

BOOK REVIEW

Decolonial Healing Through Chicana Feminist Works

Jennifer Moran

Ellis, Amanda. 2021. *Letras y Limpias: Neocolonial Medicine and Holistic Healing in Mexican American Literature*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press. \$35.00 (paper).

In 2002, Pope John Paul III visited the Basílica de Guadalupe in Mexico. There, Teresa de Jesús and María Magdalena, two curanderas, performed a *limpia* to heal him. Amanda Ellis uses this *limpia* to frame her analysis of curanderas in Mexican American literature. Challenging the ways past literature has represented traditional healers, she argues that curanderas represent the primacy of ethical relations and the power of decolonial love in the project of healing. The *limpia* performed on the Pope was not only a healing of his physical illness but also a healing of the years of brutality colonizers enforced on Indigenous people generations before. Their work drew on rich traditions where practices focus on the unity of mind, body, and spirit, which Ellis refers to as the whole *mindbodyspirit*. Such healing practices move beyond traditional biomedicine and have much to offer decolonial efforts today.

Ellis divides her work into two sections, Curative Recoveries and Radical Reimaginings, each with three chapters. She begins by discussing the *Códice de la Cruz Badiano*, the first American medical book, written by Nahua scholar Martín de la Cruz in 1552. Highlighting it as a foundational text of curanderismo, she argues that the text is an explicit encounter between the colonized and the colonizer, and thus provides a better understanding

of the historical and critical role curanderas played as both healers of the wounds of colonialism and as keepers of stories and frameworks of healing and survivance. Chapter Two compares two Américo Paredes novels, *George Washington Gómez* and *The Shadow*, demonstrating how an understanding of curanderismo, as a longstanding cultural practice and healing framework, is a critical paradigm for understanding Mexican American literature. She closes this first section with a final chapter, by drawing on Anzaldúa thought, and on common tropes of the curandera as an old medicinal healer, mysterious person, or sinister bruja figure. She analyzes Rudolfo Anaya's curandera in *Bless Me, Ultima* to show the shift in the depiction of curanderas in literature during the latter half of the twentieth century, moving from the bruja figure to a healing figure at the heart of Anzaldúa's "Healing Wounds." As Ellis states, "this curandera reminds us that Western history binary oppositions wound us in many ways and Chicana feminist theory acts as a critical therapeutic infusion of decolonial healing" (107).

Ellis' engagement of Anzaldúa thought remains central throughout the second part of her work. Chapter Four moves towards Chicana literature and its emphasis on healing by closely analyzing Anzaldúa's poem "La Curandera." Pushing back against Laura E. Pérez's problematization of the "consignment of the spiritual to the intellectual borderlands," Ellis explains that "the politics of the spirit in the name of healing" is embedded throughout Anzaldúa's poem. (118) Anzaldúa engaged in early border-arte-as-medicine through Chicana feminism and the power and logic of curanderismo were firmly in her mind by the time she released *Borderlands*. Ellis maps how these ideas of healing have continued to shape Chicana feminist literature. In Chapter 5, Ellis compares four different works written in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first: Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Alex Espinoza's *Still*

Water Saints, and Manuel Mendoza's "The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue." By comparing these four texts, she is able to demonstrate how they are unified in their representation of the curandera as a healer of communal survivance. Ellis closes this second section with Chapter 6, analyzing ire'ne lara silva's *Blood Sugar Canto*. In this work, Ellis expresses the importance of the curandera in understanding Mexican American literature and culture and the Chicana feminist aesthetics of healing and transformation. By choosing to analyze silva's poem, Ellis sheds light on how the texts and lived experiences of Chicana/os and other marginalized groups are frequently overlooked, yet provide valuable information about our shared world.

Letras y Limpias provides a valuable look at curanderas and their important place within Chicana feminist literature and historiography. The weaving of Anzaldúan themes and logic throughout the book provides a unity to the text, drawing attention to the shifting ways that Chicana/o texts have engaged mindbodyspirit through multiple generations. Though this book may be a bit difficult for lower-division students, it will be valuable for upper-division students and more experienced scholars in the field of Chicana feminism, Latina/o/x studies, and traditional healing.

