"Vacuna o muerte"

Latinx Political Cartoons as Vehicle to Raise COVID-19 Vaccination Awareness

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In the United States, the Latinx population was hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other factors, high infection and low vaccination rates marked the Latinx pandemic experience; the differential was evidenced even by the data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Oppel et al. 2020; Noe-Bustamante et al. 2021; Piedra et al. 2022). Although mainstream media often imputed such outcomes to the minority's alleged prevalence of underlying medical conditions and hesitancy towards health measures and vaccines, reality is much more complex and directly related to labor and structural violence issues. Furthermore, the lack of COVID-19 information that is culturally coded has also played a major role in the spreading of misinformation across Latinx communities. Medical communication has been either monolingual or erroneously translated to Spanish, filled with jargon and oblivious of the specificities of Latinx access to health care.[1] As the vaccine campaign began, the problem was amplified by the fact that–just like these communities had prior difficulties to access testing–the Latinx population on the average encounters structural barriers to access vaccines (among many, see Cheng and Li 2022).

As the vaccine campaigns unfolded, several activist groups formed to fight against misinformation across Latinx communities, in particular in rural and marginalized areas. Among them, COVIDLatino emerged as a project promoted by Arizona State University and aimed at providing critical information on testing

1 The term 'Latinx' is meant as an inclusive definition to refer to people of Latin American heritage who live and/or work in the United States in a stable manner, regardless of their gender. 'Chicanx' is the agender term identifying Mexican Americans who are openly proud and politically engaged against assimilation and erasure of their heritage; evidently, all Chicanx individuals are Mexican American, but not all Mexican Americans are Chicanx.

and vaccines across the country, with a specific focus on the Southwest.[2] Its campaigns endorsed the work of Chicano cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz, who was then briefly employed by the California Department of Health to create material specifically promoting vaccination in the Latinx communities. Keeping his cartoons as main reference, this chapter examines the discourse specific to Latinx cartoons on the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, highlighting its strong connections to Latinx heritage and themes specific to the structural violence that the Latinx communities have endured since the start of the pandemic.

Raising Awareness Through Political Cartoons

Eduardo López Alcaraz, better known as Lalo, was born in San Diego to a couple of Mexican migrants. Attending San Diego State University in the 1980s, Alcaraz joined the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and started producing editorial cartoons for the local newspaper; he then graduated in architecture at Berkeley and from 1992 through 2010 created editorial cartoons for *LA Weekly*, getting syndicated in 1998 (Fernández L'Hoeste 2017, 25–28). His best-known syndicated cartoon is *La Cucaracha*, a Latinx-themed political daily strip, and through the years his reputation has progressively grown outside the Latinx audience. As Héctor D. Fernández L'Hoeste underlines, Alcaraz's work is tied to an "attitude"–that "implies a healthy dose of irreverence," as the artist himself "is critical of the status quo and skeptical of the printed word" (2017, 31)–as well as a consolidated connection to the Latinx community.

The artist defines himself as a 'pocho,' a slur used by Mexicans to describe Mexican Americans and Mexican migrants who lack or have lost an 'authentic' connection to their heritage and language fluency. However, the term has been reclaimed by those Chicanxs that feel it defines, rather, the pride of having both Mexican and American cultural roots, embodied by their code-switching and customs peculiar to Mexican American communities. As the artist himself puts it, explaining his POCHO endeavors,[3] it is a process of re-imagination of a pejorative term used to insult "a

2 The project has a bilingual website (https://covidlatino.org), which has been updated and reshaped repeatedly since 2021, as well as a YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOJV3HlCXxcqp8QmpVpTKqQ) and social media profiles. By the time of the last revision of this chapter in September 2024, the project has grown, archiving part of the initial material while adding artwork and animated videos on long COVID, including Lalo Alcaraz's "No tacos para ti! (Spanish)" published on March 15, 2024, by the new YouTube channel @ellaboratorioASU.

3 Lalo Alcaraz is the founder of the satirical publication *POCHO Magazine* (printed throughout the 1990s) and main editor of the *POCHO* website that collects political cartoons by Latinx artists, as well as his own daily strip *La Cucaracha* (https://www.pocho.com).

citizen of two worlds but not really of either" into the identity of an individual that "belongs in BOTH worlds and wears BOTH identities proudly." His editorial cartoons and strips are, thus, strongly influenced by notions connected to his own liminal identity and cultural in-betweenness, often characterized by code-switching between English and Spanish, as well as themes and iconographies that are culturally relevant to the Mexican American population.

During the pandemic, Alcaraz tackled COVID-19-related topics, blending satire and culturally coded commentary on its developments, the authorities' responses, and public reactions to both the virus spread and the consequent measures imposed. He produced most of these cartoons with the aim of engaging the Latinx audience, featuring a variety of discursive strategies, culturally charged puns, Catholic symbols, Latinx historical figures, political commentary, and play on stereotypes targeting Latinx residents and migrants. For his contribution, Alcaraz was the first Latinx recipient of the Herblock Prize (March 2022) due to his coverage of issues affecting the Latinx minority, as well as the peculiar perspective from which he tackled the pandemic and the contemporary surge of nativist views during the Trump administration.

Some of Alcaraz's satirical commentary on the pandemic was accompanied by references to traditions and popular culture tropes that are widespread among Latinx individuals, but not necessarily outside their community. As Christina Michelmore stresses, political cartoons are a graphic version of an editorial, since they analyze and interpret a situation, influencing and orienting the readers toward a stance on the issue represented (2000, 37). They embody a kind of news discourse–opinion news–that enables the public to judge what is happening on the basis of the cartoonist's rendition of it, and thus organize and interpret what they see giving meaning to it within their own set of values and beliefs. On the cartoonist's part, there is an assumed shared political and cultural knowledge that allows the readers to catch and interpret the visual and verbal references, as well as an assumed up-to-date knowledge–since quite often cartoons are based on immediacy and the timely depiction of the most recent turn of events.

Martin J. Medhurst and Michael A. DeSousa trace a few fundamental parameters to analyze political cartoons: "political commonplace, literary/cultural allusions, personal character traits, and situational themes" (1981, 200). Alcaraz's COVID-19-related cartoons in which the virus appears as an active agent in the pandemic–albeit helped by human spreaders–mix the anthropomorphized traits the artist gives it with situational narratives that have "little salience beyond their immediate context" (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981, 202). The cartoons that he produced to raise pandemic-related awareness, though, combine political commonplace and ethnic heritage-relevant allusions. Political commonplaces represent something the readers are assumed to be familiar with and that they can identify as a cue that the topic described is related to politics, whereas cultural allusions refer to fictional figures

recognizable by the public. Expanding Medhurst and DeSousa's definition, it can be argued that these allusions embrace as well elements belonging to popular culture imaginaries that are relevant to the specific audience the cartoon is aimed at.

Alcaraz's political cartoons are characterized by colorful art and a simple structure, often revolving around one main subject. The metaphors are usually immediate and quite all-encompassing, understandable by the American public broadly. However, the ones aimed specifically at the Mexican American–and in many cases, more broadly Latinx–audience are often more articulated and rely heavily on shared cultural referents. Since the onset of the pandemic, Alcaraz regularly brought COVID-19-related topics in his daily strip La Cucaracha and, at the same time, used his syndicated political cartoons to address issues that hit the Latinx communities in particular. Besides satirizing the authorities' often inadequate responses to the unfolding of the pandemic, Alcaraz targets his own community, exposing how the virus outbreaks and related measures have been met with ambivalent reactions by the Mexican American population.

In the case of the "Welcome to the LA Quarantine" cartoon (July 2, 2020; Illustration VIII.1), Alcaraz reprises in detail one of the best-known engravings by Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), whose "calacas" were a satirical political commentary on Mexican society in the Porfiriato era,[4] as well as on political actors involved in the Revolution. Affirming the black nature of Mexican humor (Breton 1966, 18), Posada's illustrations were strongly rooted in Mexican heritage and contributed to indelibly shape fundamental iconographies of Mexico's post-revolutionary popular culture. Alcaraz reclaims the spirit of Posada's work to expose his own people in a way that they surely understand and interpret in the correct, meaningful way: he criticizes Mexican American citizens for organizing parties and backyard barbecues during the pandemic. The organization of gatherings that became superspreading events in the summer of 2020 was not circumscribed to the Latinx population, but he targeted his ethnic peers explicitly to raise their awareness.

In general, the ways in which the Latinx communities articulate their sociality are rooted in their heritage and aimed at reinforcing their in-person social networks, preserving their customs through group activities, and spending a significative time cultivating their family and community bonds. Intergenerational gatherings in which food is shared among many people are common; for Mexican Amer-

4 Initially influenced by the work of Manuel Manilla, throughout his life Posada produced political illustrations and cartoons for newspapers, criticizing the hypocrisy of the upper classes, the political elite's inherent contradictions, and in general the Mexican status quo. It is worth noting that the pervasive Día de Muertos figure of La Catrina derives from his satirical illustration *La calavera garbancera*, as some of his most known engravings were reprised in post-revolutionary times by other Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera (on Posada's prolific artistic production and its relevance, see, for example, Bonilla 2013).

icans, they take the form of "carne asada" or barbecue. Such kind of events implied high chances of infection and the development of severe symptoms before the diffusion of vaccines. Alcaraz's take on Posada's condemnation of social hypocrisy points the finger at the illusionary attitude his peers exhibited: no matter how much they told themselves that there was no risk in socializing without precautions, they were condemned to contract the virus with possibly grave consequences.

Illustration VIII.1: Eduardo López Alcaraz critiques the Mexican American community for organizing backyard parties

From Eduardo López Alcaraz's X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/laloalcaraz/status/1278593217005359105, July 2, 2020. © Eduardo López Alcaraz, 2020.

When the vaccination campaigns started, Alcaraz tried to raise awareness among the Latinx minorities right away. The cartoon "Vacuna o muerte" (April 29, 2021; Illustration VIII.2) reproduces in detail the famed print "Tierra o Muerte" by Mexican American artist Emanuel Martinez. The original work, in turn, refers to Emiliano Zapata and the motto "Tierra y libertad" (land and freedom) that symbolized the agrarian struggles in rural Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century. Martinez created the image in 1967 to support his adhesion to the Alianza Federal de Mercedes (Federal Land Grant Alliance) in New Mexico, supporting the Movimiento Chicano led by activist Reies López Tijerina. The rifle Zapata holds is substituted by a vaccine syringe, invoking a political stance regarding vaccination as a form of reclamation for underserved Mexican American communities.

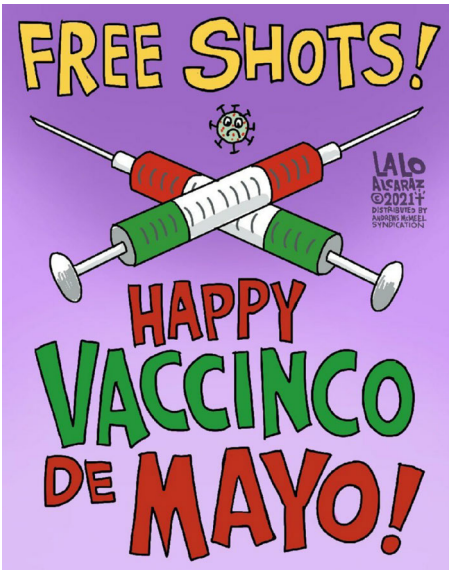
Illustration VIII.2: Eduardo López Alcaraz's "Vacuna o muerte" draws on Emanuel Martinez's "Tierra o Muerte" to suggest vaccination as a means to reclaiming Mexican Americanness

From Eduardo López Alcaraz's X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/laloalcaraz/status/1387861582214926337, April 29, 2021. © Eduardo López Alcaraz, 2021.

Published on May 5, 2021, "Happy vaccinco de mayo" (Illustration VIII.3) plays with one of the yearly commemorations for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The date marks the anniversary of the Battle of Puebla, in which the Mexicans fought against the rule of the Second French Empire and defeated the French forces in 1862. Nowadays, the celebration is much more popular in the United States, where it has become a symbol of Mexican American pride and heritage. Alcaraz addresses once again the gatherings Mexican American communities engage in, connecting them to the necessity to be vaccinated before participating in intergenerational events.

Besides his own interest in raising awareness regarding the vaccination campaign, Alcaraz eventually started a collaboration with the project COVIDLatino to spread information about vaccines, leveraging his consolidated audience across Latinx minorities to combat misinformation.

Illustration VIII.3: Eduardo López Alcaraz again calls attention to get vaccinated before attending in-person gatherings, this time in the context of Cinco de Mayo



From Eduardo López Alcaraz's X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/laloalcaraz/status/1390053427623825410, May 5, 2021. © Eduardo López Alcaraz, 2021.

COVIDLatino: Promoting Vaccination in the Latinx Community

The COVIDLatino health communication campaign was launched in May 2021 to foster health literacy within the Latinx population, providing information on the COVID-19 pandemic that is science-based and shaped for a Spanish-speaking audience. According to the official website, COVIDLatino "is focused on providing critical & timely information to ease the burden of COVID-19 on Latinx communities," both on the SARS-CoV-2 spread and vaccination. Its main communication strategies relied on the circulation of cartoons and animated videos that address fundamental concerns, sources of misinformation, and motives of hesitancy specific to the Latinx communities examined by the scholars and professionals involved in the project. In spring 2021, COVIDLatino's clips were officially used by the California Department

of Public Health for its public service announcements promoting the vaccine booster campaign.

The project stems from the work that Gilberto Lopez directs at the School of Transborder Studies (Arizona State University) on science communication that is culturally relevant for the Latinx and immigrant populations. For underserved minorities that include individuals who are bilingual or non-proficient English-speakers, it is fundamental to access, process, and understand health information that is tailored in the most effective way possible. Observing the lack of clear information his own community was dealing with at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lopez began to work specifically on the health communication that was circulating among Latinx people. In his early approaches to the task, his laboratory collaborated with the transmedia content agency Creative Frontiers in spring 2020 to produce the COVID Health Animation Project, addressing misinformation on the pandemic in Urdu and Spanish. At the same time, with the support of the University of California and local organizations, a team of scholars conducted a survey on agricultural Latinx communities and developed a mixed-methods study to pinpoint the community's specific concerns, beliefs, and struggles (Lopez 2020a).

As Lopez underlines (2020b), the pandemic was not the 'great equalizer' as it was often claimed in public discourse about the allegedly indiscriminate consequences of the spread. Despite media discourses that depicted the pandemic in democratic terms, the socioeconomic reality of it actually aggravated underlying discrimination and structural violence differentials, disproportionally affecting rural communities and marginalized minorities. The pandemic hit both urban and rural Latinx communities hard, as the outbreak–and the institutional response to it–exacerbated preexisting health inequities (Macias Gil et al. 2022). Latinx citizens and migrants are overrepresented in essential jobs and activities that cannot be carried out remotely, are subjected to unequal access to basic and quality health care, and more often live in multigenerational households.

Contextual vulnerability was one of the crucial factors that shaped the impact of the pandemic on the Latinx population. The main reasons for differential transmission were directly related to structural factors, especially workplace vulnerability (Do and Frank 2021; McClure et al. 2020). High rates of transmission were connected to the conditions endured at worksites, as well as to the lack of childcare infrastructure and paid sick leaves, in both rural and urban contexts (Quandt et al. 2021). Latinx workers employed in so-called 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demanding), meat packing, and agriculture dealt with limited–or non-existent–respect for preventive measures and work conditions that discouraged proper recovery from COVID-related illness. The workings of racial capitalism operating within public health implied complications as well for ethnic healthcare workers, in particular those who were employed in particular in taxing nursing roles (McClure et al. 2020, 1248).

A few fundamental factors characterized the issues intrinsic to the Latinx pandemic experience. For immigrants and non-proficient English speakers, the lack of reliable public health communication and consistent care delivered in Spanish "delay[ed] critical messaging at a time when recognition of symptoms and precaution application is vital to reduce transmission" (Zaeh et al. 2021, 14). Likewise, the impossibility to be supported by one's own family during hospitalization, access an interpreter or health mediator, and express concerns and conditions effectively to healthcare providers increased the Latinx patients' potential vulnerability.

Furthermore, COVID-19 had an especially heavy burden among older adults belonging to ethnic and racial minority populations, due to a combination of exposure risk, so-called weathering processes, and healthcare inequity (Garcia et al. 2021). Limited healthcare access and pervasive lack of insurance make these individuals particularly prone to contract infectious and chronic disease that remain ineffectively addressed. Such underlying conditions add to the burden constituted by chronic stressors including "poverty, marginalisation, restricted access to resources and social support, limited opportunities, acculturative stress" (Garcini et al. 2021, 285). In addition, the nursing and assisted-living facilities that most Latinx individuals can afford were characterized by insufficient resources to guarantee prevention and efficient intervention during the pandemic (McClure et al. 2020, 1249).

Underserved and marginalized Latinx communities were facing distress and mental health stressor secondary to the pandemic that were not addressed by public institutions. As Luz M. Garcini et al. (2021) highlight, besides the widespread intersectional issues related to social isolation and economic uncertainty, primary stressors for Latinx individuals included misinformation, increased immigration-related preoccupation, and forced isolation from their habitual networks of social support. At the same time, the studies reflect how "robust and collective coping skills to foster resilience" within the community emerged that are culturally specific (Garcini et al. 2021, 291). COVIDLatino emerges from these intents to deal with health communication in ways that complement public health information and purposely fight against misinformation, conspiracy, and fake news regarding all aspects related to COVID-19.

During the first stages of the pandemic, the Latinx access to testing was complicated by the logistics of the public health official response that left large rural areas and marginalized neighborhoods even more underserved than usual. When the vaccination campaign eventually started in December 2020, the same type of obstacles complicated the immunization of the Latinx population. The need to register online, the inflexibility of scheduling, and the location as well as opening hours of vaccination sites were only a few main issues that communities facing digital divide, dependence on public transportation, lower education attainment levels, and inflexible work schedules had to cope with. In addition, misinformation and con-

fusion spread quickly due to the lack of dedicated information material on the vaccines, leading many to rely on information found on the internet, through social media, or by word-of-mouth. The material provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) barely reached marginalized communities and in general used technical jargon and "unnecessarily complex information about COVID, about vaccines" (Lopez 2021) and thus could not offer an efficient means to counter misinformation and hesitancy. The necessity to find more effective ways to raise awareness and spread information led these activist movements to rely on storytelling and the comics medium.

Several scholars have tried to pinpoint the communication factors that can be more effective among Latinx populations. In particular, Armando De Alba, Daniel Schober, and Patrik Johansson's study evidences that the means perceived as most effective for health education and promotion are "videos, brochures, and websites," accompanied by the use of "visual aids, large font size, and a well-spaced layout," as well as cartoons and pictures that allow individuals to share them with their family members, including children and the elderly (De Alba et al. 2021, 392–93). Likewise, tailored language is key to both catch the interest of the users and get the message across. In general, the use of Latinx American dialects and code-switching have become fundamental elements appealing to Latinx cultural heritage, as opposed to dominant monoglossic Anglo culture and its mainstream means of communication. In the case of health communication, the employment of specific linguistic strategies can reduce the sociocultural distance between the individual and health professionals, facilitating a positive attitude, lower diffidence, and increased identification.

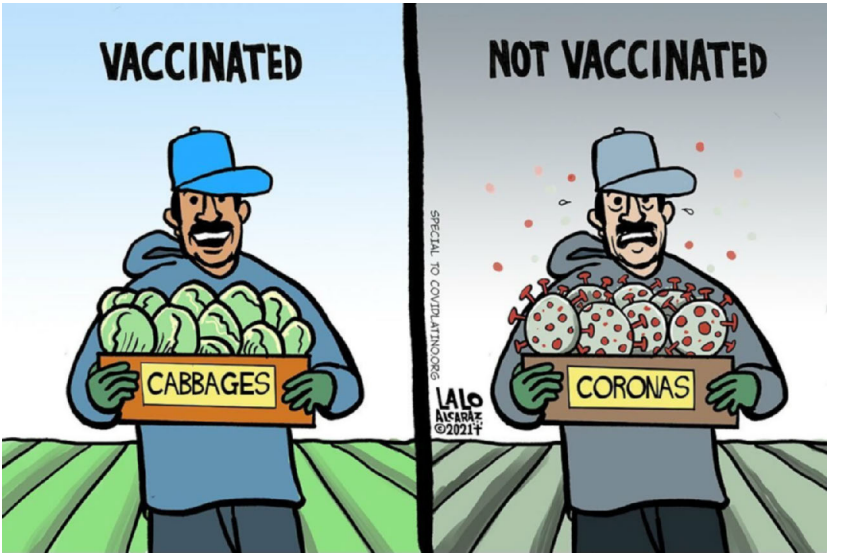
In spring 2021, COVIDLatino teamed up with Lalo Alcaraz for its vaccination awareness campaign,[5] leveraging the cartoonist's fame and consolidated effort to address pandemic-related topics. Besides his own cartoons dedicated to COVID-19, Alcaraz began to create art that would convey messages coherent with the campaign. One of the first images to carry the project's mention was dedicated to Latinx immigrants (Illustration VIII.4). The population of agriculture laborers includes a high percentage of immigrants, whose origin is mostly Mexican and, in more recent years, Central American.[6] For these workers, Spanish is their primary language

5 Lalo Alcaraz was chosen as Artist in Residence for 2021–2022 by the ASU School of Transborder Studies.

6 According to official data provided by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA-ERS), 51 % of hired farmworkers are of Latinx origin. However, the 2019–2020 report by the Department of Labor established that 63 % of the farm labor workforce was born in Mexico and 5 % in Central America (and thus does not take into account Latinx workers born in the United States). The amount of so-called non-work-authorized (i.e., undocumented) agricultural workers is 56 % of the total. It is fundamental to stress that most of these individuals have lived and worked in the United

and only around 31 % of them reports speaking English "well" (DOL 2022, 14). The agricultural and farming sector never stopped producing during the pandemic, and it is often characterized by long working hours (46 h/week on the average), low rates of government-provided health insurance (39 %), and average hourly wages around US$13. Besides workplace vulnerability due to fewer protective measures for COVID-19 (Quandt et al. 2021), farm workers suffered from high rates of reinfection and limited access to vaccines.

Illustration VIII.4: Eduardo López Alcaraz simultaneously tries to inspire Mexican American farm workers to get vaccinated and highlights the systemic problems in this line of work



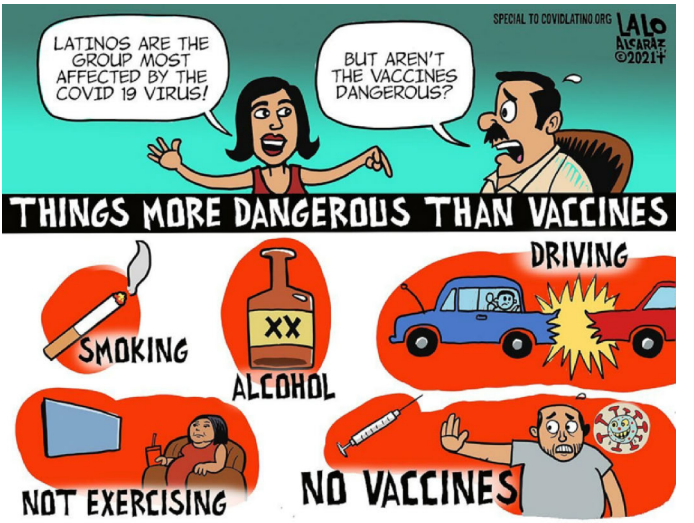
From COVIDLatino's X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/covidlatino/status/1400900896276422656, June 4, 2021. © Eduardo López Alcaraz, 2021.

For COVIDLatino, Alcaraz has expressly tackled the consolidated hesitancy correlated to consolidated issues in accessing healthcare (Illustration VIII.5). The dangers intrinsic to vaccination represent one of the fundamental causes of such hesitancy, as Latinx individuals struggled to find reliable public health content. The lack of popular health communication specifically created in Spanish and bereft of medical jargon pushed many to look for answers on the internet and, in particular, on social media. Similar to their in-person networks of social support, the connections

States for years of even decades, most of them paying taxes while trying to obtain a documented status to no avail (see DOL 2022).

established in virtual spaces seemed more reliable than the convoluted, inaccessible information provided by a healthcare system that discriminates them anyway. Alcaraz's cartoon is very simple and yet the message is immediate and made more impactful by the colorful art, as well as made in such a way to be easily understood by children and elderly members of the community.

Illustration VIII.5: Eduardo López Alcaraz seeks to counteract vaccination hesitancy



From COVIDLatino's X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/covidlatino/status/1388210982569140225, April 30, 2021. © Eduardo López Alcaraz, 2021.

Appealing once more to Mexican American heritage and popular culture, Alcaraz leverages iconography that is immediately recognizable in his incitement to fight the virus through vaccination (Illustration VIII.6). The vaccine is embodied by a group of luchadores whose mask reminds of iconic luchador El Santo, a figure most Mexican Americans of any generation would recognize. These wrestlers successfully fight virus-masked luchadores represented as the 'bad' social actors in the ring, establishing a dichotomy that is fundamental to structuring the lucha libre ethos: técnicos (the positive, correct, and well-meaning luchadores) fight against and eventually defeat rudos (villain luchadores characterized by unfair and malicious attitudes).

Illustration VIII.6: Eduardo López Alcaraz pits heroic luchadores against the coronavirus

From COVIDLatino's X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/covidlatino/status/1412456656747773971, July 6, 2021. © Eduardo López Alcaraz, 2021.

COVIDLatino counts with the support of transmedia content agency Creative Frontiers and other artists, whose illustrations and animated videos can be found on the official website. In particular, the character Mama Lucha–a play on the homonymy between the word 'fight' and the hypocorism often used for women named Luz–has become the embodiment of healthcare, explaining COVID-19-related issues in detail and in accessible language (Illustration VIII.7).

Illustration VIII.7: Mama Lucha explains the spread of COVID-19 in a brief video

Screenshot from COVID Latino, "Sana distancia durante COVID-19," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Dz-q_s2jiw, April 17, 2021. © Creative Frontiers, 2021.

These videos are characterized by simple, well-made infographics and a narrator explaining–in Spanish with English subtitles–details about COVID-19 symptoms and illness, as well as possible consequences. The introductory characters are ethnically coded, albeit much more subtly than it happens in Alcaraz's work, while the bodies on which the medical information is detailed are stylized. It is worth mentioning the video "La pandemia y la salud mental de los niños" (the pandemic and children's mental health) as an effort toward expanding the project's scope, to include issues that might be left unaddressed by the structures Latinx communities have access to. Furthermore, the website provides some additional resources with detailed explanation about the registration process for testing and vaccination.[7] However, the collaboration with Lalo Alcaraz on the Super Vaccine Vato videos is perhaps the most significant project the platform engaged in to create popular culture content that uses tropes and communication strategies relevant to the Chicanx urban population.

7 These blog posts were published on the official COVIDLatino website in April 2021 but are unavailable at the time of finalizing this chapter.

Super Vaccine Vato and the Positive Cholo

One of the focuses of Alcaraz's art has been the reclamation of the cholo identity as a legitimate and articulated expressions of Chicanx heritage, especially connected to working-class barrios. Initially emerged in California, cholo culture is characterized by a specific set of fashion elements, slang, beliefs, customs, and references. Albeit often equated with gang affiliation and criminalized tout court–both by institutions and in the mainstream imaginary–it is a much wider subculture embracing urban expression from lowriding to graffiti, often adopted by Mexican American youth to oppose cultural assimilation and, at the same time, differentiate themselves from incoming Mexican migrants. In fact, it often represents a "countercultural performance" (Rios and Lopez-Aguado 2012, 387) responding to ethnic and class marginalization, as well as criminalization. Especially when incorrectly superposed to pinto subculture–identifying prison veterans that usually speak Chicanx caló, follow a strict code of conduct, and are heavily tattooed–cholo style turns the Chicanx body into a "network of signifiers" that testify to the "abject status in society" (Olguin 1997, 161) imposed on ethnic subjects that do not adhere to monoglossic mainstream culture.

Alcazar channels his reclamation of cholo identity as integral part of the heritage of many Mexican American urban communities in the two animated videos made in collaboration with COVIDLatino and released in December 2021 and April 2022 on YouTube. The shorts were produced by ASU School for Transborder Studies and Alcaraz's Pocho Villa Productions and aim at raising awareness about vaccines and the need to follow up vaccination with booster shots. The narrative revolves around Super Vaccine Vato–a cholo superhero created by Alcaraz–who engages with Latinx individuals that refuse to get vaccinated and thus endanger their neighbors. He sports a handlebar moustache and wears a typical cholo attire including a bandana, baggy chino shorts, white high socks, and sneakers. The character is a spin-off of Alcaraz's superhero that occasionally appears in his syndicated comic strip *La Cucaracha*. Super Vato is "faster than a speeding Gonzales / more powerful than a vato loco / able to leap tall cholas in a single bound!"; as a play on undocumented immigration, he is "not and alien. He was born in East LA" (Super Vato poster strip, March 19, 2018). He is presented as a relatable code-switching, culturally coded alternative to mainstream superheroes with which Mexican American youth can identify, whose actions are limited to his neighborhood and helping out his peers, at times not entirely legally nor effectively.

Illustration VIII.8: Super Vaccine Vato is eating tacos as he is called on duty

Screenshot from COVID Latino, "Super Vaccine Vato," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl5-kmoTBl8, December 10, 2021. © Arizona State University School of Transborder Studies and Pocho Villa Productions, 2021.

In the COVIDLatino videos, his superhero costume is characterized by the Super Vaccine logo on his t-shirt and bandana, a slightly simplified look and a specific color palette.[8] Super Vaccine Vato is found at a taco cart (Illustration VIII.8) run by a fellow Mexican–a renowned character of as well–that reiterates the videos' message by stating that "tacos are life, but you know what? If you ain't vaccinated, no tacos for you!" (COVID Latino 2022).

Super Vaccine Vato is supported by a chola assistant, who manages the community members' calls for help (Illustration VIII.9) and whom he displaces on a flying lowrider car decorated with Mexican skulls (Illustration VIII.10).

8 A selection of Super Vato strips can be found on the pocho.com website. The original iteration of the cholo superhero is a take on mainstream US comics heroes played on primary colors (yellow cape, red t-shirt, and blue pants), a classic print bandana, and an S-logo on his chest remindful of Superman's shield and a police badge at the same time.

Illustration VIII.9: Super Vaccine Vato's female assistant takes calls in the office

Screenshot from COVID Latino, "Super Vaccine Vato," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl5-kmoTBl8, December 10, 2021. © Arizona State University School of Transborder Studies and Pocho Villa Productions, 2021.

Illustration VIII.10: Super Vaccine Vato with his lowrider car and his female assistant

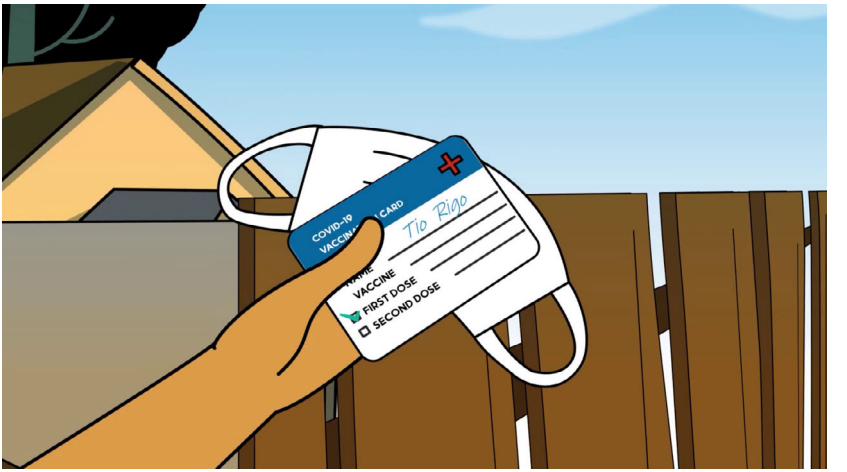
Screenshot from COVID Latino, "Super Vaccine Vato Episode 2: Boosters," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whi9IRZEPcA, April 26, 2022. © Arizona State University School of Transborder Studies and Pocho Villa Productions, 2022.

In the first video, the superhero intervenes to stop unvaccinated tío Rigo (uncle Rigoberto) from participating in a local party and convinces him to get the first dose of the vaccine. Super Vaccine Vato tackles his hesitancy fueled by misinformation by pulling up information on a tablet (Illustration VIII.11) and breaking down data in ways that can be understood immediately. For example, he counters Rigo's abstract underestimation of the risk of hospitalization that is "29 times more likely" for unvaccinated people by offering a different contextualization: he tells Rigo to imagine being 29 times more likely to be bitten by a perro (dog) than his neighbors, turning the imperceptible quality of virus infection into a concrete situation whose possible consequences are clearer to the listener. Likewise, the superhero leverages the man's wish to participate in the carne asada gathering he is excluded from–and that represents a consolidated Mexican American way of bonding–as well as the Latinx hesitancy to deal with healthcare providers mentioned in the previous section. Rigo doesn't "like hospitals" and eventually chooses to be vaccinated; Super Vaccine Vato administers the first shot and issues a vaccination card (Illustration VIII.12).

Illustration VIII.11: Super Vaccine Vato uses data and information to convince Rigo of the advantages of getting vaccinated

Screenshot from COVID Latino, "Super Vaccine Vato," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl5-kmoTBl8, December 10, 2021. © Arizona State University School of Transborder Studies and Pocho Villa Productions, 2021.

Illustration VIII.12: Uncle Rigo receives his vaccination card, which allows him to participate in community events



Screenshot from COVID Latino, "Super Vaccine Vato," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl5-kmoTBl8, December 10, 2021. © Arizona State University School of Transborder Studies and Pocho Villa Productions, 2021.

The language spoken by the characters is key to the construction of the idea that the narrative takes place in a Mexican American barrio and the linguistic choices are clearly aimed at appealing to a Mexican American audience that can identify or at least recognize the dialect. In particular, Super Vaccine Vato and his chola operator speak Chicano English with an emphasis on its prosody and simple forms of code-switching.[9] The dialogue is filled with tag (e.g., the use of the words 'órale,' 'güey,' and 'ese') and single noun (e.g., 'abuelas' [grandmothers], 'familia' [family / community], and 'comida' [food / gathering]) switches that represent emblematic switching and are "often heavily loaded in ethnic content" and barely translatable (Poplack 1980, 589). Occasional simple intra-sentential switches are also present (e.g., "vaccines are effective at stopping hospitalization and severe illness, pero [but] guess what?") and a few instances of code-switching between slangs (e.g., "cáele [drop by there], homeboy!"). The type of slang employed reinforces the connection to barrio realities (e.g., 'homie' / 'homs,' 'homegirl,' 'loco') and Latinx neologisms that emerged during the pandemic (e.g., using 'la rona' to refer to the coronavirus).

9 As Otto Santa Ana defines it, Chicano English is an "autonomous vernacular dialect of native-English-speaking" Mexican Americans (1993, 3), influenced by Mexican Spanish and primarily circumscribed to speakers that have grown up in Mexican American contexts (among many, see Fought 2002). Prosodically, it is characterized by a variety of intonation patterns traceable to regional Mexican patterns and a syllabic rhythm similar to Spanish.

In the second episode, Super Vaccine Vato appeals again to la raza's sense of solidarity and social responsibility by promoting booster shots to the students at a local school. The kids fight against the "new villain Omicron" who threatens them inside the classroom and eventually celebrate their victory joining him for tacos. In this case as well, the superhero provides simple explanations about the necessity of boosters: they are "what gives la raza the ability to fight Omicron y los variants" and thus, "all kids eligible for el booster should get it as soon as possible." Being directed also at children, the video relies less on slang and more on simple code-switching based on a few words known even to Mexican Americans who are not quite bilingual (e.g., 'escuela' [school] and 'vacuna' [vaccine]).

When the first Super Vaccine Vato clip was relaunched through the WILDsound Festival platform, selected feedback from the public was gathered stressing that it was "really funny," a "clever take," "relatable," "informative," and it "looked infographical" (Wildsound Festival 2022). Despite the diverse selection of interviewees, most of the feedback betrays that the selected audience members were clearly not quite knowledgeable of the Mexican American context–for example, one defines the superhero tentatively as "this Hispanic vato." However, the audience found this type of video effective in making COVID-19-related information "more digestible" and acknowledged that it is "specifically targeting the Latinx community." Humor was recognized as a good vehicle to convey relevant messages in a relatable, engaging way and the pace and animation were overall praised. Unfortunately, no Latinx feedback was recorded and one of the interviewees pointed at the fact that it was made in a "quasi stereotypical way […] but it was really funny," failing to either question the use of stereotypes or speculate on possible means of cultural identification for the Latinx viewer.

It is worth noting that Super Vaccine Vato operates a shift of the cholo masculinity paradigm as part of Alcaraz's reversal of the mainstream stereotype. The performance of cholo cultural resistance is often connected to a specific type of gendered coping mechanisms, characterized by the enactment of machismo, criminal affiliation, and overall toughness implicit in everyday life in marginalized barrios. This expression of masculinity gives rise to the criminalized cholo subject exploited by the mainstream imaginary as a paradigm encompassing Chicanos in general, equating overt reclamation of their interstitial heritage with toxic masculinity and gang affiliation. Aggressive and deviant, the "hypermasculinity of the stereotypical cholo" in popular culture is thus often the embodiment of the related Chicanx abject identity (Mora 2011, 121) that allegedly emerges from the barrio culture, rather than structural violence and social marginalization. As Fernando Delgado (2000) notes, Chicano masculinity is connected to the transgressive subjectivity projected by mainstream society onto the cultural hybridity intrinsic to Mexican American identity. The performance of Chicanx-ness, reclaiming ethnic and class marginalization,

code-switching and using a specifically Mexican slang, is perceived as threatening and implicitly connected to thugs and gangs.

However, it is possible to assert Chicano identity and adopt cholo stylization while distancing from such connections, both challenging the stereotype and evidencing social aspects of cholo culture that are neglected by mainstream representations. Besides their criminal endeavors, gangs that are strongly rooted in their neighborhood facilitate the existence of a support network compensating for the lack of infrastructures and institutional neglect. Few studies look into the positive attitudes towards education and mutual support among Latinx gang-affiliated youth (e.g., van Dommelen-Gonzalez et al. 2015), highlighting the types of social network that can help marginalized individuals to overcome environmental factors and health inequities that makes them more liable to become part of gangs in the first place.

Alcaraz's cholo superhero draws on such notions and the positive aspects of Chicano masculinity that revolve around respect for one's own peers and more vulnerable community members, courage, generosity, and stoicism (Mirandé 1997, 79). Within Latinx communities, defined cultural expectation characterize positive machismo connotating ideal male subjects as supportive, present, dedicated to their family and peers, responsible, and conscious of the importance of education (see Behnke and Taylor 2005). The role of education–whether formal or more in general related to information–is usually key to the construction of barrio representations that challenge the stereotype and tackle the contemporary shift toward less marginalized identities (for example, see Netflix's series *Gentefied*, 2020–2021). Super Vaccine Vato embodies a cholo that protects his community and knows how to deal with its members in an effective way, talking to them in their own terms and leveraging shared beliefs and attitudes. This spin-off of Super Vato redeems to an extent the original superhero's penchant for illegal (albeit usually innocuous) acts and leverages his nature rooted in his community and heritage.

Conclusions

Evaluating the efficacy of culturally specific information is possible and a few studies have proven that, when its creation is accompanied by clear infographics, images, and cartoons, the material is more accessible, appreciated, and efficient in transmitting its message (see De Alba et al. 2021). However, it is impossible to estimate how effective the COVIDLatino cartoons campaign specifically has been, partly due to the lack of related data on the project's website and partly by the type of ramified, word-of-mouth dissemination that characterizes it on social media. Looking at the official accounts, numbers are rather low for an ongoing two-year project and videos haven't been viewed or shared in a significative way, as the project seems to

have remained rather circumscribed and connected to the academic activity of its team.

Furthermore, the content is not exempt from critical aspects. On the one hand, COVIDLatino has tried to address a fundamental gap in the communication of relevant facts, data, and preventive measures directed towards Spanish-speaking communities. On the other hand, Alcaraz's roots in Mexican American urban culture and his lifelong activity in Chicanx contexts of cultural production lend his COVID-19-related work a flavor that is inextricable from such background. Albeit certainly closer to their experience than most official and mainstream media information, the cartoonist's work doesn't quite open to other Latinx communities. Despite the effort represented by the other videos proposed by COVIDLatino (including the Mama Lucha character), it might have been fruitful to expand the project's scope to include a more diverse representation of Latinx subjects. If unaccompanied by other narratives, the specific focus of Super Vaccine Vato in embodying the reality of urban Mexican American neighborhoods might come across as limiting the audience it can reach—incurring the risk to flatten even different Mexican American experiences to one, often stereotyped, representation.

However, it is important to stress that the work carried out by COVIDLatino represents the effort to overcome communicative barriers that affect Latinx communities, exposing the problematic relationship between public institutions and minorities that are marginalized and coping with structural violence on a regular basis. Albeit strongly characterized, Super Vaccine Vato embodies a public health superhero that comes across as relatable, entertaining, and engaging, working as a tool to counter misinformation and educate adults and children regardless of their ethnicity.

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