

**Disability between Healing and Cure:
Curanderismo and Medical Treatment in Rudolfo A. Anaya
*Tortuga***

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Abstract

The medical model of disability deeply influences people's reactions to disability by emphasizing the need for cure. Accordingly, normalizing disabled bodies, through cure, has been a key feature of most narratives addressing disability. The exclusionary practices of normative discourses hindered viewing disability as a bodily variation. This paper examines Rudolfo A. Anaya's deployment of disability in his novel *Tortuga* (1979). It explores the interplay between *curandersimo* and modern medicine as two interrelated curative discourses. The paper argues that because normalizing the body is a narrative end, Anaya falls short in his attempts to negotiate ableist ideals through *curandersimo*'s holistic approach to healing. It argues that Anaya adopts an ableist ideological framework in his representation of disability through 1) emphasizing the need for a cure, 2) associating masculinity with the ability to walk, 3) the isolation of the hospital patients from society, and 4) an ambivalent attitude towards assisted suicide.

Keywords: disability, cure, Rudolfo Anya, medical model, curendersis

In Anaya's New Mexico trilogy, traditional and folklore perceptions of illness is highlighted. In these novels the figure of curanderas/os represents a connection of Mexican heritage and ancestral worldviews. Disability, for example, is portrayed in two of the novels comprising the trilogy. This paper examines Rudolfo A. Anaya's deployment of disability in his novel *Tortuga*, the last of his New Mexico trilogy. The novel is based on his own experience with paralysis. Anaya employs disability as a "narrative prosthesis," a term coined by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, 2013, in which characters with disabilities propel the progression of plot. The paper contests that Anaya adopts an ableist ideological framework in his representation of disability through 1) emphasizing the need for a cure, 2) associating masculinity with the ability to walk, 3) the isolation of the hospital patients from society, and 4) ambivalence towards assisted suicide.

Ableism is "a form of discrimination or prejudice against individuals with physical, mental, or developmental disabilities that is characterized by the belief that these individuals need to be fixed or cannot function as full members of society," (Laura Smith, Pamela Foly, and Michael Chaney quoted in Nicole Markotić 2016, 2). Although Anaya relies on an ableist framework in his portrayal of disability, he attempts to negotiate ableist ideals through the shift of perspective the protagonist adopts at the end through which disability is viewed as part of the wide spectrum of bodily difference.

Disabled bodies are generally perceived as needing cures and fixing. Thus, abled-bodiedness is the expected norm for the body to be "whole" (Markotić 98). Michael Davidson extends on Snyder and Mitchell's idea of "narrative prosthesis" as he writes: "If narrative closure depends on the restoration of the able-bodied individual (to health, society, and normalcy), the disabled character represents a form of physical deviance necessary for the marking of body's unruliness," (Quoted in Markotić 98). Consequently, disabled bodies, under the conventions of ableism, are stigmatized and subjected to corrective measures to normalize any deviance in the body. This ableist ideal governs the development of the story and the life of its characters in Anaya's *Tortuga*.

Because the novel recounts Anaya's experience with paralysis from a fictive perspective, it presents his own belief in the tradition of the *curandarismo*. S. L Johnston defines *curanderismo* as "a traditional approach to healing used by many Mexican-Americans to supplement Western conventional

medicine,” (26). A form of alternative medicine, *curanderismo* is historically deeply rooted in Mexican culture and Mexican-Americans in the USA. Curandera/os are revered members of the Mexican-American community. They are intertwined with their clients' experience of illness because they share the same social, cultural, and religious beliefs and probably live in the same geographical location (Harris et al, 112). Mexican-Americans, therefore, acknowledge the role curandera/os may play in curing illness and more often seek their help.

In his essay “Curanderas/Women Warriors” Anaya explains that the *curandera's* role has faded because of the prevalence of the scientific view of the nature of illness and its causes” represented through the figure of the Anglo-American doctor (219). Anaya considers the *curanderas* a cultural link to the past, and their disappearance means forgetting the “holistic view of medicine” practiced by former ancestors (219)

One of the distinguishing features of *curanderismo* is it stresses the involvement and participation of family and close community in the healing process. Thus, healing is no longer an individual endeavor but a collective experience to restore health and equilibrium to the ill. These provide “lifelong interpersonal experiences with significant others” (Maduro 868).

By adopting a both/and approach in his views about medical and traditional folk treatments, Anaya stresses the reciprocal roles the doctor and the *curandera* perform in treating illness. Accepting Bernard Dixon's distinction between cure and healing, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. 1997, maintains the “idea that drugs, physical therapies, and surgical interventions may cure but people may heal” (64). The paper chooses to read Tortuga's recuperation process in light of this distinction.

The novel begins with Tortuga being transported to a Crippled Children and Orphans Hospital in southern New Mexico by a quirky couple of drivers who mentally prepare him for the process of healing. Filomón, the ambulance driver, and Clepo, his assistant, transport him to a hospital. Before reaching the hospital Filomón pulls up by the roadside to show Tortuga the magic mountain. The hot mineral springs coming from the mountain are said to have healing powers. Anaya foreshadows the role the mountain will play in the spiritual maturation of Tortuga. As the drivers stop by the road the following exchange takes place:

The doctors here can work miracles, Filomon was saying they've to go ways now of straightening out bones and sewing together nerves

and flesh. Yeah, but they didn't fix my limp. Clepo said and they sure as hell don't believe in all this mumbo jumbo you've been giving the kid. (*Tortuga* 6).

The conversation invokes two forms of treatment Tortuga will go through. First, the advanced medical treatment carried out by expert physicians. The second is the magic healing of the mountain represented through the two curanderas Josefa and Ismla. However, Clepo dismisses that the doctors in the hospital accept the myth of the magical healing powers of the mountain, which rejects any intersection between the scientific and the spiritual. Thus, the modern medicine/ *Curanderismo* dichotomy is highlighted.

The odd-shaped mountain, called Tortuga or Turtle, which dominates through its omnipresence and a short distance from the hospital, is claimed to possess magical waters and figures as the protagonist's potential cure for all his ills. Tortuga, too, is skeptical of Filomón's stories about the mountain's healing power because he has lost faith in the spiritual and the magical; he even "had long ago lost faith in [his] mother's gods" (*Tortuga* 8). However, the mythic journey quickly turns into a nexus of symbolism that both involves his physical as well as spiritual well-being.

Even though doctors and *curanderas*, in the novel, share the same mutual aim; the treatment of illness, a discrepancy exists in their approach to the ill body. For example, upon entering the hospital, Tortuga meets Ismelda, the nurse's aide. She brings him water to drink through a straw. Tortuga now refreshed comments that the water is strong and the reason she explains is that it is "full of good medicine" (*Tortuga* 9). Tortuga feels a change in his body caused by Ismeda's touch. Filomón advises Tortuga to pay attention to Ismelda and Josefa because they know "a lot of strong medicine" (*Tortuga* 9). Both have a deeper knowledge of the mountain's healing powers because they are, as Edward Elias describes, *curanderas* (85). By meeting Ismelda and drinking from the mountain water, Anaya aims to trigger the Tortuga's curiosity about the mountain to establish a connection with past practices of healing.

At first, a frustrated Tortuga loses both religious and spiritual faith. He distances himself from the other patients whom he calls "freaks". His first encounter with the children goes as follows:

Abandoned in the hospital corridor, he awakes to the calls of a group of children on wheelchairs led by a girl called Cynthia. When he asks who they are, the answer is "your brothers and sisters" (*Tortuga* 19) suggesting a sense of solidarity among the

disabled children. Cynthia pulls herself up to look at him and her deformed looks caused fear in him. The other children try to pull themselves up to look at him and he shouts at them to get away. When Speed-o, the aid, asks about what is troubling him, Tortuga replies that he has seen "freaks". Speed-o comforts him saying "the whole place is crawling with freaks. (*Tortuga* 20).

Tortuga's dismissive attitude is a result of an ableist presumption that renders people with a disability less than human. As a result, Tortuga avoids communication with the disabled children to preserve his outsider position as one who used to be abled-bodied. However, he grows to accept his predicament and forges friendships with most of the patients and staff. He works hard during his therapy sessions and regains the ability to walk, using crutches.

From the beginning of the novel, Tortuga is adamant about breaking away from his immobile state. The novel centers on Tortuga's ability to overcome his paralysis through medical treatment. He leaves the hospital after overcoming his paralysis and his spiritual doubt. Regaining his spiritual balance, Tortuga identifies with the other disabled children.

The body becomes an object of many curative processes that aim at eliminating any deviance. The relationship with the body is that of the Foucauldian observation. All signs of the body are recorded in charts, on which doctors rely to determine the pace of treatment. The patient is turned into a chart of signs and reflexes. When Tortuga starts therapy with KC, she inspects his arms and legs and tells him to push and pull feels each muscle for its strength, "*jotting down her findings on a chart*" [emphasis added] (*Tortuga* 63). She traces the malfunctions of the body and adjusts them so the patients regain movement of their afflicted limbs. However, Dr. Steel's and KC's focus on curing bodily defects; prevent their awareness of the children's monotonous life in the hospital. For example, the nurses keep on asking the patients about their bowel movements disregarding their other needs. Mike one of the hospitalized children complains:

That's the trouble with these people!" Mike cursed "They think a bowel movement is a goddamned cure for everything! I swear I was nearly dead the day I got here, and the nurse held my wrist, looked at her watch, and asked me, 'Have you had your bm today?' Damn! I nearly fainted. (*Tortuga* 99)

Mancelos explicates that Western medicine undermines the holistic approach to treating illness because of the dismissal of the unity of the body and the psyche. curandersimo, on the other hand, considers illness a symptom of psychosomatic disturbances. Therefore curandera/os approach illness differently. Angel Vigil writes:

The curandera treated the social, psychological, and physical health of the sick and infirm. By combining the knowledge of the herbal, natural treatments with the attention given to the patient's psychological health, the curandera affected physical and mental healing which contributed to both an individual's and a community's health. (Qtd in Mancelos 2009)

In light of this, Josefa and Ismelda represent the children's source of emotional support. They apply knowledge of plants to supplement the medical treatment to help the children heal, which Anaya considers an alternate "holistic" manner of treating an ailment. The body is not fragmented and is not stripped from its emotional and spiritual features. Josefa and Ismelda are the children's links to the outside world from which they are isolated. The children appreciate Josefa's food calling it food of the soul. One of the children states:

How in the hell do they expect us to be regular if they don't feed us soul food, huh? I haven't had a good meal of chile and beans since I got here! That's what Jerry was trying to tell, them there was nothing for his soul here... sure the medical care is the best in the world, but what good does that do you if your spirit is dying. (*Tortuga* 100)

Josefa's presence creates an equilibrium in their distressed souls because she maintains ties with the children's culture.

Connection with the ancient past, in the novel, is built on beliefs in spiritual healing. This is achieved through the character of Salomón, a senior quadriplegic patient in the sinister "vegetables" ward (*Tortuga* 36). The ward is dedicated to children with terminal illnesses who rely on machines to remain alive. Salomón, an avid reader of books, initiates Tortuga's spiritual growth and acts like a prophetic figure through his telepathic communication with Tortuga. Most of the people in the hospital know him and believe in his stories. Ismelda and Dr. Steel repeatedly ask Tortuga about his meetings with Salomón. Probably, meeting with Salomón is a necessary stage to initiate Tortuga on the path of re-acculturation with his cultural heritage and distant past, however, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Dr. Steel shows no objection to Josefa's administering herbal treatment to the patients, which contradicts Clepo's earlier claim that doctors do not trust traditional forms of medicine. Moreover, the children are appreciative of Josefa and Ismelda. Their presence boosts the children's spirits and hopes. When Josefa finds any of the children sick or in the "dumps": "she appeared the next day with a remedy from home. And her *herbs and purgatives and food worked because we felt better when she tended to [them]*" [emphasis added] (*Tortuga* 55-56).

Moreover, the idea of folk treatment subordination to medical treatment is represented in Ismeda's massaging Tortuga's "tired muscles with special ointments" Josefa had given him, which enhances the effectiveness of therapy. The positive reaction to the treatment makes Tortuga stronger every day, which Dr. Steel considers a miraculous achievement (*Tortuga* 102). Tortuga's ability to walk becomes a paramount aim of most of the people in the hospital which emphasizes the need for a cure.

Releasing patients when they can walk stands for the ableist concept of rehabilitation. The hope of what Mike calls "getting out" becomes the main aim for which the children yearn. The announcement of release or when someone is permitted to leave bed confinement and gets "walking braces, crutches or a wheelchair" are significant moments, because the children consider them "milestones in the long process of complete freedom" (*Tortuga* 53).

Even though the hospital is equipped with many facilities: a swimming pool, a school, a church, good food, TV, games, and all the comforts that the children may never dream of, the period of treatment is compared to "a holiday in hell" (*Tortuga* 111). Strikingly, the children feel that they are exiled outside the world because their disability is regarded as a source of shame.

Tobain Siebers explains that becoming disabled leads to disqualification which results in a person being removed from the ranks of human beings which places the person at "risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (Siebers 23). Furthermore, exclusionary ableist ideologies portray disabled people as objects of pity, fear, and repulsion. Accordingly, disabled people are stigmatized as anomalies which contribute to making them invisible citizens. Moreover, they are constructed as socially dead because they, allegedly, have no active role to play in society (Hevey 432). Disabled people are "derogatorily" portrayed and "simultaneously shamed, stigmatized, and politically erased" (Millett-Gallant 10). G. Thomas Couser describes the way Western culture mutes and defaces

bodies that are different. Couser outlines illness and disability alongside other markers of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality (10). Likewise, Mitchell and Snyder explain that the disabled body is culturally marked as “a derivative identity secondary and inferior to norms of able-bodiedness (181).

For instance, Sadsack irritably explains an incident when his father asks him not to appear in front of the guests. He complains saying his father "acted like getting polio is a sin" (*Tortuga* 51). Disabled children are treated like an outcast and abandoned in the hospital, which injures their self-esteem.

Reintegrating the children into active and productive members of society is the main aim of the hospital. As a step of preparing the patients for integration into the outside society, the hospital provides the children with "arts and craft classes, classes which [are] supposed to teach them to do something useful for when they [are] released" (*Tortuga* 53). However, some of the patients never leave the hospital and get odd jobs there e.g., Speedo, Manloney, and Samson. This is a consequence of some of them not feeling ready to go home because they can't "handle it" (*Tortuga* 111). Arguably, the fear of going home is caused by the dread of meeting a harsh stigmatizing ableist society. People with disabilities are considered inferior to others and are mocked for their disabilities.

Us/them framework segregates disabled people. For example, Tortuga's demands to be placed in isolation and wishes to have no contact with the other patients is a sign of him distancing himself from the other disabled children. However, Tortuga's refusal to blend with other children indicates a former ableist prejudice as well as the fear of becoming one of the "freaks" because of his newly acquired disability. This comes from a previous experience in *Heart of Aztlan* in which the mental disability of Henry, one of the minor characters, causes his family to be rejected by other families.

The exclusionary approach to people with disabilities is noticed in the children's visits to the movie theater. The town visit represents a contact with the outside world, which is prejudice towards them. When the children arrive in town they scatter around going to different shops, however, the shopkeepers treat them unfriendly. For instance, wanting to buy lipsticks Sandra, Mike's girlfriend, and other girls are led out of a drugstore and are told by the keeper that they are a "bunch of freaks" wanting to "make trouble" (*Tortuga* 146). The girls chant "Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but names will never hurt me!" (*Tortuga* 146). The derogatory language used to describe the children

indicates society's hostile attitude towards people with disabilities. However, the girls' chant exemplifies a resistance against discrimination towards them. They refuse to be passive and are ready to retaliate against any attempt to degrade them. This is seen in the following fight scene:

Hey, the movie freaks got loose! The ring leader laughed. I didn't know there was a circus in town, his girlfriend added. Step right this way and see the one-legged woman- I heard him shout. I broke through the crowd in time to see Mike swing and the big jock double over. When his girlfriend leaned over to help him Sandra rammed her with her crutch and shouted, "Step this way and see the girl with a crutch up her ass! (*Tortuga* 154)

Most views of disability are shaped by representations of people with disabilities in media and literature. G. Thomas Couser, 2013, draws attention to the fact that people with disabilities exercise no control over their images. Thus, cultural representations exploit these images, creating negative stereotypes and clichéd images of people with disabilities (456). Michael Berube, 2015, affirms this view when he claims that “traditional forms of artistic representation of disability ... have led to severe misunderstandings of disability, as well as literary and allegorically demeaning depictions of people with disabilities” (153). In the above scene, the disabled children reclaim the derogatory language and use to assert their identity.

Surprisingly, the children watch the movie of *Frankenstein*; an attempt by Anaya to underscore science's focus on the materiality of the body more than emotions. The children identify with the monster as their hero and become angry that the people in the movie are trying to kill him. When the other members of the audience ask the children to be quiet, Mike replies “Fuck all of you! Can't you see our hero in trouble” (153). The monster's confusion resonates with the children's perplexity at their situation as disabled and the abhorrence they suffer from society.

The children's identification with the monster is caused by their own “deformed” bodies that have been operated on by the doctors at the hospital. The emphasis on having a normalized body isolates the disabled and marginalizes them. However, the children, as a minority, have a strong bond of solidarity and comradery. For example, Mike talks about the girls saying, “They won't win any beauty contests, but they're *real women*. *They take care*

of us and we take care of them," [Emphasis added] (*Tortuga* 97). Unlike the outside world, the children accept their difference and their tender love scenes in the theater and the swimming pool exhibit what Margarite Fernandez Olmos, 1999, calls, "a liberating attitude toward sex, not bound by cultural stereotypes" (77).

Tortuga's transformation is demonstrated through his intimate relationship with Cynthia whom he abhorred at the beginning of the novel; it is an indication of him accepting the other. He claims that he is full of love for others and has broken the "web of separation" with the other disabled kids (*Tortuga* 152). The fight at the theater is evidence of the way the media shapes society's view of the disabled. However, it also indicate the importance of coalition and solidarity among the children.

Although the scene demonstrates solidarity among the boys and their ability to stand for themselves against discrimination, it also portrayed the children as causing trouble. It implicitly supports the hospital's claim that the outside world is not suitable for disabled children. Thus, affirming an ableist point of view.

Shockingly, the concept of assisted suicide is one of the disturbing and challenging issues for Tortuga and his friends. Upon visiting Salomón in the quadriplegic ward, Tortuga is asked to venture into another word specified for comatose patients which causes deep despair in Tortuga. However, in his fit of anger, Tortuga demands that the misery of those patients is ended by pulling the plug. After getting over the shock, Tortuga and the other kids discuss the issue of assisted suicide in which they echo some of the arguments of philosopher Peter Singer and the notion of a life not worthy of living. The indecisiveness of their discussion fails to present their clear stance on assisted suicide.

For example, Danny, one of the characters, tells Tortuga about a movie in which death is the solution to misery. Eventually, he tries to drown Tortuga but fails. However, he succeeds in pulling the plug on the "vegetable ward" and kills all its patients. Tortuga and the other boys know that Danny is responsible but choose to be silent. Their silence can be read as an indication of their commendation of his action. In addition, amputation in the novel could be metaphorically read as a move to rid society of its burden that is disabled people which serves ableist ends.

Tortuga is motivated by a mythic journey on the part of the protagonist Tortuga to heal both physically and spiritually via a medical cure or holy waters

from the mountain Tortuga. Curanderismo here is not presented as an ambiguous ritual or ceremony as in other novels by Anaya, but a certain magical real element that plays a role in inciting all these agents to come together to provide healing, recovery, and a sense of direction. In other words, the healing processes address more spiritual questions as they seem to be superior to the merely physical ones.

The theme of renewal and finding purpose in life emerges to guide Tortuga through these tests of his humanity—again his physical condition as well as his spiritual makeup. The goal is to overcome any form of "paralysis" and the powers of magic (holy waters from the mountain, butterflies, dreams, and a blue guitar) can assist in that objective. Suffering leads to redemption and the teenager Tortuga is, to borrow from Maduro, "socialized" in his Chicano culture through engagement with an assortment of characters of various backgrounds and with different disabilities. A host of colorful characters (Mudo or mute, Tuerto or one-eyed, Buck the cowboy, Ronco or hoarse, Sadsack, and others) serve as a contrast and comic relief to such a serious topic of acquiring a new consciousness that facilitates Tortuga acquiring a new world view that acknowledges the importance of loving and respecting others.

Overall, the novel depicts the disabled children as energetic, mischievous, and caring for each other. The overlap in treatment between *currandismo* and medicine represents how the two could work hand in hand in curing illness and healing disturbed patients. However, the insistence on not releasing the patients unless they could walk, which according to Ismelda a sign of being a man, is an ableist end that seeks to isolate disabled people from the outside world. However, Tortuga's transformation frees him from past ableist ideas, and he accepts the disabled children as his brothers and sisters. Tortuga leaves the hospital promising to sing the song of his friend's life in the hospital, using the blue guitar passed on to him by his old friend, Crispín. The blue guitar can be read as a cultural prosthesis that keeps Chicano cultural narratives in motion. However, his friends remain confined to the hospital wards where the song may not reach them.

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الإعاقة بين الشفاء والعلاج:

كوراندريسمو والعلاج الطبي في رواية رودولفو أ. أنايا: تورتوجا (السلحفاة)

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المستخلص:

يغلب النموذج الطبي للإعاقة على طبيعة التعامل مع الإعاقة وذلك من خلال التأكيد على ضرورة الحاجة إلى علاج الأشخاص من ذوي الإعاقة. وبناء على ذلك أصبحت معالجة الجسد المعاق وإعادة تأهيله سمة رئيسية لمعظم الأعمال الأدبية التي تناولت موضوع الإعاقة. نتج عن هذا خطابات علاجية ركزت على الجسد السليم كمييار أساسي، والتي تمخض عنها ممارسات اقصاصية حدثت من التعامل مع الإعاقة على أنها نوع من الاختلاف والتعدد الجسدي. ونبحت هنا في تناول الروائي الأمريكي من أصل مكسيكي رودولفو أنايا لموضوع الإعاقة في روايته تورتوجا (السلحفاة). وينصب التركيز على التفاعل بين العلاجي الطبي وكوراندريسمو، الطب الشعبي المكسيكي (curanderos) كخطابين علاجيين مترابطين. وبالإمكان الزعم أن أنايا تناول الإعاقة من إطار أيديولوجيا فُدروي (Ablest عبر: 1) التأكيد على الحاجة إلى العلاج، (2) ربط الرجولة بالقدرة على المشي، (3) عزل المرضى مستشفى التأهيل عن المجتمع الخارجي و (4) التناقض الأخلاقي حول قضية القتل الرحيم. ويمكن الاستنتاج بأن التركيز على علاج وإعادة تأهيل الجسد عبارة عن نهاية سرديّة حالت دون نجاح محاولة أنايا توظيف نهج كوراندريسمو والشفاء الشامل لتفنيد مثل أيديولوجيا الفُدروية المتمثلة في العلاج الطبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أنايا، الإعاقة، العلاج، النموذج الطبي، كوراندريسمو