

[Walsh on Armus, 'Sanadores, Parteras, Curanderos y Médicas: Las Artes de Curar en la Argentina Moderna'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, February 8, 2023

Diego Armus, ed. *Sanadores, Parteras, Curanderos y Médicas: Las Artes de Curar en la Argentina Moderna*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022. 376 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-987-719-344-2.

Reviewed by Sarah Walsh (The University of Melbourne) **Published on** H-Sci-Med-Tech (February, 2023) **Commissioned by** Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58473>

At its core, Diego Armus's edited volume *Sanadores, parteras, curanderos y médicas: las artes de curar en la Argentina moderna* argues that the "healing arts ... have been, are and will continue to be endeavors marked by incredibly varied types of treatments [ofertas de atención]" (p. 11).[1] The use of the term "healing arts," rather than "healthcare" or "wellness," speaks to the collection's overall aim of highlighting the grey area between medical practices approved by institutions such as hospitals and universities and those that typically fall into the category of alternative medicine. Focusing on the overlapping and often contradictory areas of the healing arts allows for a more fulsome reckoning of how people navigate their own health and speaks to the fact that, despite the increasing hegemony of allopathic biomedical practices, alternative medicine continued to thrive across the late nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries.

Armus begins the collection with an introduction that explores the state of the field, contending that holistic medicine has gone mostly ignored by historians of medicine. Although the field has expanded to include more nuanced appreciation of the impact of class, race, and gender, these works have been more focused on developments in biomedicine as practiced by what the volume identifies as *médicos diplomados*, or allopathic physicians. The purpose of this collection is to add the stories of alternative practitioners to this existing literature. Expanding the scholarly view to include holistic approaches recognizes the reality that people in Argentina (and presumably elsewhere) typically have incorporated both forms of healing arts into their lives. Owing to the desire to make a substantive contribution to this burgeoning field, the volume is extensive and includes fourteen chapters written by sixteen contributors from a variety of disciplines. In an effort to maintain brevity, this review will discuss themes in common across chapters to capture the overall tone of the volume.

The first three chapters of the collection are spent mostly at the end of the nineteenth century, when holistic medicine in Argentina seems to have encountered its first meaningful institutional pushback from allopathic practitioners. Using the transcript of the legal case brought against spiritualist healer Juan Pablo Quinteros, the first chapter, by José Ignacio Allevi, convincingly argues that this conflict was less driven by local concerns in Santa Fe regarding the efficacy of spiritualist healing and more by an interpersonal conflict between Quinteros and local politician and president of the Consejo de Higiene Cándido Pujato. The following chapter focuses on treating *empacho* in infants both at the end of the nineteenth century and at the start of the twenty-first. María Silvia Di Liscia contends that the

term went beyond simple “indigestion” and seemed to be a catch-all for a variety of gastric issues associated with infancy as she examines how holistic treatments eventually received approval by allopathic institutions because pepsin “began to have importance in Europe as a treatment for gastric complaints” (p. 56). While not entirely clear from the chapter, this may also explain why the treatment of *empacho* remains a space where alternative treatments and knowledge remain relevant in the early twenty-first century.

Incorporating a large number of newspaper articles, Mauro Vallejo’s chapter about Spanish hypnotist Alberto Díaz de la Quintana’s time in Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century highlights how notorious Díaz became over the course of his stay. This chapter argues that the primary reason the allopathic medical establishment was so bitterly opposed to Díaz was because “the gravest sin the hypnotist committed was to practice medicine without revalidating his license in the local faculty” (p. 86). In other words, the issue was not that *médicos diplomados* disregarded the potential medical benefits of hypnotism, but rather that they were displeased with being circumvented. The fact that the alternative medical practitioners discussed in these first three chapters suffered mostly because of interpersonal issues with state representatives and institutions suggests that the line between alternative and allopathic medicine was not as clear as it would become over the course of the twentieth century.

Upon moving into the twentieth and twenty-first century contributions, the conceptual linkages between chapters start to become more tenuous as the historical and contemporary actors, source materials, and disciplinary methodologies become more varied. Even so, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 9 all use popular media (especially newspapers) to examine the mercurial nature of coverage related to holistic medicine in early twentieth-century Argentina. Mirta Fleitas’s chapter 4, about *curadores*, or folk healers, in Jujuy, begins with a colorful retelling of famed spiritualist healer Mano Santa fleeing the city to avoid arrest in order to ground her essay about the continued presence of *curadores* through the first half of the twentieth century.

María Dolores Rivero and Paula Sedran (chapter 5) and Armus (chapter 6) consider the power of the press in creating an aura of fame around Spanish émigrés and healers Fernando Asuero and Jesús Pueyo, respectively. Both Asuero and Pueyo did indeed seem to create popular, and sometimes effective, treatments. For Asuero, this came in the form of trigeminal stimulation, while Pueyo developed an alternative treatment for tuberculosis before the arrival of antibiotics. Pueyo’s experience in particular is illustrative as it shows that regular Argentines sought out his vaccine as a result of allopathic medicine’s “uncertainties in the battle against tuberculosis” (p. 183). Adrián Carbonetti and María Laura Rodríguez also explore the connections between media coverage and alternative medicine in chapter 9, examining the various legal entanglements alternative healer Jaime Press was involved in during the 1970s. They argue that, as a result of incarceration and media coverage, Press was actually able to build on his reputation so as to improve his reach among potential patients in Córdoba.

Chapters 10, 11, 12, and 14 are organized around the theme of New Age and non-Western medicine as practiced since the 1970s, with special emphasis on the first decade of the new millennium. In part due to their focus on the more recent past or contemporary period, these chapters are more ethnographic and move away from the use of media sources. Nicolás Viotti’s chapter 10, about Chinese medical practitioner Daniel Alegre, offers a close reading of some of Alegre’s published

works from the 1980s to demonstrate how his increasing interest in that field grew out of his “initial intervention in the network of alternative culture magazines” produced in the 1970s (p. 264). The role that biography plays in the move into holistic medicine is similarly explored in Mariana Bordes’s chapter 11, about two women who decided to become reflexologists. By discussing these women’s experiences Bordes is able to show how their alternative practices were seemingly welcomed in a hospital setting, differing significantly from the more combative relationship with allopathic medicine in the past.

The possibility for fruitful interaction between allopathic and holistic medicine is also a central aspect of Betina Freidin’s argument in chapter 12. Also using ethnographic interviews, she demonstrates how three *médicos diplomados*’s turn toward homeopathy “transformed their careers” and created “new horizons in the practice of medicine” (p. 300). Karina Felitti (chapter 14) further develops the importance of looking at the person as a whole in her analysis of the life and practice of VerOna, a *bruja feminista*, or “witchy feminist,” currently working as a doula. Felitti argues that VerOna’s social media presence and day-to-day interactions are a means of understanding the connections between health, spirituality, and feminism in the context of Argentina’s Green Wave movement.

The remaining chapters (7, 8, and 13) represent what might be considered relative outliers in a volume comprised of so much diversity. Juan Bubello’s chapter 7 analyzes two mid-century Argentine films to demonstrate how negatively *curanderos* were portrayed in mid-twentieth-century popular culture. Most importantly, this chapter shows that these portrayals did not seem to lessen the public’s appetite for *curanderismo*, or folk medicine, in practice. The remaining two chapters focus more on aspects of faith healing as part of the holistic medicine landscape. Perhaps surprisingly, Daniela Edelvis Testa explores in chapter 8 how devout Methodist Gwendolyn Shepherd’s faith played a role in her approach to the treatment of polio in the 1950s. Most intriguing for a reader living in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic years in which evangelical Protestants represented a staunch anti-vaccination position, Edelvis states that “with the arrival of the anti-polio vaccines, delineating mass-vaccination schemes to fit [acordes] the national epidemiological profile was one of the tasks to which [Shepherd] dedicated a large part of her energy” (p. 222). Ana Lucía Olmos Álvarez considers faith healing by examining the use of Catholic prayer as remedy. Olmos’s chapter 13 argues that Father Ignacio Peries’s masses have come to be seen as part of a more holistic understanding of health as he has gained a following of women who see him as an integral component to their well-being.

The epilogue, also written by Armus, brings these various contributions together by reiterating how each one speaks to the grey area between allopathic and alternative medicine, a theme in which Armus is well-versed.[2] More importantly, the epilogue emphasizes that this grey area is not really created by the practices themselves, but rather by how people apply them. In other words, a “healing art” is not necessarily defined by the healer, but rather by the person seeking relief (often described as a “sufferer” throughout the volume). To this reviewer, it is this last idea that is the most important. Often, the user of medical treatments and technologies seems to be the least important when it comes to the history of medicine (allopathic or otherwise).

While the collection does give more space for discussion and consideration of how patients experience medical care, it also struggles to adequately capture this side of the equation. Though the focus of this volume is not on allopathic medicine and its practitioners, holistic practitioners and their

biographies loom large, speaking to the continuing challenges of the history of medicine. One of the other challenges specific to this volume is that the contributors clearly wrote for an Argentine readership. There is quite a lot of assumed knowledge about Argentine history, society, and politics that would leave an historian of medicine familiar with a different region or area struggling. However, the volume is written in Spanish, so the intended audience most likely is other Latin American and Latin Americanist historians of medicine. Even with that caveat, the volume still leaves those readers without much important context.

In sum, this volume does an excellent job of demonstrating the potential depth and richness of scholarship on the history of medicine. Most important, it shows how allopathic and holistic medicine often work together. Although this relationship may or may not be recognized by all of the practitioners involved, it is embodied in the choices that those seeking medical treatment make for themselves. And as we all continue to navigate the post-pandemic present, the role of the individual in medical choices is certainly an area to which we ought to pay close attention.

Notes

[1]. All translations are my own.

[2]. See Diego Armus and Pablo F. Gómez, eds., *The Gray Zones of Medicine: Healers and History in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021).

Citation: Sarah Walsh. Review of Armus, Diego, ed., *Sanadores, Parteras, Curanderos y Médicas: Las Artes de Curar en la Argentina Moderna*. H-Sci-Med-Tech, H-Net Reviews. February, 2023. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58473>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).