

BOOK REVIEW

Gifts of Song, Ceremony, and Spiritual Healing

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Medina, Lara, and Martha R. Gonzales, eds. 2019. *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*. Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press. \$29.95 (paper).

During the solitude of the Spring 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, I cracked open a crisp copy of the recently published *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, edited by Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales. Like many, I was searching for wisdom during a period of unprecedented isolation and uncertainty. I was seeking wellness and reimagining ritual and community from the confines of my tiny home under pandemic restrictions. Quickly, *Voices from the Ancestors* became my well-loved, coffee-stained guidebook. It was as though the contributors—along with their elders and ancestors—filled my home, breaking the barriers of quarantine to offer a blueprint for weaving together ritual and theory, academic inquiry and ceremonial practices.

In the introduction, Medina and M. Gonzales call the anthology a collection of “wisdom writings based on our oral traditions, our research, our intuitions, and our lived experience” (3). They acknowledge that this work comes from the last fifty years of advancing “efforts to decolonize” and reconstruct spirituality beyond Western epistemologies (3). These Xicanx scholars model crossing cultural boundaries, generational divides, academic disciplines, creative practices, and geographic distances. Medina was raised in the San Francisco Bay area while M. Gonzales is from East Los Angeles and their co-editing bridges the north-south California divide and connects often diasporic

and disparate communities. Medina and M. Gonzales masterfully weave together traditions and insights of a diverse cast of over eighty contributors including Chicana artists, Afro-Mexican poets, Diné healers, Tejana professors, Maya dancers, Raramuri social workers, Caxcana activists and beyond.

Throughout the nearly 400-page collection, *Voices from the Ancestors* emphasizes religion, ritual, and traditional knowledge in ways that are typically avoided in academic literature. The book opens with Inés Hernández-Ávila's "Sunrise Prayer" (22) and closes with Grace Alvarez Sesma's blessing, titled "Tlazocahmati Tatita Sol," thanking the sun and greeting Grandmother Moon (397). At the center of the book, held between these poetic prayers, eleven full-colored illustrations feature maize, maguey, and iconography both pre-colonial and contemporary. Feminist foremothers of Chicana/o/x and Indigenous Studies are present and honored in this volume. Patricia Gonzales (University of Arizona), Inés Hernández-Ávila (U.C. Davis), and Laura Pérez (U.C. Berkeley), who now hold hard-fought-for faculty seats and produce profound scholarship, generously share tender reflections, sacred meditations, and prayers. Seamlessly, the book also weaves in contributions from an emerging generation of leaders such as herbalist and healer Berenice Dimas and queer decolonial Xicana Indígena theorist Suzy Zepeda. Sara H. Salazar's poetry provides a steady thread throughout the volume alongside M. Gonzales and Medina's grounding introductions to each of the twenty-two sections. While cis-gendered, heterosexual Chicano men (like widely celebrated teacher Jerry Tello) are invited into the conversation, the book unapologetically centers women, queer, and Two-Spirit writers. The editors were deliberate in incorporating Indigenous, African-descendent, and Afro-Latinx contributors, though those contributions make up a smaller percentage compared to those from authors who identify as X(Ch)icanx and Mexican. Linguistically *Voices from the Ancestors*, though primarily an English publication, has Spanish and Nahuatl featured prominently with occasional smatterings of Yoruba, Maya, and other Indigenous words and phrases.

Before the pandemic, when this book arrived at my Denver doorstep, I was instantly struck by the warm-toned painting on the cover. Emilia García's artwork, titled "Fruta Amarga," is of a human subject with two long black braids, eyes closed, arms crossing over the chest, and skin-tones just brighter than the surrounding earth. Green vines and leaves reach down into the dirt with roots and blood droplets at the base, revealing the book's amplified attention to land and plants, death and the dead, animal and celestial bodies. *Voices from the Ancestors* is part of a broader dialogue of inter-species relationships, animism, and post-humanism breaking down ontological hierarchies between human and so-called non-humans. In Chapter 18 "Relationship with Land and Plants," Martha R. Gonzales reminds us that reciprocal relationships have existed for millennia and continue to resist the "... capitalist, consumerist, industrial, and 'enlightened' West" (333). This provides a counter-narrative to an often-unquestioned assumption that we are marching forward, evolving from primitive societies to advanced civilizations. Instead, this chapter centers cyclical concepts of time and ancient epistemologies which invite the readers to listen to voices of plantitas and grow maíz with song and ceremony. The essays flesh out spaces often flattened by academic disciplines of religion, anthropology, ethnic, and environmental studies, resisting dominant narratives and methodologies, and offering a new path forward.

Chapter 8, "Communing with Our Dying and Our Beloved Deceased" offers a powerful compilation of important lessons from the authors' elders: Mami, Nana and Abuelita. During the most heartbreaking moments of COVID-19 and still today, the chapter provides tools for forging healthy relationships with "Death as a teacher, healer, and loving receiver-spirit" (119). The authors make space for nuance and complexity, holding in tension both Mesoamerican ideas of transformation and life in death and violent contemporary realities like femicide in Juárez.

Voices from the Ancestors should be well received by undergraduate students, yet it also belongs at the table for advanced graduate students and faculty members across disciplines. The greatest strength of this anthology is its readability for a broad audience as it conveys the rich histories of Mesoamerican cosmovision, Indigenous kinship, and their relationship to contemporary ceremonial practices in Chicana/Latinx spaces. It would be a strong addition to Latina/o/x/Chicana/o/x/Mexican-American studies, ethnic studies, religious studies, and performance studies syllabi. This book would also push the boundaries within anthropology by focusing on materiality and animism. And though perhaps less obvious, I would also recommend assigning sections of this in environmental, post-human, and science and technology studies as a way of bringing under-represented perspectives to the table. Employed as a teaching tool in the classroom, *Voices from the Ancestors* models expansive scholarship by and for our communities and manages the elusory act of matching methodology and message.

Voices from the Ancestors is a triumph of decolonial praxis, not merely decolonial posturing or performativity. It bridges academic research, traditional practices, and embodied, experiential knowledge as the authors and editors refuse to participate in abstract, totalizing philosophical discourse and instead speak with place-based, anti-colonial, ancestral and collective alternatives. By confronting coloniality with ceremony, rupture with remembering, and suffering with stories of strength and survival, *Voices from the Ancestors* ultimately provides both scholars and casual readers access to Indigenous knowledge and practices that have been generously shared by practitioners, elders, and academics. Though it was—written and edited in a pre-pandemic world—the ancestors continue to speak in the present moment, guiding us into the unknown.