtle jabs at Japanese figures, possessive and sexist narratives of ethnic belonging, and demeaning attitudes towards laboring people. In his narrative, we see that solidarity across groups is strictly nominal ("*la raza*," "paisano," "paisana"). The virus knows no borders, and yet racialized groups are divided within and pitted against one another out of a misunderstood need for survival. It gets to the point where we no longer recognize that, in different ways, we are all pathologized and thereby racialized by discourses of disease and origin.

In the present of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic we find ourselves at a global crossroads. As Ju-Hyun Park explains in “The Alien and the Sovereign: Yellow Peril in Pandemic Times”: “The exercise of state power during the pandemic can be summed up as the mass sacrifice of the disproportionately Black and otherwise racialized poor to defend profits...Yellow Peril has been deployed in this context to maintain state authority and national identity amidst crisis.”[36] For Park, contemporary discourses of Yellow Peril are a variant of earlier Orientalisms. These discourses of race allow for pathological scapegoating on the world stage. The directive utterances of White supremacists are laced with racialized codes that inspire violence against Asian communities. The end goal, as Park observes, is the stabilization of the settler-colonial nation-state via White supremacist violence against racialized groups during these times of “crisis.”

If this is true, where does the vast spectrum of “Spanish” people fit into that equation, and how will we respond? How do we begin to think beyond our own racialized groups? How do we show up for others who suffer differently? Building from the work of Black studies scholars Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman, Park proposes a “counter-infrastructure [of care] to challenge the reign of capital and the state.” Following this coalitional ethos, will we choose to organize behind Black lives, the undocumented migrants from all around the world who are sprayed down with toxic chemicals in detention centers, and the exploited class of essential workers and other laborers from agricultural fields and meatpacking plants to grocery stores and Amazon warehouses who are disproportionately at risk for infection? Or will we stake our own claims to civic belonging and human dignity on the backs of those who are already quarantined?

## Endnotes

[1] See Chalfant. The United States has seen over fifteen hundred reported cases as of April (Human Rights Watch). Considering our northern neighbor, of five hundred Chinese Canadians surveyed in a recent study, a third of participants reported incidents of maltreatment, intimidation, and harassment as a result of news coverage from the United States that links the virus to Chinese bodies (Angus Reid).

[2] The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus is zoonotically transmitted from animals, namely bats, to humans (Hu et al.). The family of coronaviruses it stems from are found in bat and bird species all across the globe, and in bio-evolutionary terms, “the most recent ancestor common for all coronaviruses is likely...millions of years” old (Lvov and Alkhovsky; Wertheim et al.). In short, the pandemic we are currently seeing could have emerged anywhere in the world at any time given the right environmental conditions.

[3] See Lee.

[4] The A (H1N1) virus likely reached Spain in the Spring of 1918 as laborers commuted by train from France to Spain and Portugal (Trilla et al. 668). For more on the role of naming in racializing medical discourses surrounding the “Spanish” flu, see Hoppe.

[5] Ibid. 669.

[6] For a discussion of the inefficacy of facts in science studies and cultural criticism, see Latour 231, 234.

[7] See Stavans et al. 329–32.

[8] Ibid. 329–30.

[9] See López 109.

[10] Hong and Ferguson's model is an anti-institutional, counter-normative, "comparative race analytic" premised on exploring contradiction and heterogeneity between and within difference (9, 19, 22). Drawing from the work of women of color feminists and queer of color critique, their model allows them to study cultural objects to imagine "alternative models of coalition beyond... homogeneity or similarity" beyond the limitations of mainstream queer theory and minoritarian nationalisms (1, 4-8, 15-6)

[11] See Molina 4–5.

[12] Ibid. 54.

[13] Ibid. 12.

[14] Ibid. 58.

[15] Ibid. 56.

[16] Ibid. 58–61.

[17] Ibid. 4–5, 7–8.

[18] Ibid. 69.

[19] See Okihiro 276.

[20] Ibid. 268.

[21] Ibid. 269–71.

[22] Ibid. 269.

[23] See López 109.



[24] See Kanellos and Martell 48.

[25] See Stavans et al. 330.

[26] Ibid. 329.

[27] See Weheliye 4.

[28] See Kawaguchi 131.

[29] See Van Gogh.

[30] See Kawaguchi 130.

[31] See Stavans et al. 330–31.

[32] See Kanellos and Martell 49.

[33] See Alarcón 68–69.

[34] See Stavans et al. 331.

[35] Ibid. 332.

[36] See Park.

**Featured Image:** Policemen in Seattle wearing masks made by the Red Cross, during the influenza epidemic. December 1918. Public Domain, via National Archives

## Works Cited

Alarcón, Norma. "Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism." *Cultural Critique*, no. 13, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 57–87. JSTOR, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/1354269.

Angus Reid. "Blame, Bullying and Disrespect: Chinese Canadians Reveal Their Experiences with Racism during COVID-19." *Angus Reid Institute*, 22 June 2020. *angusreid.org*, <http://angusreid.org/racism-chinese-canadians-covid19/>.

Chalfant, Morgan. "White House Defends Trump's Use of Term as Not Racist." *TheHill*, 22 June 2020. *thehill.com*, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/503927-white-house-defends-trumps-use-of-term-as-not-racist>.

Hoppe, Trevor. "'Spanish Flu': When Infectious Disease Names Blur Origins and Stigmatize Those Infected." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 108, no. 11, 2018, pp. 1462–64. *PubMed*,

doi:10.2105/AJPH.2018.304645.

Hu, Ben, et al. "Bat Origin of Human Coronaviruses." *Virology Journal*, vol. 12, Dec. 2015. *PubMed Central*, doi:10.1186/s12985-015-0422-1.

Human Rights Watch. "Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide." *Human Rights Watch*, 12 May 2020. <http://www.hrw.org>, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>.

Hyatt, North, Hart. *U.S. Immigration Station, Angel Island, San Francisco Bay. Dormitory: From Photographs from the Hart Hyatt North Papers: Angel Island. 1943 1890*. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, *Wikimedia Commons*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angel\\_Island\\_Immigration\\_Station\\_Dormitory\\_b.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angel_Island_Immigration_Station_Dormitory_b.jpg).

Kanellos, Nicolás, and Helvetia Martell. *Hispanic Periodicals in the United States, Origins to 1960: A Brief History and Comprehensive Bibliography*. Arte Publico Press, 2000.

Kawaguchi, Yoko. *Butterfly's Sisters: The Geisha in Western Culture*. Yale University Press, 2010.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 225–48. JSTOR, *JSTOR*, doi:10.1086/421123.

Lee, Bruce Y. "Trump Once Again Calls Covid-19 Coronavirus The 'Kung Flu.'" *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com>, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2020/06/24/trump-once-again-calls-covid-19-coronavirus-the-kung-flu/>.

López, Marissa K. *Chicano Nations: The Hemispheric Origins of Mexican American Literature*. NYU Press, 2011.

Lvov, D. K., and S. V. Alkhovsky. "Source of the COVID-19 pandemic: ecology and genetics of coronaviruses (Betacoronavirus: Coronaviridae) SARS-CoV, SARS-CoV-2 (subgenus Sarbecovirus), and MERS-CoV (subgenus Merbecovirus)." *Voprosy Virusologii*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2020, pp. 62–70. *PubMed*, doi:10.36233/0507-4088-2020-65-2-62-70.

Molina, Natalia. *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*. First edition, University of California Press, 2006.

Okiihiro, Gary Y. *American History Unbound*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2015.

Park, Ju-Hyun. "The Alien and the Sovereign: Yellow Peril in Pandemic Times." *Evergreen Review*, June 2020. [evergreenreview.com](http://evergreenreview.com), <https://evergreenreview.com/read/the-alien-and-the-sovereign-yellow-peril-in-pandemic-times/>.

Stavans, Ilan, et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*. College edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Trilla, Antoni, et al. "The 1918 'Spanish Flu' in Spain." *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, vol. 47, no. 5, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 668–73. JSTOR, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40307722>.

Van Gogh, Vincent. *La Mousmé*. 1888. <http://www.nga.gov>, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46626.html>.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press Books, 2014.

Wertheim, Joel O., et al. "A Case for the Ancient Origin of Coronaviruses." *Journal of Virology*, vol. 87, no. 12, June 2013, pp. 7039–45. *PubMed Central*, doi:10.1128/JVI.03273-12.