

JUNE IS LGBTQ+ PRIDE MONTH. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) Pride Month is celebrated annually in June to honor the 1969 Stonewall riots, when patrons and supporters of the Stonewall Inn in New York City staged an uprising to resist the police harassment and persecution to which LGBTQ+ people were commonly subjected.

It was a Friday afternoon in June 2021 when Diana Meza and Kevin Mata, ODC's spring and summer interns, sat down for a honest talk about gender, identity, language, and healthcare. This interview has been edited for length purposes, but you can listen to their full conversation on our website: opendoormidd.org/newsletter.

Kevin Mata: Hello, my name is Kevin Mata and I am the summer intern and my pronouns are both "he/him/his" and "they/them/theirs." Diana, would you like to introduce yourself?

Diana Meza: Hello, I'm Diana Meza, spring and late-summer intern. My pronouns are "they/them/theirs," or no pronouns. My pronoun is my name.

You mentioned your pronouns are "he/him/his," "they/them/theirs." What does that mean to you?

K: First, I identify as non-binary, I am non-binary and, for me, my pronouns are interchangeable – I don't mind when individuals use "he/him/his," or "they/them/theirs." It's a signifier that I'm openly non-binary and I'm comfortable with other individuals identifying that. I will say, though, that I do

appreciate when they are interchangeably used, so sometimes I may feel more attuned to being identified with "they/them," and then of course most people use "he/him/his" when they see me, based on my masculine identifying features. But I don't really mind either identification, I guess. And how about for you? What do your pronouns mean for you?

D: I'm also non-binary. A lot of people perceive me to be a woman, but that's not how I identify. "They/them" for me in various ways represents just a shift in general for language that is non-binary language, so I appreciate when people just use that to refer to me. Although "they/them" does not define what my gender identity is, it's just a way for people to refer to me. But I'm also not exclusively "they, them," because in thinking about pronouns as how people refer to you, it just varies based on different relationships. So some people I prefer them to call me "they, them," some people I'm comfortable them only referring to me by my name, and some people, for example my family, based on our relationship, use "ella" to refer to me, which is gendered as woman in Spanish. So, when I talk to people about my pronouns, it will often vary, and I don't often feel comfortable saying "In general, my pronouns are 'they/them,'" because... it varies.

K: When I share my pronouns, it's more of an invitation: I'm disclosing my identity to you, and I hope, not hope, I'm asking you to respect that. And in certain cases, when I don't feel safe disclosing that information, it's not that I'm

not affirming my identity, it's just that I'm choosing not to disclose to this person based on my own safety.

D: Gender often seems to be a performance, because based on appearance, people will most likely gender me, right? Gender, at least to me, is something more just internal with how I operate in the world, and trying to operate with more fluidity. There are a lot of instances in which people misgender me, or I don't feel safe sharing what exactly I identify as, but that doesn't make me less valid at all. My identity is not based on others' perception of me.

K: A hundred percent not. The ability to have interchangeable pronouns or to accept the variance in use, it just goes to show that pronouns do not signify gender identity. In certain cases it can, but in certain cases, for me personally, when I share with others that I have "he" and "they" pronouns and other people use both, it's more of an affirmation of my identity. But when individuals only refer to me as "he/him/his," I don't see that as affirming my identity. It just may be a different relationship I might have with this person.

D: Yeah, exactly.

K: Now that we are transitioning to a people world, post-Covid world, at least here in Vermont, how do you share your pronouns?

D: It's difficult, it's really hard. Because that often requires somebody having to ask someone's pronouns, or introduce yourself with your pronouns and, personally, I've been unsure of which spaces are safe, which is the right

time, so what I've been doing is just not using pronouns for myself. Many times, when I meet people, I don't introduce myself with pronouns, and I just get to know people, and as time passes, maybe just a little bit of time, I start gauging, is this a safe space? Is this a space where it seems like people would respect me? Then I might bring it up in a conversation: "Oh, actually, you can refer to me by "they/them," or "please refer to me this way."

But it's a scary thing to do. And I really appreciate it when people are grateful that I share it, because it takes... it makes me a little nervous to share it.

“ Gender is something more just internal with how I operate in the world. My identity is not based on others' perception of me.”
Diana Meza, ODC's 2021 Spring Intern

What about you?

K: I 100% agree. It's very intimate to share pronouns with someone else, because you are disclosing a very important identity. It was much easier, for me at least, when we were all on Zoom. It was easier to display my pronouns there, unapologetically on my screen. Now that we are back to in-person, I have had to re-evaluate a lot of the ways in which I do share my pronouns and to whom I share them. It's been much more of a challenge to remind individuals about it if I'm being mis-gendered in a way that doesn't affirm the way I'm feeling in the moment. And that, I will say, is much more difficult without the Zoom

nametag with my pronouns.

D: [When] they can just see it.

K: Yeah, so they just take me for how I appear, so just gender assumptions.

D: I definitely understand, especially with people who are just learning that there are more pronouns and there are more gender identities than just like, "this is man," and "this is woman." I understand people forgetting, so I also appreciate, when I do correct people, that they don't take it personally, they just say "thank you," not making it a bigger deal than it is. I appreciate when people don't apologize profusely and then force me to console them about it.

K: It's very odd to be asked to forgive someone for misgendering you. But I want to touch back on how you shared your pronouns with family in Spanish. To start generally, how do you introduce the concept of pronouns in Spanish?

D: Let me think about this.

K: I can start, because I was asked the other day how we can do intake for patients and screen them for sexuality in a way that is affirming for their own body. In English, it's very simple: you can do "he/him/his," "they/them/theirs," it's very structured. But in Spanish, it's always masculine, you go by gender in terms of perception, so: masculine, feminine, or non-binary which, while it may seem to be more expanded, it is still limiting, because we shouldn't view gender as having some third category. There's not a third category, it's about viewing it on

a spectrum. When I say non-binary, it's inclusive of all gender non-conforming people. For example: masculine, in Spanish, would be "él," feminine would be "ella," and non-binary, usually, I prefer the use of "elle," because it makes more sense phonetically, but I know in a Latinx-American context, they will change all the pronouns with "-x" or "-@," because it mixes both... Is that still binary? I have no idea.

D: Yeah, that's also what I'm not sure about. I see people starting to use "-@" more, which I would say is still binary, because it seems to imply "-a" or "-o", in the way that "-@" is literally a mixture. I think the goal would be to speak with gender neutral terms in Spanish, exchanging the "-as" and the "-os" for "-es," but I have found that it's hard to do that in many Spanish speaking spaces. Most Spanish speaking communities that I'm a part of are family, and so then that enters into a new whole dynamic of safety and relationships. Just the fact that my parents are immigrants from Mexico, a lot of our relationship is built on sustaining our culture and connections to Mexico, and connections to each other. It becomes very tricky to also bring up these concepts that they haven't heard of and that would definitely challenge their views, particularly around religion. My family is most opposed to gender variants because they are Catholic and their religious views really reinforce the gender binary. I did attempt talking with them about being non-binary, which caused a lot of conflict. Like I mentioned, a lot of this goes back to my parents' religion, Catholicism. Right now that's always an on-going conversation, but my parents do refer

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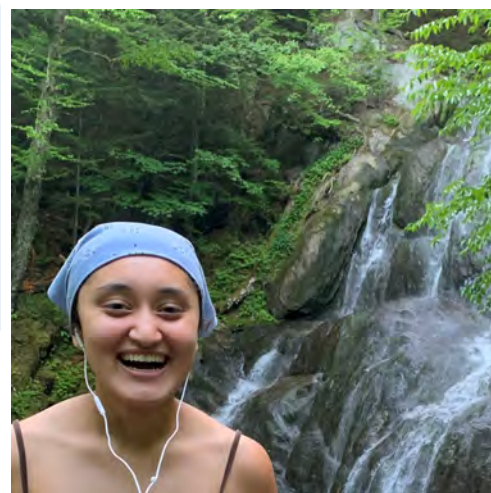
**Kevin Mata, ODC's
2021 Summer Intern**

to me as "ella." I think it's really important to me to keep a connection with my family, to keep a connection with all of their ways of living that are non-white, non-patriarchal, their understandings of land and food, all these cultural connections. With different relationships, with my family I feel that they see me for who I am in a lot of ways.

How do you feel?

K: Thank you for sharing that. You identified the way you felt as "gender variance," and I think that's an important way to phrase it, because it's an understanding of gender not being static. You are not male forever, you are not female forever, and letting there be a fluidity to gender is true and honest. I think it's a way a lot of people feel. I don't like to generalize, but it's a common experience and it's not spoken enough about, so I think phrasing it that way, as something that varies, is accurate.

D: Also, it's funny that you pick up on this term, "gender variance," because it's not a term that came to my head out of nowhere. I actually heard it for the first time in my Native Studies class this past semester, Native-American Women History, and so it's a concept that we learn. We specifically learned about a lot of native people in the Northeast United States — Turtle Island — and a lot of native people



Diana Meza is a rising junior at Harvard University

understood gender through this concept of gender variance, that there was a lot of shifting between roles that people held, and like you mentioned, this was not static. So this is not a new concept, it's something that has existed way before colonial times.

K: Exactly, and also recognizing that Spanish is a colonial language itself, and that it acts as a tool of colonialism today. I'm almost tempted to say that the concept of "elle" is new, but that implies that this experience could be new, and that somehow ties to the emergence of "-e," or "-x," or "-@." But gender non-conforming people have always existed. It's just that language has been so limiting.

D: I think that also speaks to the impact of colonialism in that a lot of people in my family, a lot of people who I know speak Spanish, think that "elle" or any other views on gender outside of cis-binary are new concepts, or imposed by United States, or something like that.

K: It's an "American thing..."

D: Yeah, and it shows that it's really sad. We've completely lost, not completely lost, but colonialism has really erased a

lot of our histories.

K: To be frank, I grew up in a bilingual household, so in English I usually don't mind when I'm being identified as "he/him," or in a masculine way. In Spanish, the only times that I do have a preference for "elle," or gender non-conforming language when I'm being referred to as a person, has been in academic spaces. Even still in academic spaces it's interesting, just because gender non-conforming language is wrong grammatically, and some people simply favor grammar over my humanity. It's always an encouragement, an invitation to ask people to prioritize other individuals' humanity, as opposed to silly grammar rules.

D: Exactly. Why are people using language as a way to silence or suppress people, when language is literally just a tool for communication? Of course it's going to be changing as people need to express themselves and express thoughts and realities in different ways.

K: Exactly. On that note of recognizing how rhetoric can be used as a form of violence, why do you think it's important to recognize gender non-conforming experiences and bodies in healthcare, or here at the Open Door Clinic? What does it mean for patients, what does it mean for you when we are doing intake for patients, screening for sexuality and gendered experiences?

D: I think overall it's really understanding that there is no one way to live, and I think that's a big thing that colonialism tries to impose. "This is the literal form that you must take."

“ Gender non-conforming language is wrong grammatically, and some people simply favor grammar over my humanity. ”
Kevin Mata

It really denies people of full humanity. Recognizing, offering, and respecting different gender identities really allows for people to partake in more full humanity. Getting more into the details of healthcare, there are also just a lot of assumptions that people have about others' bodies that are often based on this model of cis-man, cis-woman. Many people don't operate in that way and that's totally fine, that's really great. So it's important to really just allow people to let us know who they are, to let the providers know who they are, and in that way get the most accurate assistance and be respected in that whole process.

K: At the end of the day, it's just affirmation, but also at the end of the day it's a major health risk when we are misgendering individuals, because we may assume that only certain bodies can become pregnant, only woman can be pregnant. We tend to associate HPV with women, who receive pap smears. We need to understand that afflictions or health risks aren't gendered, they happen to all bodies. When we limit it to some genders and we don't also screen for sexuality, we are putting our patients at risk, we are putting any patient at risk, we are putting humans at risk, and we are not giving them the care that they need because we assume certain individuals have certain body



Kevin Mata, a senior at Middlebury College, will attend Oxford University next semester

parts. These are issues that everyone faces. By removing the idea that it affects certain genders, or certain bodies, we're also working at taking apart that stigma. It's a detriment to their health at the end of the day. And it's about recognizing there is a stigma, and by adjusting sexuality and gender you are helping protect your patients.

D: I completely agree.

K: I think too, here, at the ODC, I feel nervous at the idea of discussing gender, because while we might be at this stage in our life where we are comfortable exploring what language means in terms of thinking about gender in an expansive way, how do we also make sure we are engaging in a conversation with patients at a stage where they are right in their life to have conversations about that? That's why I'm a little hesitant. Is this a space for learning, is this a space to teach? I have a certain privilege as I'm masculine presenting which carries many privileges in terms of leading conversations on gender which I should not be doing. Much of what I've learned, most of it, comes from what I've learned from Black individuals, and I have to credit them. Black and Indigenous

people are often not credited for advancements they made in terms of discussions on sexuality and gender. How can we lead these conversations in a way that's also crediting the folks who have actually done the work? So that we are here now and having this conversation.

“ We don't have all the answers, we are not an encyclopedia on gender, but we are also learning, and continue to learn. ”

Diana Meza

D: Yes, exactly. Now that you bring up the work that a lot of Black people have done, especially Black trans, when thinking about the ODC, our patients, and opening up this conversation, the question is also: who is learning and who is teaching? Historically, the teaching has been done by a lot of affected people, Black people, Indigenous people, Queer people, and I think that's also something to very much account for, when thinking about this— who will take on this labor of teaching that's very emotionally labored, very really labored. It's important also, like you mentioned, to recognize our privileges and take on that labor when we can, take it off of someone else's back. Also, of course, giving credit that these are not ideas that we came up with, struggles that we have spearheaded, and at the same time, everybody really recognizing their privilege. Everybody has a stake in this, not just me as non-binary, not just Black, trans people. It's everyone's responsibility to take on this labor as well.

K: When I'm thinking about the ODC as a space for... is “vulnerable” the correct way to describe these populations? Well, I will just name it for what it is, migrant populations, we serve a significant portion of the migrant population here in Vermont. So immediately I applaud the ODC for attempting at least to recognize the privilege that we are engaging in these conversations on Abenaki land, and recognizing that in and of itself is an important step, but it's not the only step, and that's a learning process. I am open to making mistakes because, like you said, while I'm non-binary, I certainly do not have all the answers. Gender can be more expansive than what we imagine right now.

D: Exactly. It's completely different for every individual. I really appreciate you also agreeing that we don't have all the answers, we are not an encyclopedia on gender, but we are also learning, and continue to learn.

K: Any final thoughts?

D: I really appreciate having this conversation with you in this space. It's actually not a conversation I thought I would be having when I started interning at the ODC. I was a little hesitant. These are our identities and it's scary to speak about that sometimes, but I appreciate talking with you about this.

K: Yes, I will second everything that you just said. I did not expect to be having this conversation on a Friday afternoon, however I will say this feels affirming. It's an invitation to learn and unlearn, it's an invitation to ask questions, and it's an invitation to explore as well. Re-imagine what

gender looks for you, what it looks like for other people, how you may question, how you may impose your thoughts on gender on other people, how we can recognize other people's humanity before we assert the notion of gender on them, and realizing that at the end of the day it's just language, what matters most is the connection we make. You may be using someone's pronouns, but are you really respecting their gender? Just because you are respecting my pronouns, it might not mean that you are respecting the way I identify in terms of my gender expression... that's a good note for me.

D: Yeah, I love everything that you just said, and totally, totally, totally vibe with just respecting each other. My last note is on respecting each other, recognizing that we are all living and we are all who we are, remembering that it also extends to everything around us, the earth around us, sky, animals. To me, that's also very much tied to my gender identity, and understanding that fluidity, and understanding that we are not a superior species, but that we have a responsibility to interact respectfully with all living beings around us.

K: Think about Spanish. Every single object and living thing is gendered. And when you're de-gendering, de-colonizing your language, you're building a healthier relationship, a more respectful relationship, with all beings on the planet. That's a beautiful, sustainable solution. I respect that a lot. Thank you very much, Diana, for this fun interview.

D: Thank you too. I really appreciate you.

K: I'd like to thank the Open Door Clinic for having us have this conversation, too.★

THE MOST COSTLY JOURNEY

It all started with an idea. A few years in the making, some successful partnerships, and many hands later, *The Most Costly Journey / El Viaje Más Caro* is now a book! You can find it at your local bookstore or online at www.bookshop.org. We asked Julia Doucet, Teresa Mares, Marek Bennett, and Andy Kolovos, the four editors of the book, a few questions about the process of bringing it to life. This is what they say.

Andy Kolovos

1. We kept in mind the fundamental purpose of the project: coordinating storytellers and cartoonists to work in partnership to create comics that could help migrant dairy workers with their personal struggles. Whenever we started to get into the weeds or lost in our own heads or thinking too big, we'd remind ourselves of this and got back on track.

2. My favorite story is "The Most Important Love of Every Woman Should Be Herself." The cartoonist, Iona, grew up in Vermont and worked in farming for many years herself. I also know the storyteller Guadalupe a little bit in real life and think she's great. Unlike a lot of the cartoonists and storytellers on the project, Iona and Guadalupe were able to meet in person and spend time together. When I look at the final version I think of both of them and see both of them in it. They did a wonderful job.

3. I think it's an important book for everyone in this country to read. Although the comics only address the experiences of workers in



Vermont (and in just one slice of agriculture in Vermont at that), these are stories of national significance. All Americans depend on migrant labor for the food we eat. The more people who understand what these workers face and — more importantly — who they are as individuals, the better we as a nation will understand the true human costs of our food.

4. The project gave me an opportunity to put into practice ideas I'd been knocking around in my head for years about cartooning, ethnography, and partnership and reciprocity, and the ethics of telling other people's stories. It allowed me to move from being someone who only thought about this stuff to someone who was actually a small part of making it happen.

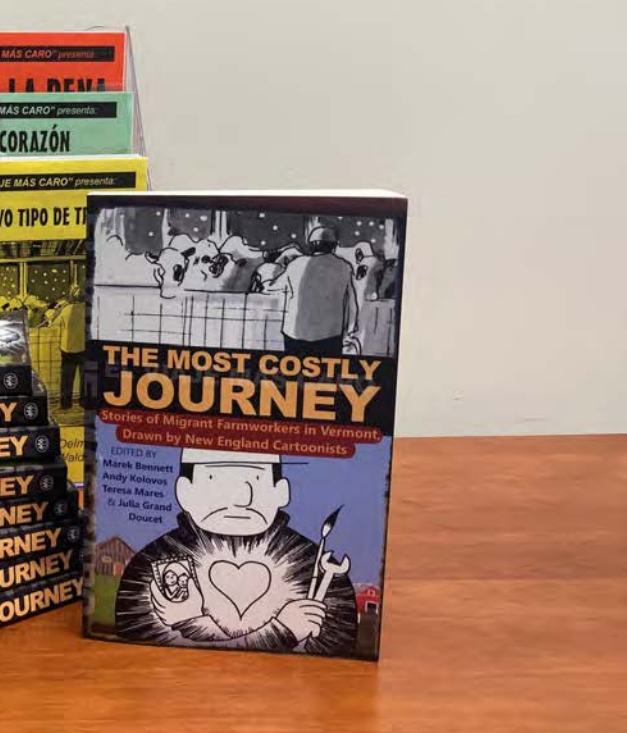


Teresa Mares

1. What a pleasure it was to collaborate with people with very different training and jobs than me. It's not typical that you get to have an anthropologist, a nurse, a public health professional, an artist, and a archivist / folklorist in the room working on a project. It was such a fun and creative experience for me.

2. My favorite story is "A Heart Split in Two." I love the artwork in this story and am also close with the storyteller. Having her experience shared with the broader world is so important.

3. I think people of all ages and backgrounds would benefit from reading this book.



4. Being part of this project made me think much more critically about storytelling and how to reach an audience. It also challenged me to think of the best and most appropriate way to share the stories of marginalized communities as someone outside of that community.

Julia Doucet

1. Translating a book into another language shares many similarities to language access at a doctor's appointment. It is not just the appointment itself that requires an interpreter (like the body of the book) but also all the wrap-around services (the acknowledgements, copyright page, back of the book text etc.).

2. Every time I think I have a favorite story, I read another that I love that then becomes my favorite. Until I read the next story. For me, it is the frank honesty and the personality of the storyteller. I love the intimate, unadorned view into their lives.

3. Anyone who believes that "Make America Great Again" does not include immigrants to our country should read the book. Anyone who drinks milk, eats cheese, enjoys



ice cream, whipped cream, $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2}$, cottage cheese or sour cream. And those people who celebrate Thanksgiving with a family turkey on their table should also read this book.

4. It was an incredibly humbling project of which I felt honored to be a part. It was hard to witness the sacrifice and pain experienced by the workers and continue on in my life without shifting my perspective.



Marek Bennett

1. I really enjoyed the challenge of adapting my own art style to fit the dramatic needs of each storyteller's narrative. It can be a fine line to walk: keeping things general enough for clarity and readability, including enough specific details but not TOO many (to avoid identifying people & places), and of course avoiding visual stereotypes and misrepresentations.

2. I really liked working on *El Migrante's* story ("Algo Adentro /

Something Inside"), because we did it (initially) as a bilingual mini-comic, and I liked having the chance to work his paintings into the panels of the comic. For me, that combination of black & white cartoon artwork with lush colorful painted landscapes really exemplifies one of my favorite aspects of this whole project—the dramatic visual combination of storytellers and artists across the entire series (and book).

3. With this book, we really wanted it to get out to a general English-reading audience that maybe doesn't have much contact with the migrant laborer community. This is a chance for readers to sit face-to-face with some of these storytellers (on the page) and follow them through some aspects of their experience. Reading this book means empathizing with

and connecting to the storytellers, and hopefully building a sense of how we all fit together in the US economy, and the many choices and sacrifices involved in producing the food we eat.

4. What is a "New England story"? A change I've noticed in my own work: before working on this project, I had a certain set of stories and storytellers that I classified as "New England" - And I would've classified the *El Viaje* storytellers as "immigrants" or "Mexicans" etc. Now I see that their stories of immigration and survival ARE truly New England stories—as much as those of anyone who lives in this region. And that's enriched and widened my sense of the communities and inhabitants of New England.

MEET GRETCHEN DUNN, ODC'S RDH

Gretchen Dunn joined the ODC in March 2021 as a dental hygienist. Originally from Minnesota, Gretchen's been a dental hygienist for 10 years. She has enjoyed learning how to adapt to better serve the Latinx population. Here are 5 facts about her.



I ENJOY DENTAL OFFICES AS A WHOLE. They are generally happy places for me. My father was a dentist, so I always had a really good feeling about dental stuff. When I moved to Vermont, my plan was to go

to dental school and become a dentist—but I found out

I was pregnant so that got tabled. And as time went on, I just realized it really wasn't worth the investment for me to become a dentist. But I could easily become a dental hygienist and would be really happy doing that. My primary goal is to treat people and help them get healthy which is huge to me. I find that both at the Open Door Clinic and at the UVM Medical Center—Dental and Oral Health where I also work.



One of the things I have figured out is that **MEN HAVE A HARDER TIME ADMITTING TO BEING UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE FEMALE PRACTITIONER,** and to learn how be much more aware of signals of discomfort that they might send out. They work very hard at being stoic, which is lovely and honorable, but I do not want them to be uncomfortable.



MY ORIGINAL DEGREE WAS IN GEOLOGY.

I came to dental hygiene late in life. I worked at an environmental firm for some years, then I taught Math and Geology for some years, and worked at a daycare facility for some years as well.



Gretchen Dunn

I AM A COMMUNITY PERSON

and I love the idea of participating in community. I'm also passionate about working in a dental office that does not have the traditional for-profit model. I have been slowly learning how to change the stories that I tell and how I approach pain management. For example, I usually talk about gum tissue like a turtleneck around a tooth, but the population we work with generally doesn't know what a turtleneck is! I now use the example like a cuff on your sleeve and I hold up my arm. And I got a little elastic band on the wrist of my lab coat so that they have sort of a visual example.



I HIKE, I SKI, I READ, AND I GARDEN.

I have a dog that I adore—she goes on hikes with me. There's the Otter Creek Gorge trail which is absolutely beautiful. I try to do a different mountain every weekend so we're kind of all over the place!

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